SICUT SCINTILLA IGNIS IN MEDIO MARIS: THEOLOGICAL DESPAIR IN THE WORKS OF ISIDORE OF SEVILLE, HROTSVIT OF GANDERSHEIM AND DANTE ALIGHIERI

by

Kristen Leigh Allen

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Graduate Centre for Medieval Studies
University of Toronto

© Copyright by Kristen Leigh Allen 2009
Abstract


When discussing the concept of despair in the Middle Ages, scholars often note how strongly medieval people linked despair with suicide. Indeed, one finds the most recent and comprehensive treatment of the topic in Alexander Murray’s *Suicide in the Middle Ages*. Murray concludes that most medieval suicides had suffered from “this-worldly” despair, brought on by fatal illness, emotional or material stress, or some other unbearable circumstance. However, Murray also observes that medieval theologians and the people they influenced came to attribute suicide to theological despair, i.e. a failure to hope for God’s mercy.

This dissertation investigates the work of three well-known medieval authors who wrote about and very likely experienced such theological despair. In keeping with Murray’s findings, none of these three ultimately committed suicide, thus allowing me to explore how medieval people overcame their theological despair. I have chosen these three authors because they not only wrote about theological despair, but drew from their own experiences when doing so. Their personal testimony was intended to equip their readers with the spiritual tools necessary to overcome their own despair.

The first of my three authors, Isidore of Seville, will be treated in Chapter Two. Isidore’s works provide an excellent synthesis of patristic thought on despair and also hint at his willingness to share his own spiritual struggles in order to help his flock defeat this vice. Chapter Three discusses Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and her understanding of despair and presumption as closely interrelated mindsets that can afflict the repentant
sinner. Hrotsvit’s own frequent admissions of presumption in her prefaces strongly suggest that she was also plagued with despair due to her unorthodox appropriation of the role of *poeta*. My fourth chapter considers Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, a poetic meditation on the ultimate fate of the desperate sinner and how such a fate might be avoided. Dante the Wayfarer will come to realize the necessity of God’s grace for those wishing to overcome sin. Indeed, all three of the writers studied consider this knowledge an important antidote to despair, proven by their own experiences.
Acknowledgements

The road to thesis completion was especially long for me, and I would not have gotten very far down it without the help of mentors, family and friends. I must first thank Joe Goering for showing forbearance and charity above and beyond the call of duty, as well as providing the guidance and support more typically required of a supervisor. I am also indebted to Isabelle Cochelin and Giulio Silano for supplying excellent advice and necessary challenges to my thinking. Likewise of great help were George Rigg, who shed light on Isidore’s clever word games in the *Etymologies*; Andrew Hughes, who helped me put a liturgical wild goose chase to rest; and Christopher Kleinhenz, who patiently introduced me to new aspects of Dante studies.

I would have given up long ago without the steadfast support of my brother, Justin Allen, and my grandmother, Jean Allen, who always believed that I could do this. They often walked by faith and not by sight in this regard, and I am so grateful that they did. I have also been blessed with many friends who were excellent listeners and supporters during this long process: Melanie Brunet, Peter and Jodi Bubenik, Leah Cherniak, Lap Chung, Brett Dieter, John and Sarah Geck, Magda Hayton, John Knoezer, Jon Newman, Andrew Reeves, Margaret Rose, Sean Winslow, and Lorna Wright. Were it not for the reassurance of Grace Desa, I may never have finished my MA. Sage advice was also given by Dr. Danielle Thomas and the Rev. Andrew Asbil. Lastly, and most importantly, the biggest thanks must go to John, for everything.
Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my mother,

Jean Anne Knapp Allen (1954-1992)

“Et nunc, domine, confiteor tibi in litteras: legat qui volet, et interpretetur ut volet, et si peccatum invenerit, flevisse me matrem exigua parte hora, matrem oculis meis interim mortuam quae me multos annos fleverat ut oculis tuis viverem, non inrideat sed potius, si est grandi caritate, pro peccatis meis fleat ipse ad te, patrem omnium fratrum Christi tui.”

“And now, Lord, it is in writing that I confess to you. Let anyone read it who will, and judge it as he will, and if he finds it sinful that I wept over my mother for a brief part of a single hour—the mother who for a little space was to my sight dead, and who had wept long years for me that in your sight I might live—then let such a reader not mock, but rather, if his charity is wide enough, himself weep for my sins to you, who are Father to all whom your Christ calls his brethren.”

Augustine, Confessiones, IX, 12, 33
Trans. Maria Boulding, O.S.B.

...and to my father, Dennis R. Allen.

“Ben veggio, padre mio, sì come sprona lo tempo verso me, per colpo darmi tal, ch’è più grave a chi più s’abbandona;

“per che di provedenza è buon ch’io m’armi.”

“I can see, father, that time is spurring toward me to deal me such a blow as falls most heavily on one proceeding heedless on his way.

“Thus it is good I arm myself with forethought.”

Dante Alighieri, Paradiso, XVII, 106-109
Trans. Robert and Jean Hollander
# Table of Contents

Chapter One  
“Instar Cordis Desperati”: Introduction  1-19

Chapter Two  
“The Foot Fails”: Despair in the works of Isidore of Seville  20-85

Chapter Three  
The *Rara Avis* Presumes to Sing:  
Despair and presumption in the works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim  86-216

Chapter Four  
Leaving the *Selva Oscura*: Despair in Dante’s *Inferno*  217-265

Chapter Five  
“Sicut scintilla ignis in medio maris”: Conclusion  266-273

Bibliography  274-289
Chapter One
“Instar Cordis Desperati”: Introduction

When I first considered writing my dissertation on the concept of despair in the Middle Ages, the work of Giotto presented an obvious starting point. Early in 1305, he completed the complex and masterfully executed programme of frescoes decorating the Arena Chapel in Padua, a marvel that has continued to draw pilgrims and tourists to the present day. Among its glorious panels they will find his famous fresco of Desperatio. The stark scene contains the body of a woman who has hung herself with what appears to be a piece of her own clothing. The fresco has suffered much damage over the centuries: the taut length of the noose has been scratched by passers-by as though they could not resist trying to cut her down. A small black demon hovers in the upper left-hand corner, implying that he had something to do with this last act and that he is about to claim her soul. Most of the demon’s body has been defaced, though his two thin talons are still visible as they reach toward the woman’s head. Her face is also difficult to make out, leaving the viewer to speculate as to what final emotions Giotto wanted to show there.

The body language is still readable, however; Despair’s arms are flung out stiffly to each side, and her nails appear to be digging into the flesh of her palms. Though she is at the point of death, the self-destructive urges that led her there still plague her.

---


2 Moshe Barasch, despite his familiarity with Giotto, did not discuss this figure in his Gestures of Despair in Medieval and Early Renaissance Art (New York: New York University Press, 1976); nor was Desperatio discussed in his Giotto and the Language of Gesture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). Yet as Robert Rough has noted, the position of her arms is quite similar to what Barasch identified as the “Hippolytus” gesture often found in scenes of this period depicting frenzied or shocked mourners. See his “Enrico Scrovegni, the Cavalieri Gaudenti, and the Arena Chapel in Padua,” The Art Bulletin 62:1 (Mar. 1980): 24-35, here p. 28, note 33. Barasch does, however, discuss the fresco in his “Despair in the Medieval Imagination,” Social Research 66:2 (1999): 565-576. Here he argues that despair was usually
Giotto deliberately placed Despair and her counterpart Hope on opposite sides of the *Last Judgment* scene on the western wall, inviting the viewer to determine the nature of each by their relationship to the afterlife depicted there. The winged figure of Hope springs joyfully off the ground, reaching for the crown offered to her by an angel in the upper right-hand corner. She flies toward the heavenly ranks of the saints at the right hand of Christ. Despair, however, simply mirrors the hanged or otherwise tormented souls of the damned in Hell, most notably Judas Iscariot, seen on Christ’s left.³ Her feet, hidden by the length of her robe, also seem to have left the ground, but for a far more sinister reason. What remains of the rhymed Latin verses underneath proclaims that “this figure depicts the image of a desperate heart, strangled at the suggestion of Satan and thus damned to Gehenna.”⁴ Giotto’s message is clear even without these words: though they will fail to find it, the desperate often seek peace in death.

The earliest audience for Giotto’s frescoes would have had little trouble receiving this message. Its members would not have been limited to the Scrovegni family and the chapel’s clerical staff, but would have contained a wide variety of the devout and curious. Giotto certainly meant for all viewers of his virtues and vices to understand what they represented, including those who could not make out the clever Latin poems under each

---


⁴ “INSTAR CORDIS DESPERATI/ SATHAN DUCTU SUFFOCATI ET GEHENNE SIC DAMPNATI/ TENET HEC FIGURA” See Giotto: *Padua felix: atlante iconografico della cappella di Giotto 1300-1305*, ed. Claudio Bellinati (Ponzano: Vianello, 1997), p. 137. While there appear to be two more lines of text underneath these verses, they are now impossible to decipher.
panel, or even the simple one-word labels found above them. The artist was confident that most of his audience, when confronted with an image of suicide, would understand it as an image of despair.

Further medieval evidence supports this supposition. While Giotto’s fresco is by far the most famous medieval depiction of this vice, it is only one of twenty works listed under “Despair” in Colum Hourihane’s recent directory of medieval images of virtues and vices. The entry catalogues renderings of despair in diverse media such as fresco, glass, manuscript, metalwork and sculpture. I have thus far been able to view photographs or illustrations of nineteen of these works, including Giotto’s fresco. In a number of cases, Despair appears in a traditional *psychomachia* scene as just another personified vice being trampled by a triumphant virtue. Were it not for the fact that the figure in question is clearly labelled “Desperatio” and located under the feet of “Spes,” one would be hard pressed to identify it. In nearly half of these images, however, no label seems to be necessary, as the allegory of despair is committing suicide. Eight of them portray the personification of Despair as stabbing him or herself with a knife, sword

---

6 Despite consulting numerous and well-illustrated studies of the northern porch at Chartres, I am not convinced that there are two personifications of Despair shown there, as Hourihane’s directory indicates: one in the central portal and one in the left. While the latter image of Despair is well documented, I have yet to locate any corroborating pictures or descriptions of Despair in the central portal. Despair also appears on the south porch of Chartres. See Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: religious art in France of the thirteenth century*, trans. Dora Nussey (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), p. 109, 115; Adolf Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art, from Early Christian times to the thirteenth century*, trans. Alan J. P. Crick (London: Warburg Institute, 1939), p. 80, n. 1; p. 82.
7 Six of the nineteen images I have seen fit this criteria. For more on the *Psychomachia*, see Mâle, *The Gothic Image*, pp. 98-99; Katzenellenbogen, *Allegories of the Virtues and Vices in Medieval Art*, pp. 1-13. Katzenellenbogen also mentions the depiction of Despair found in the stained glass in the western choir of Naumburg Cathedral (p. 20, n. 2), which the catalogue does not include. This rendering matches the criteria of the six mentioned above.
or spear. Like Giotto, medieval craftsmen and their clients often agreed that depicting an act of self-destruction was an ideal visual shorthand for despair.

The apparent strength of this connection has certainly been noted by the few modern scholars who have studied despair in the Middle Ages, most of whom make reference to Giotto’s arresting image in order to indicate how frequently medieval people linked despair with suicide. This focus on the darker side of despair caused me to wonder whether enough work has been done on those medieval people who clearly struggled with despair, but ultimately managed to overcome it. In other words, if, according to their contemporaries, the desperate of the Middle Ages could find no peace in death, could they find any in life? This has proven a difficult question to answer using what little work on despair is currently available. Indeed, those searching for the most recent and comprehensive treatment of medieval despair must turn to Alexander

---

8 The Index of Christian Art’s online database also contains records of two manuscript images of despair not listed in Hourihane’s work: New York, Morgan Library, MS M. 453, fol. 98v; and Princeton, Princeton University Library, MS 58, fol. 3r. In the former image, a woman stabs herself, in the latter, a man. See Princeton University, “Index of Christian Art Database,” Index of Christian Art, http://ica.princeton.edu/index.php (accessed 1 May, 2009). Both Mâle and Katzenellenbogen mentioned a stained-glass depiction of Despair stabbing herself with a spear located in the thirteenth-century choir of Auxerre, which for some reason has not been noted in Hourihane’s entry (Mâle, p. 115; Katzenellenbogen, p. 83).

9 An idea corroborated by Murray, Suicide in the Middle Ages, vol. II, p. 394. Later in his work, Murray notes that in French depictions of suicide and/or despair, the self-stabbing figure appears almost exclusively. He explains that since hanging was a common punishment for criminals, the hanged figure could have been mistaken for an image of execution or criminality. As Giotto’s fresco shows, this was not an issue in Italy, where hanging criminals was not standard practice (p. 501).

10 Murray, Suicide, vol. II, p. 383, 501; Barasch, “Despair in the Medieval Imagination,” pp. 573-574; Susan Snyder, “The Left Hand of God: Despair in Medieval and Renaissance Tradition,” Studies in the Renaissance 12 (1965), p. 55; Arieh Sachs, “Religious Despair in Medieval Literature and Art,” Mediaeval Studies 26 (1964), p. 241; Morton W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State College Press, 1952), pp. 103-104. These scholars pay little attention to evidence that would contradict this linkage: for example, a well established visual tradition derived from Prudentius’ Psychomachia calls for the figure of Ira to be depicted as suicidal. Mâle’s classic study showed the suicidal Ira being replaced by Desperatio in twelfth-century French cathedral sculpture. See, however, the article of Nigel Harris and Richard Newhauser, “The Emblematic Conflictus and Its Literary Representatives,” in In the Garden of Vices: the vices and culture in the Middle Ages, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: PIMS, 2005), pp. 234-276, which shows the Prudentian tradition continuing well into the later Middle Ages.
Murray’s three-volume monograph on suicide, in which they will find a chapter dedicated to “The Sin of Despair.” Though Murray did not set out to study despair per se, his chapter represents the most thorough and insightful scholarship on the topic produced in the last decade. It has provided a valuable frame of reference for my own research, and thus I will give a description of his findings in the following paragraphs. I have come to agree with his classification of the various connotations of the word desperatio and related terms, and as we will see further below, my study will treat what Murray considers the more theological definitions of despair.

In his first volume, Murray presents actual cases of suicide in the medieval period, drawing from several types of chronicles, judicial records, exempla, hagiography, miracle collections and sermons. He then makes some preliminary conclusions based on the statistical analysis of these cases. His second volume deals with society’s reactions to the act of suicide, both practical and theoretical. Murray first concentrates on how the suicide’s body and property were treated, followed by an extensive examination of “the written inheritance,” i.e. the Christian and pagan sources of medieval thought and legal practice. He next discusses “the medieval contribution,” including the works of theologians, canonists and jurists. Chapters 9, 10 and 11 cover what he refers to as “occasional theology,” habits of medieval thought on spiritual matters that were not necessarily subject to the careful rigours of formal or institutional criticism.

Here Murray incorporates his chapter on despair, where he explains his purpose as “examining the meanings of despero and its cognates, with the aim of discovering two

---

things: first, what meanings the word had, context by context; second, what the ensemble of meanings reveals about the mental recesses of those who used them.”12 The particular “mental recesses” which interest Murray in this case are those relating to the medieval attitude toward suicide. Murray illustrates earlier in his work that the traditional aversion to suicide was so strong that medieval people often referred to it metaphorically or euphemistically, the actual Latin term *suicida* only being coined in the middle of the twelfth century.13 He goes on to show how the meanings of despair evolved over time, so that *desperatio* came to serve as one of these euphemisms.14

Murray begins his investigation of despair by determining the proper approach to his topic. Since despair is a mental state, he argues, scholars should look for the medieval understanding of despair in the field of ethics, the medieval counterpart to modern psychology.15 Hence in his section on “The Twin Roots of Medieval Ethics,” he identifies the two written traditions from which medieval ethical speculation was derived: the Bible and commentaries thereon; and the translation, in circa 1250, of Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. Murray describes how:

…[t]he growth of Christian moral writing was assisted by the spread of lay sacramental confession, and the preaching that went with it. Because it touched practical morality, this sacramental compulsion had an effect its authors could not have foreseen, and might not have approved. It exposed the shortcomings of the Bible, on its own, as a moral guide; and put a correspondingly higher premium on Greek and Roman ethics. The effect is already visible in the twelfth century, but it would be still more strikingly illustrated in the thirteenth, when…the needs of mendicant

---

confessors played an important part in creating the market for which Aristotle’s *Ethics* was translated.\(^\text{16}\)

Due to the inevitably imperfect fusion of the classical and Christian traditions, Murray observes, scholastic ethics was more amenable to the influence of a third source, that of “real-life observation.”\(^\text{17}\) In the wake of the above-noted emphasis on the *cura animarum*, a surge of pastoral literature was produced to meet the demands of the confessors and preachers charged with this responsibility. Such works were increasingly shaped not only by the written legacy of moral speculation, but also by the practical expertise that was gained in the attempt to apply these theories. Here enters Murray’s “occasional theology.” These pastoral writers often cited despair as a vice, the opposite of the theological virtue of hope. Such a usage would seem to suggest that, “since Hope was a theological virtue…Despair [was] a theological vice. But was it, or was it not?”\(^\text{18}\)

Murray states that the medieval concept of despair, like much of the medieval ethical tradition, traces its ancestry to two sources, classical and Christian; he goes on to show how actual medieval usage shaped this two-fold legacy. He first presents three distinct medieval connotations of despair, supported by plentiful examples in both Latin and the vernacular languages. The first meaning he dubs “Despair of the Present,” explaining that “[n]ot surprisingly the word ‘despair’ often meant, as it might today, the failure of some perfectly concrete and carnal hope.”\(^\text{19}\) This usage of despair most often appeared in reference to the fatally ill, who could be *desperatus* by his physician or loved ones, or be sick *desperabiliter*. However, it was also used to describe the mental state of

\(^{16}\) Murray, *Suicide*, vol. II, p. 373.

\(^{17}\) Ibid.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., p. 374. Despair also appears in vice literature as one of the more dire products of either *tristitia* or *acedia*. Murray refers to this definition of despair rather awkwardly in a small section entitled “Further Meanings” (pp. 384-385). See p. 18 below.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., pp. 374-376, here quoting p. 374.
prisoners doubting the possibility of release, a soldier predicting defeat, or anyone under a great deal of emotional or material stress. As Murray writes:

…[t]his usage of despair corresponded with the definition given by psychological texts with no Christian element…The word desperatio, then, had a range of this-worldly meanings reflecting the inverse of this-worldly hopes of everyday life. In that it was much like our word ‘despair’ today. There were, however, other-worldly ways of interpreting the word.20

Murray then introduces the two more spiritual meanings of despair, which will be the focus of this dissertation.

In his next section, “A Gulf Between God and the Sinner,” Murray begins by pointing out the similarity between the theological virtues of faith and hope. After all, he notes, we find in Hebrews 11:1 that faith is “the substance of things to be hoped for” (sperandorum substantia rerum). Because these two virtues were interdependent, he reasons, “the religious connotations of despair, as the opposite of hope, could correspondingly often overlap with failures of religious faith. Failure in faith and failure in hope, that is to say, could go together.”21 He first concentrates on the most common understanding of spiritual despair in educated circles, that of despair as a failure to hope for God’s mercy. Theologians from the patristic period onward found an ideal example in Genesis 4:13, when Cain, after killing his brother, said that his sin was too great for him to merit pardon (maius est iniquitas mea quam ut veniam merear). This kind of despair could manifest in a number of ways, most commonly as either the belief that the

20 Ibid., pp. 375-376.
sin itself was so heinous as to be unpardonable, or that the sinner was incapable of
reforming his or her wicked life and thus would not merit forgiveness.

As it did for moral teaching as a whole, the growth of sacramental confession in
the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries would have its effect on this connotation of
despair in particular. Since confession was the process by which God’s mercy was
attained, someone who failed to hope for God’s mercy would most likely eschew this
process, assuming that any effort would be a waste of time. Preachers and confessors,
therefore, began to pay special attention to despair as an impediment to conversion and
confession. Murray describes Robert Grosseteste’s elaboration of the problem in his
treatise *Deus est*:

Grosseteste makes the word *desperatio* mean, first a denial
either of God’s power to forgive or of His willingness to
forgive even if He had the power (on the grounds that His
justice is supposedly too rigorous). Secondly, Grosseteste
says, the word can refer to the sinner’s own moral capacity,
in that he may believe that God both could and would
forgive, but that the sinner is, in his own view, too sinful to
complete penitential works sufficiently meritorious to earn
forgiveness. Thirdly, according to Grosseteste, the sinner
may think a particular stipulated penance too much for him;
while finally, in a closely related (and old) meaning,
Grosseteste thinks the habitual sinner might regard reform
as a practical impossibility, because habit has too strong a
grip. So the sinner “despairs” of his own capacity to
refORM.22

Pastoral writers also considered this kind of despair to be the major cause of suicide.

Educated clergy, and those that they preached to or advised, held that Christians who
despaired of forgiveness often did not confess their sins and consequently killed
themselves due to their unbearable guilt. Murray points out the paradox contained in this
religious explanation for suicide, remarking that those convinced of their inevitable

22 Ibid., p. 378.
damnation would be unlikely to kill themselves and thus cause that damnation to begin earlier than necessary. Murray will offer a hypothesis for how this paradoxical belief developed later in his study, when he deals more closely with the origins of the traditional connection between despair and suicide.

The section entitled “Religious or Moral Indifference” distinguishes the second understanding of spiritual despair. As implied by the earlier discussion of the overlap between hope and faith, many theological writers considered a failure to trust that God would forgive one’s sin to be equivalent to a failure to accept the Christian faith as a whole. Murray demonstrates that medieval thinkers associated despair with apostasy, blasphemy, and spiritual doubt. A further usage derived from this connotation was the result of “a more radical failure in belief,” in which the desperate sinner took on a role similar to “that of the modern international term desperado, which today envisages less a state of mind, coldly analysed, than a relationship of one man with a multitude: the desperado is the person dangerous to a community and likely to behave irrationally.”

After presenting these three connotations, Murray gives one further meaning for despair, providing an example for almost every medieval century: to despair in the Middle Ages could mean to commit suicide. Classical Latin contains many examples of despair over worldly concerns, Murray’s “despair of the present,” and of despair having the secondary meaning of “to commit suicide.” These two meanings predated Christianity and would remain in use alongside the later, Christian meanings of despair.

---

23 Ibid., pp. 378-379. Cf. Susan Snyder, “The Left Hand of God,” who associates another paradox with despair: “awareness of and sorrow for past sin, always the first step of fallen man on his way to salvation, may lead him into such self-loathing that he feels—and therefore is—beyond the reach of God’s mercy” (p. 20; see also p. 59).
24 Ibid., pp. 380-381.
25 Ibid., p. 381.
26 Ibid., pp. 382-383.
throughout the Middle Ages. Murray then attempts to explain how medieval theologians and the people they influenced could believe that what he calls “their kind of desperation,” 27 i.e. a failure to hope for God’s mercy, was the main cause of suicide despite the above-mentioned logical absurdity it implies: “that the man who despairs of God’s mercy might be the very man most tenacious of life, for fear of meeting his judge.” 28

In “The Two Despairs,” Murray posits that the worldly and spiritual connotations of despair became conflated due to the same growth and refinement of medieval ethics that caused the Christian understanding of despair to be further elaborated and disseminated. The new Aristotelian approach to ethical problems caused greater emphasis to be placed on one’s motive for committing a particular sin, and the traditionally cited motive for suicide, as it had been since Antiquity, was despair. However, Murray dismisses the medieval belief that spiritual despair was a frequent cause of suicide:

…people did not, in general, commit suicide for expressly religious reasons. A monk here, or a nun there, may be found as a possible exception, but they were the spiritual gladiators, and most suicides had no identifiably religious motive. 29

In the cases collected in his first volume, Murray found far more evidence of “this-worldly” despair causing the suicide’s self-destructive impulses rather than any abstract concern that he or she would not be redeemed in the next. In other words, those who struggled with theological despair were more likely to live to tell the tale, unlike Murray’s suicides, who left no statement but their mute remains. Due to illness, poverty,

27 Ibid., p. 377.
28 Ibid., p. 390.
or some other kind of devastating setback, life in this world had become intolerable.\textsuperscript{30} However, as the theological connotation of despair became more widely understood, it was also more frequently seen as the state of mind preceding suicide, logical inconsistency aside. Moreover, theological despair also became one of the many euphemisms for suicide, since it was often easier for medieval people to refer to suicide by referring to its supposed motive.\textsuperscript{31}

Despite its merits, Murray’s work on despair clearly comprises part of a larger study on suicide, and was written with this objective in mind. It is thus possible that Murray has misinterpreted some of his theological sources, seeing a reference to physical suicide when the author was in fact citing the spiritual suicide that could result from despair. In other words, when a sinner despairs of God’s mercy and consequently does not confess, he exists in a state of spiritual death, denying himself the continual renewal of regular repentance. However these sources are read, it is easy for the reader of Murray’s study to lose sight of the fact that not all of those who suffered from despair in the Middle Ages resorted to the drastic solution of physical suicide, or allowed themselves to succumb permanently to such a spiritual suicide.

This dissertation investigates the work of three well-known medieval authors who wrote about, and, I will argue, very likely experienced, despair according to the theological or spiritual understanding outlined above. In keeping with Murray’s findings, none of these three ultimately committed suicide, though many scholars believe that at least one of them was tempted.\textsuperscript{32} At first glance, these three authors seem to have little in common: they flourished in disparate times and places, moved in very different social

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., p. 386.
\textsuperscript{32} See Chapter Four, p. 221.
circles, and wrote in a wide variety of genres. What has justified their inclusion in this study was not simply that they wrote about theological despair, but, as will be shown, that they drew from their own experience when doing so. Their personal testimony, presented either directly as their own, or indirectly as that of a character or interlocutor, was intended to equip their audience with the spiritual tools necessary to overcome their own despair.33

The first of my three authors is Isidore of Seville, the celebrated early seventh-century bishop whose teachings on despair will be treated in Chapter Two. Working in Visigothic Spain in the wake of the slow and turbulent collapse of Roman influence, Isidore and his colleagues sought to preserve as much as they could of the classical educational tradition and tailor it to the needs of a new generation of Christian clergy, one not necessarily familiar with the fundamentals of Latin grammar and style. His extensive corpus contains the famous *Etymologiae*, as well as treatises on liturgy, Biblical exegesis, grammar and theology. My discussion includes every reference to *desperatio* or related terms found in Isidore’s works, since I believe they provide an important overview of patristic thought on despair and serve to confirm Murray’s findings. Isidore’s writing also shows an early example of this thought being repackaged to suit the demands of a later century, as it would be throughout the Middle Ages. His efforts to train the young scholars of his own day would prove invaluable to later centuries as well, as the enduring popularity of his work has shown. Two of his most widely disseminated texts, the *Synonyma* and the *Sententiae*, are not only excellent sources for Isidore’s synthesis of

33 Unless otherwise specified, any references to despair from this point forward will be to theological or spiritual despair as defined above.
patristic thought on despair, but they also hint at Isidore’s willingness to share his own spiritual struggles in order to help his flock defeat this vice.\(^{34}\)

The second writer I have chosen, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, was not widely known amongst her tenth-century contemporaries but has become a favoured topic of study and praise for modern scholars. She wrote three prefaces in the course of her works, all of which, despite her use of the first person singular, have produced more questions than answers about their author. In the first part of Chapter Three, I examine these prefaces more closely, especially in light of her frequent use of the verb *praesumo* and its derivatives. Like all of the self-characterizations found in her prefaces, Hrotsvit’s admission of her own presumption should not be taken at face value, but should be understood in relation to her use of *presumptio*, and its counterpart *desperatio*, in the body of her works.

In Part Two of Chapter Three, I will demonstrate how Hrotsvit presented *praesumptio*, *desperatio* and related issues in her narratives. Due to the extent of her *opera* and her frequent references to despair, it is necessary to focus primarily on her treatment of despair and obedience in the legend of *Maria*, and her exploration of presumption and despair as impediments to penance in the legends *Theophilus* and *Basilius*, and the plays *Abraham* and *Pafnutius*. Careful reading of both Hrotsvit’s prefaces and narratives reveal her belief that all of humankind presumes when asking for

---

forgiveness, and that such presumption is necessary for salvation. Indeed, the female martyrs portrayed in her legends and plays are often described as “presumptuous” by a tyrannical male authority figure, forcing the audience to re-evaluate the term. In Maria, she depicts the Virgin Mary as secure in her obedience to God’s will and ready to defy the Jewish authorities who have conflated God’s Law with their own customs. In presuming to disobey worldly authority in order to obey God’s plan for her, Mary provides a template for Hrotsvit and her sisters, whose monastic vocation sometimes brooked the disapproval of those to whom they owed temporal obedience.

Hrotsvit’s positive connotation of presumption must also shape any interpretation of the presumption of which she accuses herself in her prefaces. Hrotsvit often expressed her desire to write in thanksgiving and praise of God, and her prefaces hint at her determination to do so despite the possibility of opposition from her superiors. Thus Hrotsvit’s seemingly humble confessions of sinful presumption are in truth a proud declaration of the salvific presumption that allowed her to write in the face of worldly criticism. Given her understanding of despair and presumption as complementary mindsets, her admission of presumption also strongly suggests that Hrotsvit was also plagued with despair over her unorthodox appropriation of the role of auctor and poeta.35

My fourth chapter considers Dante Alighieri’s Inferno, a poetic meditation on the ultimate fate of the desperate sinner and how such a fate might be avoided. Dante wrote his magnum opus in the years after his devastating exile from Florence in 1302, an event which almost drove the disgraced poet to suicide. Dante’s protagonist is a fictional version of himself, a lost Wayfarer struggling to escape a dark wood. Most dantisti

believe that he also represents Everyman, his ordeal in the forest portraying the plight of
the ignorant Christian trying to escape sin by relying on his own abilities. This
beleaguered Pilgrim is soon rescued by the shade of Virgil, a divinely appointed guide
who leads him out of the wood and through the nine circles of Hell. Along the way, the
Wayfarer converses with condemned shades being punished according to the type and
severity of the sins they failed to repent in life. He not only learns the nature of the
afterlife, but more importantly, the nature of sin and his own potential to commit it. As
the Pilgrim had almost done in the dark wood, the shades of the Inferno had abandoned
themselves to sin, investing their hopes in themselves or in the world around them. As
his famous journey progresses, Dante the Wayfarer will come to realize the necessity of
God’s grace for the Christian wishing to overcome sin. Indeed, all three of the writers
studied consider this knowledge an important antidote to despair, an antidote not only
prescribed by the Church, but tested by their own experiences.

What little research has been done on how these three authors viewed despair will
be discussed in the appropriate chapter, along with a brief overview of the more general
scholarship on each writer. As did Murray, most scholars have approached the topic of
despair as an ancillary interest. Some welcome exceptions to this rule appeared in the
1960’s and 70’s. In 1963, Susan Snyder submitted her doctoral thesis on “The Paradox
of Despair: Studies of the Despair Theme in Medieval and Renaissance Literature.”
Her first chapter, “Despair in Medieval Thought,” provides an excellent survey of
patristic writing on despair, augmented by scholastic and mystical texts. She then uses
this chapter to elucidate her discussion of four medieval and early-modern works:

Wolfram von Eschenbach’s *Parzival*, Arnoul Gréban’s *Mystère de la passion*, Marlowe’s

---

Doctor Faustus and Book I of Spenser’s Faerie Queene. Snyder’s first thesis chapter, as well as the published article based on her doctoral work, have been an invaluable starting point for my own research, especially her summary of patristic thought. Also useful has been the article of Arieh Sachs, who covers some of the same ground as Snyder, but tends to focus more on literary sources and less on theological ones.

In the following decade, Friedrich Ohly contributed more focused work on despair as it pertains to the Judas legend and related hagiographic themes. In 1976, Ohly published a small study of despair and its counterpart, presumption, on which he expanded in the same year in his classic Der Verfluchte und der Erwälte: vom Leben mit der Schuld. Here he contrasts the twelfth-century emergence of “holy sinner” legends such as Gregorius and Albanus, who successfully overcame despair for their heinous sins, with the apocryphal legends of Judas, whose failed repentance made him the ideal example of despair. He goes on to discuss their influence on later medieval passion plays, early-modern Faust legends and subsequent modern literature. More recently, Ohly has conducted a study of words for despair in Middle High German, and then treated a theme often found in medieval discussions of despair, warning the spiritual superior against punishing a guilty subordinate too harshly, lest they fall into despair.

In a Festschrift in honour of Ohly, Leopold Kretzenbacher also dealt with Middle High German philology. Kretzenbacher found evidence that desperatio was translated into that


As mentioned above, there are several areas of study in which despair is granted cursory mention, but not sustained investigation; we have already seen an example of this tendency in research on the virtues and vices in medieval art and literature.\footnote{Mâle, The Gothic Image, pp. 104, 105 n. 2, 106, 109, 112-115; Katzenellenbogen, Allegories of the Virtues and Vices, pp. 13 n. 1, 20 n. 2, 59 n. 3, 65 n. 3, 76, 78-79, 80 n. 1, 82 n. 2, 83 n. 1; Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins, pp. 103-104, 149, 199-200, 205; Siegfried Wenzel, The Sin of Sloth: Acedia in Medieval Thought and Literature (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1967); Barasch, “Despair in the Medieval Imagination”; Hourihane, ed., Virtue and Vice, pp. 350-352; Richard Newhauser, ed., In the Garden of Evil, pp. 10, 38-39, 76, 142, 224, 458, 472.} Here despair is usually mentioned as the vicious opposite of hope, and/or an offshoot of acedia, sometimes paired with the complementary vice of præsumptoio or cited as the medieval explanation for suicide. Despair is also commonly referred to in more general studies of penance.\footnote{Jean Delumeau, Le péché et la peur: la culpabilisation en Occident, XIIIe—XVIIIe siècles (Paris: Fayard, 1983), English trans.: Sin and Fear: the emergence of a Western guilt culture, 13th-18th centuries, trans. Eric Nicholson (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1991), pp. 11, 17, 177-184, 193, 200, 208.}

despair is increasingly applied to the dilemma of the thwarted or unrequited lover, as in the Italian *disperata* poems that began to appear in the fourteenth century.\(^{47}\) Iberian scholars have also started to note the role of despair in legal and religious texts, especially in the thought of Alfonso the Learned.\(^{48}\) The present study follows the example of the few existing surveys of a particular author’s thought on despair.\(^{49}\) I believe this dissertation will show how fruitful such intensive research can be, since in their efforts to combat despair, medieval people developed infinite and fascinating variations on a familiar theme: *sicut scintilla ignis in medio maris*, so was the measure of a repented sin in the vast ocean of God’s mercy.\(^{50}\)

---


\(^{50}\) A late medieval expression frequently found in penitential and devotional literature, inaccurately attributed to Augustine. See Collins, “Mercator pessimus?”, p. 213, n. 52.
Chapter Two
“The Foot Fails”: Despair in the works of Isidore of Seville

Introduction

Considering the influence of earlier Christian thinkers such as Augustine of Hippo, John Cassian and Gregory the Great on the theological concept of despair, the work of Isidore of Seville may seem like an odd place to start my study. The formative views of the first three, and the texts in which they were expressed, are discussed in most modern treatments of the topic. More recent scholarship reminds us, however, that medieval people did not always have access to ideas as presented in their original context. This was especially true in the centuries before 1200, when the words and ideas of these Fathers were more often found in the works of compilers, epitomators and encyclopedists; Neil Hathaway has observed that “the Middle Ages can rightly be called the age of compilation.” One of the most renowned of such compilers was the Bishop of Seville. In his recent monograph on Isidore’s life and work, Jacques Fontaine demonstrates his vital contribution to the long tradition of compilatio so important to the instruction and transmission of classical and early Christian learning.

---

Widely hailed as “the last Church Father” by both medieval and modern acclaim,\textsuperscript{5} Isidore remains better known as an encyclopedist and compiler than as an innovator.\textsuperscript{6}

During much of the twentieth century, this description of Isidore was usually pejorative when used by academics, who saw the contributions of early medieval compilers as essentially derivative. We find an extreme statement of this view in the work of Ernest Brehaut, who in 1912 portrayed Isidore as the inheritor of all the worst tendencies of late Roman encyclopedists, namely,

\begin{quote}
[t]he literary and philological flavour, the stress on word history and derivation, the pseudo-science based on authority, the conspicuous tendency to confusion and feebleness of thought, [and] the habit of heedless copying that we find in an aggravated form in the \textit{Etymologies}.\textsuperscript{7}
\end{quote}

Their work was worthy of study only for the sake of their sources or their role in transmitting earlier ideas to later generations. Brehaut assures his readers in the preface of his study that Isidore’s writings, “while of no importance in themselves, become important as a phenomenon in the history of European thought.”\textsuperscript{8} Recently, however, scholars have attempted to vindicate compilers, arguing that innovation and creativity

\textsuperscript{5} It appears that the first medieval expression of this view occurred, naturally enough, in Spain, at the Eighth Council of Toledo (653), where Isidore was described as “[n]ostri quoque saeculi doctor egregius, ecclesiae catholicae nouissimum decus, praeecedentibus aetate postremus, doctrinae comparatione non infimus, et quod maus est in saeculorum fine doctissimus, atque cum reverentia nominandus.” See José Vives, ed. and trans., \textit{Concilios visigóticos e hispano-romanos} (Barcelona: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, Instituto Enrique Flórez, 1963), p. 276. For modern uses of this idea, see Jacques Fontaine’s classic \textit{Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans l'Espagne wisigothique} (Paris: Études augustiniennes, vols. 1 & 2, 1959; vol. 3, 1983), vol. 1, p. 3; and more recently J. T. Crouch, “Isidore of Seville, St.,” in the \textit{New Catholic Encyclopedia}, vol. 7 (Detroit: Catholic University of America, 2003), p. 602.

\textsuperscript{6} For example, see Franz Brunhölzl, \textit{Geschichte der lateinischen Literatur des Mittelalters} (München: W. Fink, 1975), French trans. Henri Rochais (mise à jour by author), \textit{Histoire de la littérature latine du Moyen Âge} (Paris: Brepols, 1990), p. 78: “Dans son œuvre écrite, Isidore nous apparaît avant tout être un érudit, non pas un esprit vraiment créateur ou un penseur, mais plutôt comme un compilateur, qui, extrêmement diligent, a beaucoup lu et qui maîtrise comme nul autre l’ensemble du savoir de son temps.”


\textsuperscript{8} Brehaut, \textit{Encyclopedist of the Dark Ages}, pp. 7-8. On the vicissitudes of Isidore’s modern reputation, see Fontaine, \textit{Genèse et originalité}, pp. 8-10, 329-330; Brunhölzl, ibid., pp. 78-79; and Fontaine, \textit{La culture classique}, vol. 1, esp. pp. 3-5, “Isidore de Séville, figure paradoxale.”
should be sought not only in the development of new ideas, but also in the way older ideas were selected, organized and presented to changing medieval audiences. The works of Isidore, tailored to meet the needs of the newly stable and orthodox Visigothic kingdom of the early seventh century, certainly represent this latter type of authorial ingenuity. I will again call attention to the subtitle of Fontaine’s latest book, *Genèse et originalité de la culture hispanique au temps des Wisigoths*; the author places Isidore’s work firmly in its temporal and geographical context in order to highlight his previously unappreciated *genèse et originalité*. Neil Hathaway argues that early medieval writers themselves did not share our habit of devaluing compilation. In order to understand medieval conceptions of this often maligned literary activity, he traces the uses of *compilo* and its noun forms from antiquity to the twelfth century, finding quite a number of positive or at least neutral views of compilation. In fact, one of his pivotal examples is Isidore’s own definition of *compilator*, found in Book X of the *Etymologiae*.¹⁰

With these arguments in mind, I have decided to begin with Isidore’s treatment of my topic not only because of his well-documented dependence on the above-mentioned Fathers, or the early and impressive dissemination of certain of his works, though these reasons alone are persuasive. Jocelyn N. Hillgarth has asserted that “[t]here appear to be more extant manuscripts of Isidore written before 800 than of any other author except Augustine.”¹¹ The earliest extant copy of the *Etymologiae* is the famous St. Gall fragment, which Bischoff believed to be of Irish provenance and

---

¹¹ See Hillgarth’s article, “Isidore of Seville, St.,” in the *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*, ed. in chief Joseph R. Strayer (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1985), vol. 6, pp. 563-566.
assigned to the mid-seventh century. Michael Herren has argued for the possibility that other Isidorian works were known in Ireland in the seventh century. My interest in Isidore owes more to the fact that this “last” Father was among the first to take on a challenging and novel project, adjusting the traditional methods of secular and religious education in order to meet the needs of a newly-orthodox Germanic kingdom and its churches. Isidore strove to blend both the pagan and Christian legacies of classical Europe into a well-organized, comprehensive and above all practical curriculum for the young clerics and scholars of his time. As a result of these efforts, Isidore provided us with an excellent sampling of those aspects of pagan and early Christian thought which would inform the Church’s teaching on theological despair throughout the period covered in this study. Moreover, his works also reveal some of the earliest medieval interpretations of these ideas, since Isidore’s own expressions of theological despair, both as a bishop and as a simple penitent, were hardly derivative.

In this chapter, I will examine all instances in which forms of the verb despero or its derivative noun desperatio appear in Isidore’s writings. I will start with the four examples found in the Etymologiae, thus learning what Isidore considered to be the most prevalent and useful meanings attached to these terms. My findings here confirm

---


14 Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, pp. 113-116.
to some degree those of Murray as presented in the Introduction.\textsuperscript{15} I will then
investigate the references to despair made in his smaller, less celebrated treatises, works
that drew on the genres of liturgy, theology, exegesis and grammar to help the cleric
better understand and carry out the duties of his office. Not surprisingly, these texts
will give us a clearer picture of his conception of, and solutions to, the problem of
theological despair. Following Augustine, Cassian and Gregory, here Isidore treats
desperation as a sin which can pose a serious threat to the penitential process. The
despairing sinner need not suffer alone, however, as Isidore was quick to remind his
students; the penitent would always have the essential aid of God’s grace in his struggle
to emend his sinful life.

I will finally show that, in order to promote this message, Isidore shared his own
concerns about the state of his soul in both the \textit{Synonyma}, written at the beginning of
his episcopal career, and the \textit{Sententiae}, composed near the end of his life. He thus
provided comfort and guidance to those who had encountered despair either in their
own lives or in their dealings with their parishioners. Whether Isidore derived these
lessons from the arguments of earlier Christian moralists or from his own personal
experiences, medieval readers clearly found them effective, as demonstrated by the
large and appreciative audience his works garnered in the centuries after his death.

\textsuperscript{15} See pp. 5-12 above.
The Foot Fails: Despair in the *Etymologiae*

When considering the thought of Isidore of Seville on any particular point, however abstract or concrete, scholars turn first to his famous *Etymologiae*. In fact, his effort to provide a kind of lexicological archive for the *literati* of his time was so wide-ranging and thorough that the resulting work, unfinished at the time of his death in 636, was ultimately divided into twenty books. Despite its size, the *Etymologiae* survives in over 1000 manuscripts, indicating an impressive medieval readership; the editors of the recent Cambridge English translation claim it was “arguably the most influential book, after the Bible, in the learned world of the Latin West for nearly a thousand years.” Modern scholars still use it as a source of first resort when seeking to know the general tenor of medieval thought on a given topic. Sadly, Isidore left us little explanation of his purpose in undertaking his most celebrated work. We have

---


17 Fontaine has identified four stages of the work’s development. The first stage was completed sometime between 612 and 621; the later two were the product of posthumous recensions. The final stage produced the twenty-book version that survived in most manuscripts and is best known to us today (*Genèse et originalité*, p. 173).

18 Barney et al., p. 3, and especially their section on “[t]he influence of the *Etymologies*,” pp. 24-26. For a list of manuscripts from the seventh through twelfth centuries containing the *Etymologiae*, along with some editorial and bibliographic background, see Manuel C. Diaz y Diaz, *Index Scriptorum Latinorum Medii Aevi Hispanorum* (Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 1959), pp. 39-41; for a more extensive list see José María Fernández Catón, *Las Etimologías en la tradición manuscrita medieval estudiada por el Prof. Dr. Ansbach* (León: Centro de Estudios e Investigación “San Isidoro,” 1966). Standard works on the early manuscript transmission of the *Etymologiae* include the articles of Bischoff, ibid.; and Reydellet, ibid.
only the brief letter to King Sisebut which he appended to its earliest redaction. The text itself testifies, however, that Isidore sought to organize and present in succinct form all the knowledge available to him, be it arcane or technical in nature, pagan or Christian in origin. Jacques Fontaine argues that Isidore’s aims were primarily pastoral and educational; he wished to preserve the knowledge of antiquity in a format accessible to the aspiring clerics and lettered elite of his day.

The etymology of desperatio found in Book VIII of Isidore’s great encyclopedia will allow me to introduce his most basic conception of despair in the Christian context, one designed to leave its mark in the minds of his students. For the sake of comparison, I will then discuss the three other references to despair in the work: the etymology of desperatus given in Book X, and the appearance of the word desperatio in Books II and XI. In each of these cases, Isidore drew on the pre-Christian meanings of despair that would remain in use alongside the more specialized theological senses throughout the Middle Ages. Though these older connotations are not the main subject of this study, their appearance in the Etymologiae will confirm Murray’s assertion that they “flowed undisturbed into medieval vocabulary, like a river flowing evenly between two countries,” and would inevitably influence the spiritual notion of despair.

The first five books of the Etymologiae introduce the reader to the major intellectual disciplines of Isidore’s day, comprising the seven liberal arts (I-III),

---

19 Brunhölzl, ibid., p. 80; Barney et al., ibid., pp. 17-18. See Epistola VI at the beginning of the Lindsay edition (not paginated): “En tibi, sicut pollicitus sum, misi opus de origine quarundam rerum ex veteris lectionis recordatione collectum atque ita in quibusdam locis adnotatum, sicut extat conscriptum stilo maiorum.”

20 See Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, pp. 167-182, where he argues that the Etymologiae are the culmination of the “triptyque grammatical,” also including the Differentiae and the Synonyma, in which Isidore made novel use of traditional grammatical exercises in order to develop and pass on sound techniques for Biblical interpretation, the scientia christiana posited by Augustine in his De Genesi ad litteram (12, 7, 1). See also p. 60 below.

21 Murray, Suicide in the Middle Ages, vol. II, p. 386.
medicine (IV) and law (V). With these basics covered, Isidore could then move on to loftier subjects, and the next three books form what Fontaine calls the “**triptyque religieux**.” Book VI turns to the study of Scripture, canon law and liturgy. Book VII deals with the Trinity, the saints, clergymen and the laity. Book VIII, entitled “*De ecclesia et sectis,*” is a comparative study of orthodox Christianity and its various rivals, past and present: the Jews, heretical and schismatic groups, the ancient schools of philosophy, pagan gods and their worship, and more humble phenomena such as poets, sibyls and magicians.

This last book also contains Isidore’s etymology of *desperatio,* the first of two explicit treatments of the topic in his encyclopedia. He starts Book VIII by exploring the difference between the church and the synagogue, followed by a section “*[d]e religione et fide.*” Here he defines dogma and religion (*religio*), associating the latter with the noun “*eligio,*” or “choice.” Drawing on Augustine, he goes on to discuss the three virtues enshrined by Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:13: “[t]here are three things that are required of people for worshipping God in the practice of religion, that is, faith, hope, and charity.” It is by faith, he explains, that we believe what we cannot see, and that

---

22 Ibid., pp. 177-178. Barney et al. list the main sources for this section, which include Augustine, Jerome, Gregory, Lactantius’ *Divine Institutes* and Tertullian (p. 15).

23 Of great help to me here were the entries for “*desperatio*” and “*despero*” in the concordance to the *Etymologiae* compiled by Ana-Isabel Magallón García, *Concordantia in Isidori Hispaliensis Etymologias: a lemmatized concordance to the Etymologies of Isidore of Sevilla* (Hildesheim; Zürich; New York: Olms-Weidmann, 1995), p. 423.

24 “Quod verbum compositum est a relegendo, id est eligendo, ut ita Latinum videatur religio sicut eligio” (*Etym.* VIII, ii, 2). This discussion of the *Etymologies* was originally written before Barney et al. became available, thus all of the translations were mine. In some cases, I have retained my own translations for the sake of more clearly expressing my argument. Here, as in all of my quotations of Lindsay’s edition, the italics are mine. As one often finds in Isidore’s prose, “*eligio*” is apparently a neologism, the noun form of *eligo, eligere,* it is not attested by Lewis and Short or Cassell.

we are able to disbelieve what we do see. “Thence the noun ‘faith’ (*nomen fidei*) is properly derived if that happens (*[f]i*[l]at*) which was said (*[d]i*[c]tum*) or promised. And thus that which is pleasing to both parties, as if between God and man, is called faith (*fides*), and from here comes the word for treaty (*foedus*)”.

Isidore elucidates hope and charity in the same fashion, relying on ancient authority, current usage and simple mnemonic devices, e.g. using homophones such as *fides*/*foedus*, to reinforce his lesson.

That which is called hope (*spes*), he tells us, is a “*pes progrediendi*,” or “a foot for going forward,” as though to say “*est pes*” (“it is a foot”). Thus *desperatio* takes its name from the reversal of this idea, “for there the foot fails ([*d*]eest...*pes*), and there is no ability to go forward; since while someone loves sin, he does not hope for eternal glory.”

As we will see below, this connection between desperation and the love of sin will be further explored elsewhere in Isidore’s work. Sophie de Clauzade de Mazieux calls this *spes*/*pes* image one of Isidore’s few “bold inventions,” arguing that while most of the material in his etymologies is derived from patristic sources, we can

---

26 “*Fides* est qua veraciter credimus id quod nequaquam videre valemus. Nam credere iam non possumus quod videmus. Proprie autem nomen fidei inde est dictum, si omnino [*fi*]at quod [*di*]ctum est aut promissum. Et inde *fides* vocata, ab eo quod fit illud quod inter utrosque placitum est, quasi inter Deum et hominem; hinc et *foedus*” (*Etym. VIII, ii, 4, my bracketing*). These lines are my admittedly loose translation of the entry for “*fides*”, much improved thanks to the advice of Prof. A. G. Rigg. Prof. Rigg pointed out to me Isidore’s trick of spelling component parts of the word in question using words from the etymology, hence “fi-di” from “*fiat*” and “*dictum*”, which I have shown in the translation by including the Latin word and bracketing the appropriate letters.

27 Barney et al. note that this last type of etymology, the explanation of one word by using another word or phrase containing similar sounds, was the one Isidore used most frequently (p. 24).

28 “*Spes* vocata quod sit pes progrediendi, quasi *est pes*.” Unde et e contrario *desperatio*. *Deest enim ibi pes*, nullaque progrediendi facultas est; quia dum quique peccatum amat, futuram gloriam non sperat” (*Etym. VIII, ii, 5*). Again, these lines contain my translations. Isidore’s explanation of *desperatio* as the opposite of *spes* is one of the few of his etymologies that will be confirmed by modern scholarship. See Barney et al., p. 22, n. 62.
see his elusive originality in these clever word associations. I believe, however, that here too Isidore distilled the ideas of his predecessors into a more compact and memorable form. Whether or not this imagery begins with Isidore, it creates a fundamental correlation in the mind of the student: hope facilitates the Christian’s progress toward salvation, while despair impedes it. It also represents an early example of the Christian tradition of treating despair as the opposite of, and a serious impediment to, the Pauline virtue of hope, a tradition that we will see carried on by medieval writers long after Isidore. Naturally, the lover of sin afflicted with desperation would be less inclined to repent, an exercise carried out in hope of forgiveness and, ultimately, salvation.

In Book X we learn more about the desperatus, the person of whom others despair. Unlike the rest of the books in the Etymologiae, which are arranged topically, Book X, De vocabulis, consists of a loosely alphabetical collection of abstract adjectives. Fontaine sees it as an odd digression from the unifying theme of Books IX and XI-XIV, which he believes to be a series on “l’homme et la nature animée.” He even suggests that Book X was originally composed separately as a treatise on moral

---

29 On the issue of Isidore’s originality, see the discussion of compilation in the introduction to this chapter (pp. 20-22). See also Sophie de Clauzade de Mazieux, “Isidori Hispalensis Etymologicarum liber octavus: De ecclesiis et sectis. Edition critique et commentaire,” Positions de thèses de l’École nationale des chartes (1977), p. 51. I have not been able to make direct use of the thesis itself.

30 Perhaps what Isidore alludes to are the “feet of the soul,” an image discussed in Chapter Four, pp. 229-232.

31 See pp. 7-9 above. See also Murray, Suicide, vol. II, Plate 8, pp. 374, 376-377; and Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 27, 45, 48, 58. For more on the virtue of hope per se, see Jacques-Guy Bougerol, La théologie de l’espérance aux XIIe et XIIIe siècles, I, Études (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1985), pp. 17-24 on patristic views of hope; pp. 23-24 on Isidore; see the first plate, pp. 135-136, and pp. 259-260 on despair as hope’s opposite. Bougerol finds Isidore’s foot imagery employed by ninth-century abbot Paschasius Radbertus (p. 25, pp. 303-304), a lead doubtlessly followed by many other medieval writers.
and exegetical vocabulary and was only included in the encyclopedia at a later stage. Isidore’s short preface to the book implies such an exegetical aim:

Although the origin of names, from whence they come, takes its rule from philosophers, so that by metonymy ("per denominationem"), man ("homo") is named from humanity ("ab humanitate"), and a wise man ("sapiens") is named from wisdom ("a sapientia"), since first there is wisdom, then a wise man; nevertheless another specific cause is clear in the origin of some names, just as man ("homo") comes from the earth ("ab humo"), whence he is properly called homo. For the sake of example, I have cited [here] some from among those [used] in this work.

Isidore claims that the true origin of some names does not follow a clearly discernible rule, such as the rhetorician’s rule of denominatio. In the case of homo, revelation is also key; we know from Genesis 2:7 that God created man from earth ("ab humo").

In the case of some entries, however, Fontaine’s theory wears rather thin. For example, the entry for decolor, which immediately precedes desperatus, seems clear enough no matter what one’s interpretive perspective: “Decolored, because color is lacking in it.” No further elucidation is given, Biblical or otherwise. It has recently

---

32 Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, p. 178. Those further interested in Book X should attempt to consult a recent book by Carmen Codoñer Merino, El libro X de las Etymologiae. Su lugar dentro de esta obra. Su valor como diccionario (Logroño: San Millán de la Cogolla, 2002). Unfortunately, this book is not available in Canadian libraries.

33 “Licet origo nominum, unde veniant, a philosophis eam teneat rationem, ut per denominationem homo ab humanitate, sapiens a sapientia nominetur, quia prius sapientia, deinde sapiens; tamen claret alia specialis in origine quorundam nominum causa, sicut homo ab humo, unde proprie homo est appellatus. Ex quibus exempli gratia quaedam in hoc opere posuimus” (Etym. X, 1, 4-10).

34 This rule is known in Greek as metonymy, as I have translated it above. Metonymy occurs in language when a speaker uses the name of one thing to indicate that of another thing associated with or suggested by it. An example of this rule can be found in American English, in which we often indicate the President by referring to “the White House.” Here Isidore is quoting Rhetorica ad Herennium IV, XXXII, 43. See Rhetorica ad Herennium: lateinisch-deutsch, ed. Theodor Nüsslein (Zürich: Artemis & Winkler, 1994), pp. 258-261.

35 Though the exact phrase in the Vulgate is “de limo” (“Formavit igitur Dominus Deus hominem de limo terræ, et inspiravit in faciem eius spiraculum vitae, et factus est homo in animam viventem”), we find reference made to trees made “de humo” a few lines later (Gen. 2:9), so perhaps this explains Isidore’s liberty with the noun in question. He probably did not use the Vetus Latina, since “de humo” does not appear at all in its version of Gen. 2:7-9.

36 See complete quotation in n. 38 below.
been pointed out that all the terms in Book X can be used to describe human beings. Seen in this light, it is argued, perhaps Book X should be classed with Book IX, which deals with human political order and social institutions, and Book XI, on human anatomy. We must remember, however, that Isidore himself was not responsible for the arrangement of the *Etymologiae* into books; their order can provide limited insight into his ultimate intentions for Book X or the work as a whole. Whatever Book X’s exact origin or purpose, Isidore obviously felt that his students could benefit from closer study of the words defined there. The entries are grouped according to their initial letter, and these groups are presented alphabetically. Within each letter-group, however, the words do not seem to follow any discernible arrangement; Isidore probably added useful entries as they occurred to him. One can often find a series of words that share some kind of connection, semantic or morphological, which would indicate that an intelligent mind was behind their selection.

Isidore’s etymology for the man despaired of ("*desperatus*") occurs in the middle of a series of words associated with physical weaknesses, some of which are linked to moral abuses. Isidore reports two ways in which *desperatus* was used in his time:

He is commonly called “despaired of” (*desperatus*) who is bad and lost and is no longer of any prosperous hope. It is said by way of comparison to the sick who are afflicted and given up without hope. It was customary among the ancients to place the desperate in front of their doors, either

---

37 Barney et al., ibid., p. 20, 21.
so that they might return their last breath to the earth [i.e. die], or so they might perhaps be cured by passersby who had once suffered from a similar illness.\textsuperscript{39}

In the latter two-thirds of this passage, Isidore confirms what Latin scholars have known for centuries; \textit{desperatio} and related words enjoyed wide usage in Latin long before early Christian thinkers, expanding on Paul, decided that to despair was to sin.\textsuperscript{40} Throughout antiquity, Latin speakers employed \textit{despero} and its derivatives to describe situations that predated Christian concepts of sin and penance. Quite often, these situations were not even related to one’s spiritual or moral condition. As we saw in Chapter One, these older meanings were not replaced or overshadowed by the newer, Christian, understanding, but remained current throughout the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{41}

Of these secular contexts for despair, Murray found that by far the most common was the indication of someone too gravely sick to hope for recovery.\textsuperscript{42} Thus Isidore’s description of the terminally ill patient as \textit{desperatus} would be quite familiar to the reader and would be expected in any discussion of the term, especially since the previous four entries also involved symptoms of bodily dysfunction. In fact, Isidore’s last mention of \textit{desperatio} in the \textit{Etymologiae} appears in the same context. It occurs in

\textsuperscript{39} “Desperatus vulgo vocatur malus ac perditus nec iam ullius prosperae spei. Dicitur autem per similitudinem aegrorum qui affecti et sine spe deponuntur. Consuetudo autem erat apud veteres ut desperati ante ianuas suas conlocarentur, vel ut extremum spiritum redderent terrae, vel ut possent a transeuntibus forte curari, qui aliquando simili laboraverant morbo” (\textit{Etym.} X, 72, 15-21).


\textsuperscript{42} Murray states that “illness was the main single occasion of this kind of desperatio,” i.e. what he terms “despair of the present.” Other situations he includes in this category were those of prisoners without hope of release, and those causing various levels of emotional and/or financial stress. “This usage of despair,” he explains, “corresponded with the definition given by psychological texts with no Christian element.” He goes on to reference the discussion of “diffidentia vel desperatio” in the Latin version of Aristotle’s treatise on the soul (\textit{De anima}) as well as Avicenna’s gloss of it (ibid., pp. 375-376). Cf. below Cicero’s definition of \textit{desperatio} in note 51, given as part of his discussion of the Stoic theory of the four passions.
Book XI, “De homine et portentis,” in which he deals with the vocabulary for the human body and its parts. After explaining the various terms for the pupil of the eye, Isidore includes another piece of medical lore: “Doctors say that despair is certain when the pupils of those about to die are not seen for three days.” Here Isidore was not setting out to define desperatio per se, as he did in Book VIII, or those despaired of, as in Book X. He simply used the word, as any speaker of Latin would, to evoke the tragic resignation of those caring for the terminally ill, in keeping with his own report of its use in Book X.

We should not forget, however, that in Book X Isidore first defined desperatus not according to its medical usage, but according to its common sense (vulgo); people commonly used desperatus to denote someone “bad and lost and no longer of any prosperous hope.” He then explains that this meaning of desperatus was a metaphor drawn from the language of the sickbed ([d]icitur autem per similitudinem aegrorum). While this brief definition leaves much to be desired, its final reference to the lack of hope puts the reader in mind of our first encounter with despair in Book VIII, where Isidore depicted it as the opposite of Paul’s virtue of hope, the failing foot to hope’s progressing one. Just as someone afflicted with the failing foot of desperatio loved sin and had no hope for salvation (“quique peccatum amat, futuram gloriām non

---

43 “Physici dicunt easdem pupillas, quas videmus in oculis, morituros ante triduum non habere, quibus non visis certa est desperatio” (Etym. XI, i, 37). If Isidore means here that the patient in question is unconscious for three days, with her eyes rolled to the back of her head, death might indeed be inevitable. Possible sources for this idea include Pliny, Servius and Solinus (Barney et al., ibid., p. 15).

44 Murray, Suicide, vol. II, p. 375-376: “Thus in miracle stories desperatio is employed frequently in respect of a sickness thought incurable before the miracle. A sick man is desperatus by his doctor. Doctors desperaverunt a patient. A patient is ‘desperately’ ill, and the weakest patients can be said to have ‘despaired of life’: vitae...desperati.”

45 “Desperatus vulgo vocatur malus ac perditus nec iam ullius prosperae spei.” See note 39 above for the full quote and bibliographic reference. Barney et. al. add a note of caution to the interpretation of phrases such as vulgo in the Etymologiae: “[u]sages that Isidore labels as ‘commonly’ (vulgo) current may be those current in the milieu of the source” (p. 14).

46 I again thank Professor Rigg for helping me decipher the Book X quotation under discussion.
we can assume that the desperatus was someone despaired of on moral and/or spiritual grounds. This use of desperatus confirms Murray’s assertion that:

…[o]ne connotation of the medieval desperatio was the same as that of the modern international term desperado, which today envisages less a state of mind, coldly analysed, than a relationship of one man with a multitude: the desperado is the person dangerous to a community and likely to behave irrationally.

As we will see below, this understanding of the desperatus had a precedent in the pagan Latin enshrined in the *Etymologiae*.

The careful reader will note that despair made its way into the *Etymologiae* in one more place, though here it was used not by Isidore, but by one of the pre-Christian sources he quoted. In Book II, *De Rhetorica et Dialectica*, Isidore illustrates the rhetorical technique of antitheton by including a lengthy quotation of Cicero’s second *Oratio in Catilinam*. The great orator had employed antithesis in order to contrast the combined forces of the Roman state with the supporters of the wicked Catiline. The former, he claimed, fought with all the virtues on its side, the latter with all the vices: “On one side fights decency, on the other wantonness; on this side chastity, on that debauchery…” He continued this “here virtue, there vice” pattern until his list of paired opposites touched on every conceivable element of personal and civic morality, each new addition another nail in Catiline’s political coffin. “And finally,” Cicero concluded, “good hope contends with universal despair.”

---

47 See pp. 28-29 above.
48 See p. 10 above, and *Suicide*, vol. II, p. 381. See also ibid., p. 175; Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 47-48.
this same speech, he described the allies of Catiline as *desperati*, since they were morally and/or financially worthless. Cicero probably would have agreed with the people of Isidore’s day in calling such men “bad and lost and no longer of any prosperous hope.” In fact, Cicero himself defined despair in similar words in the fourth book of his *Tusculanae Disputationes*, his classic restatement and elaboration of the Stoic theory of the four passions. When listing the “parts” of *aegritudo*, he explained that despair is “grief without any expectation of better things.” It is easy to imagine a person afflicted with such feelings becoming morally “bad and lost,” and one’s imagination does not have to be Christian in order to do so.

The *Etymologiae* has provided us with a general understanding of despair at the beginning of the Middle Ages. Like Giotto’s fresco in Chapter One, Cicero’s exercise in antithesis taught us that despair was not only a vice, but in some cases was the ultimate vice, the result of a life dedicated to vice. Long before Christian concepts of sin and penance were commonplace, Latin speakers had applied the vocabulary of despair to people, situations or desires which they perceived to be in some kind of dire extremity. Christian thinkers like Isidore would not radically depart from this tradition, but made use of it to illustrate their own concerns. The Christian sufferer from

---

51 “Desperatio [est] aegritudo sine ulla rerum expectatione meliorum” (4, 8, 18). See *Tusculan Disputations*, Latin and English edition, trans. J. E. King (London: W. Heinemann; Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univerity Press, 1950), p. 346. I have followed King’s translation of *aegritudo* as “grief” or “suffering,” as it is clear that in this instance Cicero was discussing one of the four Stoic passions and not a physical illness. Cf. other Latin translations of this passion, usually termed *lupē* (emotional pain or distress) in Greek: Virgil, in *Aeneid* VI, 733, also uses “aegritudo”; Augustine, in *De civitate dei* XIV, 3 and 5, citing both Virgil and Cicero, uses “tristitia”; Boethius uses “dolor” in *De consolatione philosophiae* I, 7. See also Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages*, pp. 38-39.
Desperatio was a lame man indeed, unable to practice one of the Pauline virtues that Isidore considered essential to the proper worship of God. Despite its own famous merits, however, the Etymologiae is not known for the depth and complexity of its exposition, nor for its everyday usefulness. For a better understanding of despair’s relationship to Christian penance, we must turn to those parts of Isidore’s œuvre with more theological and exegetical content. Here Isidore would move beyond simplistic definitions and provide practical guidelines for the churchmen of his day, who would be expected to recognize the despairing sinner and help him heal his failing foot.

“Ut convertatur et vivat”: Isidore’s council to the penitent

When dealing with the repentant sinner, the specter of despair was never far from Isidore’s mind. A quick study of one of his earliest works, De origine officiorum, makes this apparent. Writing at the request of his brother Fulgentius, Bishop of Ecija

---

52 See the work of John Freccero on Dante’s first canto, referenced in Chapter Four, pp. 229-231.
53 As Jocelyn Hillgarth explains, “[u]nlike [Isidore’s] other works…the Etymologiae was not intended as a practical manual but as a dictionary to be consulted by scholars, with its focus less on the present than on the classical past” (“Isidore of Seville, St.,” p. 564).
55 The work is more widely known as the De ecclesiasticis officiis, a title its recent editor opted to keep in order to avoid confusion. See Sancti Isidori episcopi hispalensis de ecclesiasticis officiis, ed. Christopher M. Lawson (Turnhout: Brepols, 1989). On the dating of Isidore’s works, scholars still rely on the article of J. A. de Aldama, “Indicaciones sobre la cronología de las obras de San Isidoro,” in Miscellanea isidoriana: homenaje a s. Isidoro de Sevilla en el 13 centenario de su muerte, 636-4 de abril-1936, ed. Provincia de Andalucía (Rome, 1936), pp. 57-89. Aldama estimated that Isidore wrote this work between 598 and 615, a range accepted by Lawson and Fontaine (see De eccles. off., pp. 13-14; Genèse et originalité, p. 437). For modern amendments to Aldama’s findings, see the introduction to the recent edition of Isidore’s Liber differentiarum II, pp. 22-23, n. 46 (see n. 121 below for the full bibliographic reference).
(then known as Astigi), Isidore drew on biblical and patristic authority to create a succinct guide to the basics of liturgy, administration and pastoral care for his fellow churchmen. The text now serves modern scholars as an introductory guide to the early seventh-century Visigothic Church. Its first book covers the major liturgical rites and texts; the second treats the clerical officers that celebrated these rites and various categories of their lay participants. Isidore included a chapter “De paenitentibus,” in which he briefly described the customs and lore pertaining to the ordo paenitentiae, those faithful seeking publicly to repent serious sins committed after baptism. Here we learn that he considered despair a formidable threat to the penitential process. Isidore focused on debunking the two fundamental assumptions that, either separately or together, he believed led most sinners to despair: that their sins were too great to merit forgiveness, or that they did not have the time or moral strength necessary to turn away from sin and perform a fitting penance.

Isidore begins the chapter by discussing Biblical penitents, including Job, David and the Ninevites (Jon 3:5-10), who would become classic models of penance and overcoming despair throughout the Middle Ages. Isidore goes on to define penance and give its etymology:

---

56 See Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, pp. 199-207. The text’s preface also provides insight into the pedagogical aspects of Isidore’s work as a compiler: “Itaque ut uoluisti, libellum de genere officiorum ordinatum misi, ex scriptis uetustissimis auctorum ut locus obtulit commentatum. In quo pleraque meo stilo elicui, nonnulla uero ita apud ipsos erant admiscui, quo facilius lectio de singulis fidei auctoritatem teneret” (p. 1, my italics).


58 Churchmen would work against these assumptions throughout the Middle Ages; see Murray, Suicide, vol. II, “A Gulf Between God and the Sinner,” pp. 377-378.

Penance is medicine for a wound, the hope of health, through which sinners are saved, through which God is appealed to for mercy; it is not weighed by time but by the depth of sorrow and tears. Penance (paenitentia) takes its name from penalty (poena) by which the soul is tormented and the flesh is punished.60

He then describes some outward signs of one’s penitential intention, such as growing out one’s hair and beard, wearing a hair shirt and covering oneself with ashes. While the sacrament of baptism could not be repeated, Isidore explains that the Church recognized the human propensity to fall back into sin and allowed penance to be carried out, “for the tears that penitents cry to God are considered in place of baptism.”61

Following Augustine, he admonishes the penitent to avoid falling into despair, “[f]or no matter how great their faults may be, however grave, nevertheless they must not despair of God’s mercy for them.” 62 The human capacity for sin, although impressive, could never be thought to outstrip God’s mercy for the truly repentant.63

Isidore then broaches the tricky subject of the amount of time one must spend in repentance. Still quoting Augustine, he firmly states that the sincerity of one’s contrition matters more than the length of time one spends carrying out penitential acts. Both, citing Psalm 50:19, note that God does not spurn a contrite and humble heart.64

60 De eccles. off. XVI, 2, 12-16: “Est autem paenitentia medicamentum uulneris, spes salutis, per quam peccatores saluantur, per quam deus ad misericordiam prouocatur; quae non tempore pensatur sed profunditate luctus et lacrimarum. Paenitentia autem nomen sumpsit a poena qua anima cruciatur et mortificatur caro” (p. 80).
61 Ibid., XVI, 6, 51-52: “Lacrimae enim paenitentium apud deum pro baptismate reputantur” (pp. 81-82).
62 Ibid., 52-54: “Vnde et quamlibet sint magna delicta, quamuis grauis, non est tamen in illis deis misericordia desperanda” (p. 82). Cf. Augustine, Enchiridion, XVII, 65, 26-29: “Sed neque de ipsis criminiis, quamlibet magnis, remittendis in sancta Ecclesia, deis misericordia desperanda est agentibus paenitentiam secundum modum sui cuiusque cecci” (p. 84).
64 De eccles. off. XVI, 7, 55-57: “In actione autem paenituidinis…non tam consideranda est mensura temporis quam doloris; cor enim contritum et humilitatum deus non spernit” (p. 82). Cf. Augustine,
Isidore recommends that the convert’s penitential fervor be determined by the degree of evil intent that had been in his or her mind when the sin in question was committed.

Were someone to repent in the last stages of life, Isidore counsels them to be hopeful:

> For if someone were to stop being evil toward his end by means of penitence, he should not despair because he is at the limit of his life, because God does not consider how we were before but how we are toward the end of life. For he forgives or condemns each person according to his end, as it is written: The Lord shall judge the ends of the earth (I Reg 2:10); and elsewhere: He beholdeth the ends of the world (Iob 28:24). So then we do not doubt that man is forgiven according to his end through the prod of penitence.65

While God always forgives the sincere convert, however late that conversion may take place, Isidore ends the chapter by recommending against delaying too long.

> In the early seventh century, the Church typically allowed believers to undergo a public rite of penance only once in a lifetime. Many Christians chose to wait until the end of their lives before receiving penance on their deathbed, a practice that became known as paenitentia in extremis.66 Isidore cautioned against this, reminding the reader that death could strike suddenly and before one had a chance to repent at all. He carefully explained that although last-minute conversion was certainly good, the better policy was to turn away from sin long before the end, so that one might pass from this

---

65 *Enchiridion*, pp. 29-32: “In actione autem paenitentiae…non tam consideranda est mensura temporis quam doloris; cor enim contritum et humilitatum deus non spernit” (p. 84, my italics). Cf. Vulgate version of Ps. 50:19: “[C]or contritum et humilitatum, Deus, non despicies.”

life more securely. Isidore’s works show that his interest in penitential practice would continue throughout his career, yet here in the *De origine officiorum* we see presented in a clear and compact format the two fundamental lessons that the Church would go to great lengths to communicate to despairing sinners for centuries to come: no matter how terrible their sins, no matter how long they had avoided repenting, they must never despair of God’s mercy.

Isidore intended this message to be expressed not only to the clergy, who would have been the main audience for *De origine officiorum*, but also by the clergy. While few sermons from the Visigothic period survive, and none of Isidore’s, Fontaine has looked to his exegetical works for clues to the sources, style and themes prevalent in his preaching and homiletic instruction. Fontaine argues that Isidore wrote his six exegetical texts in response to the need to train future preachers in the basics of Biblical interpretation and exposition. The existing tradition of exegesis, such as the work of Cyprian, Hilary, Ambrose, Jerome, Augustine and Gregory, proved too erudite and rhetoricly sophisticated to suit this purpose in an era of steadily declining literacy. Isidore combined and simplified the ideas of these Fathers with both his clerical students and their future parishioners in mind.

Despair is treated in only one of Isidore’s exegetical works, an Old Testament commentary known as the *Mysticorum expositiones sacramentorum*, written sometime

---

67 *De eccles. off.*, XVI, 9, 80-84: “Sed quia raro id fieri solet, metuendum est ne, dum ad finem differtur conversio sperata, ante occupet mors quam subueniat paenitentia. Pro qua re, etsi bona est ad extremum conversio, melior tamen est quae longe ante finem agitur ut ab hac uita securius transeatur” (p. 83).
68 See Fontaine, “Pénitence publique et conversion personnelle.”
70 Ibid., pp. 183-185.
between 624 and 636. Here he mentions despair on six different occasions, each one giving us some idea of how he wished his flock to perceive and resist their desperate thoughts and feelings. In the first two of these instances, he fortifies his readers, and by extension their potential audience, against despair with a clever interpretation of a seemingly unrelated Biblical verse. During his discussion of Genesis, Isidore emphasizes that even after Adam and Eve’s sinful disobedience, God still sought them out in the Garden of Eden. “This shows,” Isidore explains:

…that if some stray from faith and good works into their own lies and desires, God does not spurn them, but still calls out to them so that they might render penance, since he does not want the death of the sinner, but that he might be converted and live (Ezek. 33:11). Therefore sinners should not despair, as long as these wicked ones are called forth to the hope of forgiveness.

He draws another such lesson from the Book of Exodus when recounting the various donations made for the construction of the Temple (Ex 25:1-7). He likens the offerings of precious stones to the confessors, apostles, priests and other just members of the Church, both in this world and the next, who can help the believer to avoid despair. “The blessed apostle Peter also calls them living stones: Be you also as living stones, he said, built up into the Temple of God (I Pet. 2:5). Therefore all these things are offered

---

71 Also known as the Quaestiones in Vetus Testamentum. See Mysticorum expositiones sacramentorum seu quaestiones in vetus testamentum, in Patrologia cursus completes: Series Latina, ed. J.-P. Migne (hereafter referred to as PL), vol. 83 (Paris: Garnier, 1850), col. 207-424. For dating, see Fontaine, Genése et originalité, p. 436. For more on this little studied text, see Thomas O’Loughlin’s article, “Isidore’s Use of Gregory the Great in the Exegesis of Genesis,” Revue bénédictine 107:3-4 (1997): 263-269. O’Loughlin also notes that “the systematic structure of the work…marks the beginning of the distinction between a commentary and a theological treatise…Isidore made no claim to originality regarding ideas in his work; but he seems to have been aware that the format and style of his work, in particular that the student could have access with breuitas to the best materials, was new” (p. 263).

72 Expositiones, Genesis, V, 3: “Vocavitque Deus Adam: Ubi es? (Gen 3:9) Hic ostendit quod si qui a fide vel bonis operibus ad mendacia sua desideriaque labuntur, non despicit illos Deus, sed adhuc ut redeant ad paenitentiam vocat, quia non vult mortem peccatoris, sed ut convertatur, et vivat (Ezek. 33:11). Ergo non est desperandum quibuslibet peccatoribus, dum et ipsi impii ad sperm indulgentiae provocantur” (col. 220C). Snyder notes that the verse from Ezekiel that Isidore quoted here was evoked against despair throughout the Middle Ages (See “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 44).
in the tabernacle of God so that no one despairs of salvation.”73 With such encouraging words, found throughout his *œuvre*, Isidore reminded his audience, both clerical and lay, of the value of hope to the believer.

### The Despair of Doubt

As discussed in the Introduction, Alexander Murray notes what he terms an “overlap” between the first two of the aforementioned Pauline virtues, faith and hope. As he explains, the theological concepts of faith and hope were closely related, and could be interpreted as interdependent. For example, the definition of faith found in Hebrews 11:1 relies on the concept of hope: “faith is the substance of things to be hoped for.”74 In other words, while a Christian clearly cannot hope for salvation without also believing in it, the author of Hebrews felt that he could hardly hold such a belief without also hoping that it would come to pass. Therefore, Murray continues, since faith and hope are so closely linked, it should not surprise us that a lack of hope, or despair, can also manifest as, or lead to, a lack of faith.75 He then provides a number of examples found throughout the Middle Ages in which despair denotes a failure of faith.76

Isidore apparently had such an understanding of despair, since the next two references to despair in the *Expositiones* portrays it not as a danger to the virtue of hope, but rather to the virtue of faith, thus striking at the very foundations of Christian

---

74 See the Vulgate version of Hebrews 11:1: “Est autem fides sperandorum substantia rerum, argumentum non apparentium.”
75 Murray, *Suicide*, vol. II, pp. 376-377. See also p. 10 above.
76 Ibid., p. 379-381.
belief. Both occur in his commentary on the Book of Numbers, in which he covers the
events that befell the Jewish people during their forty years of wandering in the desert
before taking possession of the promised land of Canaan (chapters 13-19). In both
places Isidore likens the Jewish people’s doubt in God, manifested by their despair,
with their later doubt in the divinity in Christ.

For instance, when Moses sent twelve spies across the Jordan to explore the
promised land, all but two were sorely discouraged, questioning God’s promise because
of the strength and number of the peoples already settled there. Upon their return,
Isidore recounts, they infected the people with their fear and doubt (Num 13-14):

[J]ust as [the spies] terrified the people with desperation, so
that they would not believe in the promise of God, thus the
Scribes and Pharisees persuaded the Jewish people not to
believe in Christ, desiring to return to the Egypt of this
world, denying the manna of faith, seeking the black oils of
sins, the rotten onions of blasphemies, and the melons of
VICES and desires, withering with corruption.77

In these last lines, Isidore refers to another instance of the people’s doubt in God’s plan,
from Numbers 11:4-9, in which they complained about the manna God was providing
for them in the desert, wishing instead for the kind of food they had eaten in Egypt.
Why had they risked their lives and followed this God out into the desert, some of them
wondered, if He was not even powerful enough to provide them with meat? The Lord
answered by sending great flocks of quails to the camp, but then showed His anger by
causing an epidemic to break out and kill those who had craved meat (Num 11:31-34).

77 Expositiones, Numbers, XV, 7: “Sed sicut illi desperatione terrerunt populum, ne de Dei promissione
confideret, ita et isti Scribæ et Pharisaæ suaserunt populo Judæorum ne crederunt in Christum, ad
Aegyptum saeculi hujus redire cupientes, repudiætes manna fidei, quaerentes ollas peccatorum nigras, et
cepas blasphemiariæ putidas, et pepones vitiorum æ libidinum corruptione marcentes” (col. 346B-C).
Isidore would return to this theme when interpreting the first portion of Numbers 20, in which even Moses was swayed by the people’s doubt. In answer to their complaints about the lack of water at Kadesh, God instructed Moses to take the stick that usually rested in front of the Covenant Box and to speak to a nearby rock in the presence of the assembled people. These things being done, Moses was assured, water would gush out of the rock. However, instead of following God’s orders, Moses used the stick to strike the rock twice, clearly feeling that simply speaking to the stone would not be enough. His words to the people just before doing this also showed his lack of faith: “Hear, ye rebellious and incredulous,” he said, “can we bring you forth water out of this rock?”, implying that he and Aaron, and not God, were responsible for this miracle. After the task had been performed, God punished Moses for his doubt by prohibiting him from leading the people into the promised land (Num. 20:2-13).

Forty years later, God ordered Moses to spend his last days on a nearby mountaintop, looking out over the land that he could never enter (Deut. 34).

These episodes make the perils of doubting and disobeying God clear, but when analysed within a Christian frame of reference, the doubt of Moses and the Israelites takes on another meaning. As Isidore explains:

[While in the sacred Scriptures Moses may play the part of such and such a thing, which represents some other significant thing, here he played the part of the Jewish people under the Law, and represented them in a prophetic omen. For just as Moses, striking the rock with a stick, doubted the virtue of God, thus that people, who were held under the Law given through Moses, [later] nailing Christ to the wood of the cross, did not believe him to be the power of God; but just as, with the rock having been struck,]

Isidore goes on to note Paul’s assertion in 1 Corinthians 10:4 that the rock described here was Christ. “Therefore God decreed that this carnal despair concerning the divinity of Christ die on the height of Christ Himself, when he ordered that the death of the flesh of Moses occur on the mountain. For just as the rock [that Moses struck] was Christ, so the mountain [on which he died] was Christ.” Here Isidore employs the word *desperatio* to denote doubt, in this case doubt in the divinity of Christ, one of the essential tenets of Christianity. Understood in this way, despair threatened to undermine the very beliefs that made one Christian, and thus made eternal life possible.

Someone beset with such fundamental doubts would be unlikely to accept the efficacy of the penitential process or the salvific properties of God’s grace.

**Despair as Turning Point**

In the next chapter of his commentary on Numbers, Isidore likens the struggle to lead a virtuous life to a precarious battle, the fortunes of which can change suddenly.

---

79 Ibid., Numbers, XXXIII, 4: “Dum enim Moyses in Scripturis sanctis aliam atque aliam pro re aliqua significandam personam gerat, nunc tamen populi Judaeorum sub lege positum personam gerebat, eumque in prophetica praemunitione figurabat. Nam sicut Moyses, petram virga percutiens, de Dei virtute dubitavit, ita ille populus, qui sub lege per Moysen data tenebatur, Christum ligno crucis affigens, eum virtutem Dei esse non credidit, sed sicut percussa petra manavit aqua sitientibus, sic plaga dominicae passionis effecta est vita credentibus (col. 353C-354A).


81 Snyder notes instances in which patristic or medieval authors describe heretics, lapsed Christians, Jews and pagans as despairing, following Paul’s reference to the Gentiles in Ephesians 4:19: “[Q]ui desperantes, semetipsos tradiderunt impudicitie, in operationem immunditiae omnis in avaritiam.” In the case of heretics or lapsed Christians, they have either refused to acknowledge the possibility of salvation, or are too immersed in the sinful pleasures of this world to care. In the case of Jews or pagans, they are tragically ignorant of the Christian faith, and thus, as shown above, are “desperate” in that they cannot hope for things in which they do not also believe. This is the usage we find Isidore applying here in his commentary on Numbers. See Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 6-7.
He recounts the attack of the Canaanite king and its initial success, leading to the capture of some of the Israelites. They in turn made a vow to God, promising to dedicate to Him any victories or conquests He chose to grant. With divine help they fought the Canaanites again, this time destroying their army and conquering their lands (Numbers 21). Isidore presents this episode to his readers as a model for their own struggle against vice:

With the vow being made, the battle was fought again in the same place, and the winner was conquered, the conquered prevailed, through which we understand that when enemies attack us, being without God’s help, and we are led away into captivity, we must not despair of rescue [salutem], but we must arm ourselves again for battle. Thus might we conquer where we were defeated, and we might triumph in the same place in which we were captives before.82

Isidore stressed that the Christian must recognize the importance of divine assistance in the fight against sin. Without this one essential piece of knowledge, the sinner, left to her own resources, would inevitably fall into despair and death. If the need for God’s help, i.e. grace, was understood, however, she could stave off despair and prevail. The resolve to continue the fight and to remain expectant of divine assistance was the turning point of the war.

The Progeny of Vice I: Cassian’s Tristitia

Isidore also employs such military imagery in his sixth and last mention of despair in the Expositiones. He again interpreted the Hebrews’ wars of conquest as a

---

82 Ibid., Numbers, XXXIV, 2: “Rursusque in eodem loco pugnatur ex voto, victor vincitur, victi superant, per quod intelligimus ut cum nos Dei auxilio destitutos hostes invaserint, duxerintque captivos, non desperemus salutem, sed iterum armemur ad praelium. Potest fieri ut vincamus ubi victi sumus, et in eodem loco triumphemus in quo fuimus ante captivi” (col. 354C-D).
figure for the believer’s struggle against vice. This time, however, he had a particular set of vices in mind. In his commentary on Deuteronomy, Isidore deals with Moses’ last words to the Israelites, in which he names the seven nations they will have to fight in order to possess the promised land (Dt. 7:1-2). Isidore likens these seven peoples to “the seven principal vices which each conquering spiritual warrior is warned to destroy entirely through the grace of God.” He then goes on to list eight principal vices, gastrimargia (gluttony), fornicatio (lust), philargyria (avarice), ira (anger), tristitia (sadness), accidia (spiritual indifference, “sloth”), cenodoxia (vain glory) and superbia (pride), and the numerous subordinate vices which each causes. We find despair placed under tristitia, the last subordinate vice in a list that also includes rancor (malice or ill will), pusillanimitas (faintheartedness), and amaritudo (bitterness).

Many of Isidore’s readers, especially those from a monastic background, would recognize this particular listing of eight vices, and their comparison to the seven Canaanite tribes, from the Collationes of John Cassian, one of the most influential authors of the Western monastic tradition. Cassian was exposed to this concept during the time he spent among the anchoritic monks of the Egyptian desert ca. 400, whose strict asceticism would have a definitive influence on his own life and teachings. He

---

83 On the history of patristic and medieval lists of the principal vices, see the classic study of Morton W. Bloomfield, The Seven Deadly Sins. For a more recent overview of the topic, see Richard Newhauser, ed., In the Garden of Evil: the vices and culture in the Middle Ages (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005).
84 Ibid., Deuteronomy, XVI, 2: “Septem istae gentes septem sunt principalia vitia quae per gratiam Dei unusquisque spiritualis miles exsuperans exterminare penitus admonetur” (col. 354D).
85 From the Greek α-, not + κέδος, care. On the ancient and patristic meanings of the Greek term accidia, or acedia, which were notably different from our modern “sloth,” see Siegfried Wenzel, The Sin of Sloth, esp. pp. 3-29.
86 Isidore, ibid., Deuteronomy, XVI, 3-4 (col. 366C-367A).
87 See Richard Newhauser, “Introduction,” in In the Garden of Evil: the vices and culture in the Middle Ages, ed. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2005), p. x. To account for the discrepancy between the seven tribes and eight vices, Cassian makes Egypt, Israel’s unconquered enemy, the eighth “tribe,” likening it to gula, a vice we can never completely defeat, since
discussed these eight vices at length in the fifth *collatio*, or “conference,” of his *Collationes XXIV*, a work recounting conversations with specific desert fathers on problems that often beset anchorites. The scheme was first committed to writing in Greek by Evagrius Ponticus, who sought to help the anchorites of the East recognize and combat the eight “evil thoughts” likely to impede their lonely struggle for spiritual perfection. Cassian, however, also discussed the list at length in his *Instituta*, which applied the lessons of the desert to the coenobitic communities that were becoming increasingly prevalent in the West. While Evagrius’ works inspired a number of Latin adaptations, those of Cassian would be chiefly responsible for transmitting this vice list, as well as many other anchoritic teachings, to the West. The reading of both the *Collationes* and the *Instituta* would be required by Benedict of Nursia in his *Rule*, sealing their fate as Western monastic classics.

Cassian also originated the practice of listing the lesser vices that arose from each chief vice; he was the first to name despair the last progeny of *tristitia*. Early in his treatment of *tristitia* in Book IX of the *Instituta*, he describes the consequences of
prolonged struggle with this vice: “[H]aving destroyed all salutary counsel and driven out steadfastness of heart, [tristitia] crazes as it were and stupefies the intellect, breaking it and overwhelming it with a punishing despair.”[^94] He further explains this despair in chapter IX:

There is also another, more detestable type of *tristitia*, which causes neither correction of life, nor amendment of vices in the offending soul, but the most dangerous despair, which caused Cain not to repent after his fratricide, and led Judas not to hurry to make amends after his betrayal, but to hang himself in his despair.^[95]

We will meet these two notorious biblical characters again, as they were often evoked as examples of the despairing sinner.^[96] Of more interest here, however, is the acknowledgement of despair as the ultimate product of intense engagement with vice,^[97] though in this case with one vice in particular.

This sadness is only useful to us, Cassian clarifies, when it incites us to repent our sins, strive for perfection, or contemplate our future blessedness. This type of sadness he likens to the *tristitia secundum Deum* mentioned by Paul in 2 Corinthians 7:10, “which works steady penance until salvation.”^[98] Again following Paul, he asserts


[^95]: Ibid., IX, p. 170, line 6-11: “Est etiam aliud detestabilius tristitiae genus, quod non correctionem vitae nec emendationem uitiorum, sed perniciosissimam desperationem animae incit et delinquenti: quod nec Cain fecit post fratricidium paenitere nec Judam post proditorem ad satisfactionis remedia festinare, sed ad suspendium laquei sua desperatione pertraxit.”


[^97]: Cf. my conclusions on Cicero’s reference to despair, pp. 34-35 above.

[^98]: “[Q]uae enim secundum Deum tristitia est paenitentiam in salutem stabilem operator; saeculi autem tristitia mortem operator.”
that all other sadness is *tristitia mundi*, the sadness of the world which works death.\textsuperscript{99}

Cassian describes it as:

…harsh, impatient, hard, full of rancor, fruitless mourning and penal despair, wearing down him whom it has grasped and calling him away from industry and healthy sorrow, because it is irrational and steals not only the efficacy of prayers, but even cancels out all the spiritual fruits that we mentioned before, which the other [type of *tristitia*] knows how to bestow.\textsuperscript{100}

The ideal monk must learn to use the positive *tristitia secundum Deum* for his spiritual advancement, while striving to overcome the negative *tristitia mundi* as he would any other vice. In the struggle to develop such emotional refinement, one can imagine how easily salutary *tristitia* could degenerate into its vicious twin.\textsuperscript{101}

**“Immersus voragine vitiorum”: Isidore’s Regula monachorum**

Isidore’s close dependence on Cassian should not surprise any scholar familiar with his other writings; Isidore took a keen interest in monastic life, a subject he treated in *De origine officiorum*, the *Etymologiae*, and the *Sententiae*.\textsuperscript{102} He even wrote his own *Regula monachorum*, drawing on Cassian, Pachomius, Augustine, and his older brother Leander’s *De institutione virginum et contemptu mundi*, a rule for nuns written

---

\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., p. 171, lines 2-7: “haec uero asperrima, inpatiens, dura, plena rancore et maerore infructuoso ac desperatione poenali, eum quem conplexa fuerit ab industria ac salutari dolore frangens ac reuocans, utpote inrationalis et interciens non solum orationum efficaciam, uterum etiam uniueros quos praediximus fructus spirituales euacuans, quos nouit illa conferre.”
\textsuperscript{101} For this image see Snyder’s discussion of *tristitia*, “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 3-6. Here she cites the *Liber de conflicto vitiorum et virtutum*, now attributed to Ambrose Autpert (d. ca. 778). In this popular *psychomachia*, Spirituale Gaudium accuses her opponent Tristitia of being the evil half of a set of twins.
for their sister Florentina.  Five of the twenty-five chapters of Isidore’s rule deal with matters of discipline. According to Isidore, all faults, whether minor or major, deserved some kind of censure in keeping with their severity. While he did not make direct mention of despair in this section, he did recognize the risk it posed to the monk. In chapter XVI, where he covers the pardoning and correction of the sinner, Isidore uses language that earlier Fathers associated with despair, warning that:

...[a]lthough someone may be caught in the abyss of frequent and very serious faults, he is not to be cast out of the monastery but restrained according to the nature of the fault, lest he who could be corrected by a long period of penance be devoured by the mouth of the devil during the time he is cast out.

Even in its gentler, coenobitic form, the monastic life, with its strict discipline and focus on penance, provided many opportunities for the kind of overwhelming self-recrimination and frustration which could engender habitual sin and despair. Isidore knew that were his hypothetical community to turn such a troubled monk out into the

---

103 See Julio Campos Ruiz, *Regulas monásticas de la España visigoda. Los tres libros de las “Sentencias,”* which includes an edition and translation of the *Regula monachorum* and Leander’s rule for nuns (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1971); as well as the introduction to the English translation of A. W. Godfrey, “The Rule of Isidore,” *Monastic Studies* 18 (1988), pp. 7-29. Leander himself was a monk before becoming bishop of Seville (579-600). In this work we again see the influence of both Cassian and Gregory’s lists of principal vices, which Isidore drew upon when discussing the monks’ proper disposition (III, IV; See Ruiz, ed., *Regulas monásticas*, pp. 93-97). For more on Augustine’s influence on Isidore’s *Regula*, see *La culture classique*, vol. 3, p. 1155.

104 For example, see Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 59: “Augustine, Chrysostom, Gregory...all use the figure of a deep abyss [in reference to despair]”; p. 16: “Despair is the devil’s own weapon, as theologians from Chrysostom to Bonaventura agree.”

105 Godfrey, trans., “Rule,” p. 21-22. See Ruiz, ed., *Regulas monásticas*: “Quamuis frequentium grausissimorumque uitiorum uoragine sit quisque inmersus, non est tamen a monasterio proiciendus, sed iuxta qualitatem delicti coercedus, ne forte qui poterat per diuturna tempora paenitudinem emendari, dum proicitur ore diaboli deuoretur” (p. 114).

106 Isidore seemed to acknowledge the essentially penitential nature of the monastic lifestyle in *De ecclesiasticis officiis* when he placed his chapter on penitents directly after that on monks.
world, he might abandon his vocation altogether, and perhaps even join the ranks of Murray’s *desperados*.  

Isidore’s lines are reminiscent of an *exemplum* found in Cassian’s second *collatio*. Here Cassian describes a distraught young monk who, having been tormented by feelings of lust, asks an older monk for advice on how to overcome this vice. Instead of consolation or prayer, the young man received only a harsh scolding from the impatient old monk, one which drove him to despair and made him consider leaving the monastic life. Their abbot, however, after learning what the young monk planned, scolded the older monk in turn. “[You]…” he admonished:

…who, receiving this young man suffering from diabolical attack, not only soothed him with no consolation, but even surrendered him, despondent with ruinous despair, into the hands of the enemy, to be, as far as you are concerned, lamentably devoured by him.  

Cassian, like Isidore, clearly believed that the outcast monk’s despair over his failed monastic conversion could easily devolve into a sinful and desperate life in the world. As we will see again in Chapter Three, despair would remain a well attested problem for those pursuing a monastic vocation in the Middle Ages.

**Progeny of Vice II: Gregory’s *Tristitia***

The Bishop of Seville was not the first author inspired by Cassian’s version of Evagrius’ vice list, nor even the first in Hispania. Newhauser notes that the earliest evidence for the literary reception of Cassian’s list comes from the Iberian peninsula.

---

107 See p. 10 above.
108 *Collationes*, II, XIII: “[Tu] qui suscipients iuuenem infestatione diobolica laborantem non modo nulla consolatione souisti, sed etiam perniciosas desperatione deiecutum inimici manibus tradidisti, quantum in te est ab eodem lugubriter deuorandum” (p. 56, lines 11-15).
Two sixth-century bishops, Eutropius of Valencia and Martin of Braga, would draw on this schema from their monastic past when writing during their episcopal career.\(^{109}\)

Though their work, especially that of Martin, would find a secular audience, Newhauser maintains that “at this point in its development the treatise on vices was still the spiritual property of the monastery, even when it moved outside the cloister walls.”\(^{110}\)

In the case of his *Expositiones*, Isidore followed the lead of his Iberian predecessors by drawing on Cassian’s list.

We learn from one of Isidore’s earlier works, however, that this was not the only version of the vices available to him. Newhauser argues that the primarily monastic focus of the vice list started to change with the work of Gregory the Great, a near contemporary of Isidore and a good friend of his older brother Leander.\(^{111}\) We find the classic statement of his vice list in the thirty-first book of the *Moralia in Job*, a massive exegetical and contemplative exercise comprising thirty-five books which Gregory wrote at the request of Leander.\(^{112}\) Though originally meant for monks, the work would be widely read by non-monastic audiences as well.\(^{113}\) Modern scholars

---

\(^{109}\) See Richard Newhauser, *The Treatise on Vices and Virtues in Latin and the Vernacular* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1993), pp. 108-111. He asserts that “[i]n a certain sense, the treatise on vices and virtues was created twice: once in Greek at the end of the fourth century in the anchoritic environment of the Egyptian desert, and then in Latin in the clerical culture of the Iberian peninsula in the sixth century, at the point of contact between monastic and secular Christian culture” (p. 109).

\(^{110}\) Ibid., p. 114.


have often noted the formative influence that Gregory’s *Moralia* would have on Isidore’s thought.114

Like Cassian before him, and Isidore after, Gregory was inspired to discuss man’s struggle against the vices by Biblical references to the battlefield, this time the image of a warhorse found in Job 39:25: “When he heareth the trumpet he saith: Ha ha: He smelleth the battle afar off, the encouraging of the captains, and the shouting of the army.”115 Gregory makes *superbia* the leader of this vicious army, and the seven principal vices its generals.116 He would further change the schema by adding *invidia* (envy) and subsuming Cassian’s *acedia* under the heading of *tristitia*. Again following Cassian, Gregory lists the subordinate vices which arise from the principal ones, dubbing them the armies that follow each general. Here we find the sins which Cassian had attributed to *acedia* and *tristitia* combined under *tristitia*, so that *desperatio* is followed by “sleepiness concerning rules [and] the wandering of the mind toward unlawful things.”117 Gregory also adds “horror or despair of the future” to the end of his list of the offshoots of *luxuria*, an innovation that, like the rest of Gregory’s discussion of the vices, would exercise definitive influence throughout the medieval

period. As we have learned from Cicero and Cassian, feelings of despair signaled the negative extreme of the sinner’s indulgence of their vicious nature.

Isidore would make use of Gregory’s list twice in one of his early grammatical works, written ca. 600 and known today as the Liber differentiarum II. First appearing in the fourth century, the writing of differentiae evolved from grammatical treatises. A differentia consisted of a comparison of two or more words which had come to be used interchangeably; the author sought to distinguish the subtle differences in meaning between these words. Indeed, Isidore’s other book of differences, now known as the Liber differentiarum I, was written for this exact purpose, as Isidore himself explained in its preface. The Liber differentiarum II, however, was more abstract and encyclopedic in nature, its comparisons of terms better understood as differentiae rerum than differentiae verborum. Isidore starts with such elevated
topics as the Trinity, the nature of Christ and paradise, and then moves down through
the hierarchy of creation, dealing with angels, humans, demons and beasts. He next
focuses on human nature, including our body parts, stages of life, reason, memory and
senses.

This line of inquiry leads Isidore to address subjects of theological and moral
import, such as the difference between the desire of the flesh and that of the spirit
(“Inter concupiscentiam carnis et spiritus hoc interest…”), a question inspired by
Cassian’s Collationes. Isidore explains that:

…[t]he desire of the flesh is the base movement of the soul
toward the disposition of lowly delight; but the desire of the
spirit is the eager straining of the mind toward the needs of
holy virtue. The latter sends those consenting to it to the
Kingdom [of God]; the former to eternal punishment. One
is the law of sin, descending from the damnation of the first
man; the other is the law of the mind, proceeding from the
gift of Our Redeemer. Now in such a way these two
oppose each other in a daily struggle for the disposition of
virtues and vices.

Isidore elaborates this last point by contrasting the reactions of these two desires to
each of Gregory’s vices. For example, referring to tristitia he notes that “[o]ne [desire]
is infected with sadness, [and] up to now it deeply felt any troubles; the other is broken
by no grief, but even suffering evils from neighbors is not moved from inner joy.”

124 Cf. Collationes, IV, VII-XV, esp. ch. XI; Isidore seems to have followed Cassian in his use of
antithesis in this chapter, though he did not draw on Cassian’s specific examples, indeed making a more
elaborate demonstration of his point.
125 Liber diff. II, XXVIII, l. 1-9: “Inter concupiscentiam carnis et spiritus hoc interest: concupiscentia
carnis est motus animae turpis in affectum sordidae delectationis; concupiscentia uero spiritus est ardens
intentio mentis in desideria sanctae uirtutis. Ista sibi consentientes mittit ad regnum, illa ad supplicium
sempiternum. Illa lex peccati est, de primi hominis damnatione descendens; ista lex mentis est de
munere Redemptoris nostri procedens. Haece autem sibi inuicem pro affectu uirtutum uitiorumque
quotidiana conluctatione taliter aduersantur” (pp. 69-70).
126 Liber diff. II, XXVIII, l. 30-32: “Illa tristitia inficitur, dum quaelibet aduersa persenserit; ista nullo
maerore frangitur, sed etiam mala de proximis portans, ab interiore gaudio non mouetur” (p. 72).
After running through Gregory’s list, Isidore returns to a now familiar military theme:

The desire of the flesh hastens those consenting to it toward the crowd of all vices; but the desire of the spirit strengthens the tired mind, lest it fail, in the hope of eternal glory. So then no matter how the desire of the flesh might overcome us, in no way should we despair, since, with the battle renewed, we are able to triumph over it even more gloriously. No matter how much the desire of the spirit might conquer, it is not secure in victory, since the cunning enemy, although sometimes defeated, nevertheless ultimately conquers the victors. And those whom he does not strike in the first meeting, he endeavors to cheat in the end. Indeed it is for this reason that the desire of the flesh does not cease to fight until the end of this life. But if the desire of the spirit overcomes until the end, it reigns in eternity, secure in the peace of victory with its fellow victors.127

So the conscientious Christian must be on guard to the very end. Isidore understood feelings of despair to be a possible end result of a vicious life, though not the inevitable result, since the Christian can always ask for the aid of divine grace to keep striving against his vicious desires until his death. As though with this thought in mind, Isidore followed this differentia with one which distinguished “[i]nter gratiae divinae infusionem et humani arbitrii voluntatem…”128

Isidore also ends the Liber differentiarum II with a meditation on Gregory’s vices. He begins the work’s last chapter, “De distinctionibus quattuor uitiorum,” with a brief discussion of the four Stoic passions—fear, joy, lust and sadness. He interprets

128 Ibid., XXX, p. 74.
these as vices that the pagan philosophers opposed to the four cardinal virtues.\footnote{Liber diff. II, XLI, l. 2-4: “Contra haec tamen quattuor virtutum genera totidem uitia philosophi opposita dicunt: metum scilicet et gaudium et cupiditatem siue dolorem” (p. 104). See Fontaine, \textit{La culture classique}, vol. 2, pp. 700-701. Cf. Cicero, \textit{Tusculanae disputationes} IV.} He specifies, however, that “we [i.e. Christians] call these same ones ‘middle’ rather than ‘perfect’ vices,” since they could be turned either to good or evil purpose by the power of the will.\footnote{Liber diff. II, XLI, l. 4-6: “Nos autem haec ipsa non perfecta uitia, sed media nuncupamus eo quod propter diversitatem morum ad utrumque parata sunt et modo ad bonum, modo ad malum pro arbitrio uoluntatis uertuntur” (p. 104, my italics). Fontaine notes that in this passage Isidore, following Augustine and Jerome, broke with the Stoic view of emotions as primarily negative, seeking “à réhabiliter la valeur morale de l’affectivité” (\textit{La culture classique}, p. 701).} After citing examples of how these middle vices could be either beneficial or sinful, Isidore gives a concise explanation of Gregory’s vice scheme, which owes much to its original presentation in the \textit{Moralia}:

Now there are seven perfect or principal vices, from which a great crowd of vices arise, that is the desire of gluttony, fornication, avarice, envy, anger, sadness, vainglory, and the ultimate leader and queen of them all, pride. Out of all of them two are carnal, fornication and gluttony; the rest are spiritual. Each is separated in such a way into its parts…\footnote{Ibid., l. 21-26: “Septem autem sunt perfecta uel principalia uitia, ex quibus copiosa uitiorum turba exoritur, id est gulae concupiscientia, fornicatio, auaritia, inuidia, ira, tristitia, inanis gloria, nouissima dux ipsa et earum regina superbia. Ex quibus omnibus duo sunt carnalia, fornicatio et ingluuiæ; reliqua spiritalia [sic]. Quae quidem in membri suis taliter distinguuntur.” (p. 106). Cf. \textit{Moralia} XXXI, XLV, 87-88 (l. 7-40). Andrés’ editorial apparatus indicates that some manuscripts show “octo” instead of “septem.” This confusion reflects that seen in the \textit{PL} version of the \textit{Expositiones} (see n. 87 above).} 

Isidore then distinguishes the various “parts” of each vice: five for \textit{gulae concupiscientia}, three for \textit{fornicatio}, and so on.

In this exercise he was again inspired by Cassian’s \textit{Collationes}, though he traded out many of Cassian’s examples, taken from the ascetic life, in favor of classical, Biblical and patristic allusions.\footnote{Cf. \textit{Collationes} V, XI, pp. 131-134. Besides Gregory and Cassian, Andrés identifies references to Cicero, the Old Testament, Augustine and Jerome (ibid., pp. 106-109).} He returns to Cassian’s works, however, in order to show that there are three parts of the vice \textit{tristitia}:
…the first of which, as Cassian said, is temperate and rational, coming from the repentance of faults; the other is disturbed, irrational, arising from anxiety of mind or desperation for sins; the third proceeds from anger, due to either some harm that has been suffered or the loss of a desired thing.\textsuperscript{133} Here Isidore seems to propose two harmful types of \textit{tristitia}: one pertaining to spiritual or emotional concerns, and the other to more worldly, tangible concerns.\textsuperscript{134} He ends the \textit{Liber differentiarum II} on a proactive note, teaching the reader how to combat each of the principal vices. \textit{Tristitia}, we learn, is overcome by “fraternal conversation and the consolation of the Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{135} Isidore prescribed comforting thoughts and company for the dejected, seeking to prevent any further isolation or spiritual malaise. He clearly felt that their vicious sadness, if unaddressed, would lead to despair. Thus the readers of his liturgical, theological or grammatical treatises, and undoubtedly those who benefited from his teaching in person, found so many encouraging words to help them address this problem. He must have expected that they would encounter the despairing sinner in their pastoral duties, and that they themselves might be a despairing sinner at some point in their lives.

\textsuperscript{133} \textit{Liber diff. II}, XLI, 1. 51-55: “…quarum prima, ut ait Cassianus, temperata et rationabilis, de delictorum penitutine ueniens; altera perturbata, irrationabilis, de anxietate mentis seu desperatione peccatorum exoriens; tertia de iracundia, uel de inlato damno ac desiderio praepedito procedens” (p. 109). Though indeed drawing from Cassian, Isidore is blending together two passages from separate works. \textit{Cf. Collationes V}, XI (l. 6-8): “unum quod uel iracundia disinente uel de inlato damno ac desiderio praepedito cassatoque generatur, aliiu quod de irrationabili mentis anxietate seu desperatione descendit” (p. 134); and \textit{Instituta} IX, VII-XIII, where as we have seen above, pp. 49-50, he opposed the \textit{tristitia} that worked repentance with the \textit{tristitia} that worked death. He goes on to list the likely causes of the latter (l. 16-21): “…universa tristitiarum genera, siue quae ex praecedente ira descendunt, siue quae amissione luci uel detrimento inlato nobis aduentium seu de inrogata generatur iniuria, siue quae letalem desperationem nobis inducunt, ualebimus superare…” (p. 171).

\textsuperscript{134} On this latter type of negative \textit{tristitia}, \textit{cf.} Murray’s conclusions on “despair of the present” (pp. 7-8 above).

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Liber diff. II}, XLI, 1. 75-76: “Tristitiam [subiugat] fraterna conloquia et consolatio Scripturarum” (p. 111).
The *Synonyma*: a template for successful penance

In his recent monograph dedicated to the life work of Isidore, Jacque Fontaine groups three of his texts together and treats them as “un triptyque grammatical.” He argues that each of the three—the two books of *Differentiae* (here treated as one work), the *Synonyma* and the *Etymologiae*—while based on an ancient grammatical exercise, were intended for more than mere pedantry, “[[I]’étude des mots menant à celle des choses qu’ils désignent.” Each text was used to reinforce correct Latin usage in young clerical students while also instilling important lessons about the reality beyond the words, whether philosophical and theological, as in the case of the *Liber differentiarum II*, psychological and moral, as with the *Synonyma*, or encompassing all fields of human knowledge, as he attempted so famously in the *Etymologiae*. In all three cases, we see Isidore’s efforts to preserve the rich tradition of classical erudition while putting it to practical use in a post-Roman, newly orthodox setting.

I have chosen to make the *Synonyma*, the second element of Fontaine’s loosely chronological “triptyque,” the last of the three discussed in this study, since only the *Synonyma* focuses exclusively on the theme of individual penance and moral reform. The work provides us with the most intensive engagement of the problem of...
despair found in Isidore’s œuvre. In fact, it did not take long for the Synonyma to acquire an alternate title: *De lamentatione animae peccatricis*. Though more than 500 manuscripts containing the text are extant, few modern scholars had studied it before Fontaine. We see a notable example of this lacuna in the first chapter of Susan Snyder’s doctoral thesis, an otherwise thorough discussion of the patristic thought on despair to be found in the *Patrologia Latina*, written in 1963. While she made use of Isidore’s *Differentiae, Sententiae* and *Regula monachorum*, she made no reference whatsoever to the Synonyma, though all four texts had been published in the same volume of the *Patrologia*. Jacques Elfassi, who recently completed a new critical edition, has been working to correct this scholarly oversight, publishing much needed studies on the work’s sources, language, style and fortuna.

The Synonyma’s many peculiarities may account for this earlier reticence; Fontaine has observed that early twentieth-century scholars could come to little agreement concerning its literary genre or Isidore’s purpose in composing it. Its written style was certainly unprecedented; as his title suggests, Isidore was inspired by

---

141 We cannot know with certainty when exactly this popular subtitle was added to the MS tradition; Ildefonsus of Toledo first referred to the work as a “lamentatio” in the middle of the seventh century. See *Genèse et originalité*, p. 170; “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” p. 164, n. 4.


143 See Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair.”


145 Jacques Fontaine, “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” pp. 164-165; idem, *La culture classique*, vol. 1, p. 10, n. 2; here Fontaine concluded that “[l]es Synonymes représentent la curieuse tentative d’un grammairien pour transformer un exercise scolaire en instrument d’expression d’un monologue mystique,” which has now become the accepted explanation of Isidore’s intentions.
the ancient rhetorical concept of synonymy (*synonymia*), which he defined in his *Etymologiae* as “occur[ing] whenever in connected speech we signify one thing with several words.” Isidore also drew on the related classroom exercise known as *copia dicendi* or *copia uerborum*, which required the student to express one concept in as many ways as possible, thus improving his vocabulary and oratorical skills. An aspiring cleric reading the *Synonyma* would enjoy similar benefits, thereby gaining valuable preparation for a career that often involved preaching and administrative tasks. As we will see below, Isidore also emphasized the cultivation of moral virtues along with grammatical ones, another debt owed to classical rhetoric.

Each of the textual subdivisions in the *PL* version, which Elfassi has decided to preserve, contains two or three distinct but related units of thought, each expressed in a number of ways, as we can see in the opening line: “My soul is in anguish; my spirit seethes; my heart is restless; the trouble of my soul possesses me.” Given its mournful tone, its beauty and creativity of expression, as well as the rhythmic feeling evoked by the repetition of one concept, we can easily understand why Fontaine has described the writing of the *Synonyma* as “prose poétique.” He posits the versified

---

148 See Fontaine, *Genèse et originalité*, p. 171, 359; Michael Winterbottom, “Aldhelm’s Prose Style and Its Origins,” pp. 59-60, 74; Fontaine, “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” pp. 188-189. Winterbottom quotes Quintillian’s criticism of this exercise as “childish”, “thankless”, and “not particularly useful” (p. 60). Winterbottom himself, when discussing the influence of the *Synonyma* on his subject, is not impressed either. He describes one of Isidore’s synonyms for “faith is gone,” “nusquam tuta fides,” as “ultimate dottiness” (p. 59), and elsewhere characterizes such use of synonyms as “mannerism” (p. 61).
150 Esp. in *Synonyma* II, 44-46. See Fontaine, *La culture classique*, vol. 1, pp. 125-126, 132-133, 292-293; views which he revised slightly in vol. 3, pp. 1068-1069.
152 Fontaine, “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” p. 163; see also idem, *Genèse et originalité*, pp. 170, 172, 347-348, where he observes that “[c]’est aussi chez Grégoire qu’Isidore a pu observer des traits majeurs de son
books of the Old Testament, especially the Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Lamentations and Ecclesiastes, as a likely source of Isidore’s inspiration.153 Like the text of the Psalms, which formed such a key element of prayer and liturgy, the lyrical and repetitive prose of the Synonyma facilitates a prayerful and contemplative state of mind for its reader.154 Elfassi’s recent work has also uncovered the grammatical sources from which Isidore drew, showing his debt to the few other examples of the synonymic style that have survived and then demonstrating how he surpassed them: “D’un exercice grammatical, Isidore a…fait un traité de morale, ou même de spiritualité. Ce qui fait l’originalité du style des Synonyma n’est donc pas l’usage répété de propositions synonymiques: c’est l’usage répété de propositions synonymiques tout au long d’une œuvre qui a un sens.”155

Despite his use of this striking, but hardly discursive, style, Isidore structured the Synonyma as a dialogue, a genre owing more to ancient philosophical treatises than to works of grammar or poetry. He dubbed the first speaker Homo, the anima peccatricis of the medieval subtitle. Homo begins the first of the work’s two books by

---

153 Fontaine, La culture classique, vol. 2, p. 818; idem, “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” pp. 170-171, 173-174. He also mentions the opening prayers of each book of Augustine’s Confessions, in which the author carries on a one-sided dialogue with God, though the influence of the Psalms is also evident here (La culture classique, vol. 2, p. 702).

154 On the influence of liturgy on the Synonyma, see Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, pp. 349-350.

lamenting the wretched state of his life. When his thoughts take a suicidal turn, Ratio
interrupts his dark monologue with a long speech of her own, encouraging and
admonishing him in turns.\textsuperscript{156} In his choice of characters, Isidore was likely inspired by
Augustine’s \textit{Soliloquiae}, also a short dialogue of two books in which Augustine speaks
with his own personified Reason. We know that medieval readers were aware of this
similarity; Fontaine reports a number of cases in which a medieval copyist of Isidore’s
dialogue gave it the title “\textit{soliloquium}, “\textit{soliloquia}” or “\textit{liber soliloquiorum}.”\textsuperscript{157}

Augustine’s work, however, closely resembles the classic Platonic dialogue,
since his conversations with Reason address a specific theological question: how one
comes to know God and his own soul.\textsuperscript{158} Isidore’s dialogue attempts to capture the
inner struggles of the penitent as, guided by Reason, he learns to overcome his worldly
frustrations, his spiritual despair, and to confess his sins properly and lead an exemplary
life. We will again find a better parallel with the dialogues found in the Old Testament,
in which man speaks introspectively with his own soul, prayerfully with the Lord, and,
in the case of Ecclesiastes, as a student under the tutelage of a wise teacher.\textsuperscript{159}

As we saw above, Book I begins with the tearful complaints of Homo, who
feels that his life has become unbearable. He is overwhelmed by his troubles,
friendless in a corrupt world that seems determined to punish him unjustly. Like Job,
upon whom he was doubtlessly modeled, Homo begins to wonder why he was born and
wishes that he could pass from life more quickly. He declares that “living is tedious to
me; I wish to die; only death pleases me. Oh death, how sweet you are to the wretched!

\textsuperscript{156} Fontaine points out that upon closer inspection, the text more closely resembles a series of long
monologues than a true dialogue, as we will see below (“Auteur ‘ascétique’,” p. 170).
\textsuperscript{157} Fontaine, “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” p. 169, n. 20.
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., p. 170.
\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
Oh death, how sweet you are for the living to love! How pleasant you are, oh death, to the sad and mourning!"\textsuperscript{160} Death would end the hardship of life, he decides, and it would be better to die well than to live badly.

At this crucial point Ratio makes her entrance, drawing on the familiar vocabulary of vice literature in her demands that Homo fight off this state of mind:

Oh man, why do you distrust your mind so much? Why is your mind so weakened? Why do you lose all hope and faith? Why is your mind so empty? Why are you thrown down by such faintheartedness (\textit{pusillanimitas})? Why are you so broken in adversity? Abandon sadness (\textit{tristitia}); stop being sad; drive sadness from you; do not succumb to grief; do not give yourself too much to grief; drive sorrow (\textit{dolor}) from your heart; close sorrow out of your mind; stop the assault of sorrow; do not continue in sorrow; conquer the sorrow of your mind; overcome the sorrow of your mind.\textsuperscript{161}

When Homo asks how he might do this, Ratio answers in a long monologue of her own: Homo must bear the vicissitudes of this world patiently and be more mindful of the problems of others; the pain of this life is short, since all things in this world will soon pass. Ratio then advises Homo, with no trace of “self-reference” or irony, to rely on the power of reason.

Thus far, Ratio’s counsel has had a Stoic flavour,\textsuperscript{162} but she now introduces the Christian concepts of God and the afterlife by quoting two verses from the New

\begin{itemize}
\item “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” pp. 178-179.
\end{itemize}
Testament: “through many tribulations we must enter into the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14:21); and “the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared with the glory to come that shall be revealed in us” (Rom. 8:18). In light of these lessons, she urges Homo to use the trials of this world for self-improvement, thus preparing himself for the possibility of eternal reward in the next. The alternative, to continue railing against his circumstances without changing his sinful ways, will ultimately lead to far greater torments in eternity.

With the existence of God and the afterlife established, Ratio now emphasizes the consequences of this knowledge, working to instill a healthy fear of God in her student. Homo’s complaints will only incite God’s anger, she argues, causing Him to send more hardships. She instructs Homo to recognize himself as a sinner and to probe his own conscience instead of focusing on the injustices of the present world, over which he has no control. She guides him through this process by pointing out his sins of pride, anger, envy, avarice and lust. Ratio’s monologue thus shifts Homo’s focus, as well as the reader’s, from the miseries of the outside world to the flaws within, leading him to see his own sinful nature as the root cause of his problems.

Homo initially agrees with Ratio, now realizing that the source of his crisis was internal rather than external. Yet he soon baulks at the challenge of mending his ways, citing the difficulty of breaking old habits. Ratio responds by reminding him that the pains of Hell will be far worse than the present discomfort of changing sinful customs.

Life is short and death can come suddenly; one must repent now while there is time.

---

Homo is thrilled to hear that his sins can be forgiven, but Ratio quickly tempers his excitement by warning against despairing of God’s mercy:

Therefore you must certainly believe; you must in no way hesitate; in no way doubt; in no way should you despair of the mercy of God. May you have hope in confession; may you have faith. You should not despair of the remedy of health; you should not despair of salvation, if you have turned to better things. *For he who despairs of forgiveness for sin condemns himself more on account of his desperation than for his original crime.* Desperation increases sin; desperation is worse than any sin. Therefore correct yourself, and have hope of indulgence…No fault is so serious that there is no forgiveness; however great a sinner you are, however criminal, however infamous, however weighted down by innumerable heinous crimes, the place of the penitent is not to be denied to you. Divine kindness easily supports penitents; indulgence is given through penance; every fault is wiped away through penance.\(^{164}\)

Ratio’s warning shows how easily problems of faith and hope can be conflated.\(^{165}\) It also contains a lesson that would find many teachers in the Middle Ages: the sin of despair is far more damnable than whatever sin caused that despair.\(^{166}\) Homo concurs that he had indeed lost hope, but now declares that his hope has been renewed, and that with God’s help he will begin to repent. Ratio prays that such help will be forthcoming, then starts the penitential process by insisting that he grieve over the enormity of his sins.

---

\(^{164}\) *Synon.* I, 53-54: “Certissime igitur crede, nullo modo haesites, nullo modo dubites, nullatenus de misericordia Dei desperes. Habeo spem in confessione, habeo fiduciam. Non desperes remedium sanitatis; non desperes salutem, si ad meliora convertaris. *Qui enim veniam de peccato desperat, plus se de desperatione quam de commisso scelere damnat. Desperatio auget peccatum, desperatio pejor est omni peccato.* Corrige igitur te, et indulgentiae habeo spem… Nulla tam gravis culpa est quae non habeat veniam; quamvis enim peccator sis, quamvis criminosus, quamvis sceleratus, quamvis infinitis criminibus nefandis oppressus, non denegatur tibi poenitentiae locus: facile poenitentibus divina clementia subvenit, per poenitentiam indulgentia datur, per poenitentiam delicta omnia absterguntur” (my italics).

\(^{165}\) See p. 8 above.

Homo follows Ratio’s advice, but his guilt and contrition are soon so great that they threaten to overwhelm him, proving the wisdom of Ratio’s earlier warning against despair. He fears that no punishment could be terrible enough to fit his crimes, and that no matter how much he suffers in repentance here on earth, he will still be destined for Hell. He even returns briefly to his suicidal thoughts: “[i]t would be better for me if I had not begun; better not to have been born; better not to have been brought into this world than to endure tortured for eternity.” He works through these dark musings, however, by praying, first to the saints, and then to God. Remembering the Lord’s infinite mercy, he finally confesses:

I do not defend my crimes; I do not excuse my sins; what I did displeases me; I am displeased that I sinned. I admit my offense; I confess my mistake; I acknowledge my blame; I reveal the voice of confession. Receive, I ask, the cry of one confessing; consider, Lord, the voice of one praying. Hear the voice of the crying sinner.

Homo finishes his prayer of confession by again asking for God’s help to overcome his own sinful nature and mend his ways before the arrival of Judgment Day.

Ratio admits that she has been moved by Homo’s tearful confession, and also prays that God will forgive him. In the final speech of Book I, she warns Homo not to fall back into sin, encouraging him to persist in confession and penance.

---

167 At this point in the dialogue, Homo begins to be addressed as “Anima.” This first occurs in I, 57, where Homo refers to himself as “infelix anima.” It appears again in I, 61, though it is unclear if Ratio asks this question, or it is a case of Homo addressing his own soul after the Psalmic tradition: “Heu anima! Quid est quod multum metuis?” Cf. Ps. 41:6 and/or Ps. 42:5: “Quare tristis es, anima mea, et quare conturbas me? Spera in Deo…” Throughout the rest of the work, Homo will sometimes be called Anima, as though to emphasize the mystical nature of their discussion.

168 Synon. I, 65: “Melius mihi fuerat non esse ortum, melius non fuisse genitum, melius non fuisse in hoc saeculo procreatum, quam aeternos perpeti cruciatus.”


the book by praising perseverance, again supporting her argument with two Biblical quotes: “Blessed are they that keep judgment, and do justice at all times” (Ps. 105:3); and “he that shall persevere unto the end, he shall be saved” (Matt. 10:22). Isidore thus gives confidence to his reader, who has hopefully had a penitential breakthrough of his own.

Book II consists almost entirely of a norma vivendi, a guide to avoiding sin and cultivating virtue which Isidore presents in the form of a long monologue imparted by Ratio. Fontaine identifies four distinct parts in this section: 1.) the acquisition of virtues (II, 5-43); 2.) the good usage of words and deeds (II, 44-46); 3.) the respective roles of the learned, superiors and subordinates, judges and dignitaries (II, 44-66); and 4.) the rejection of the world and love for one’s neighbour (II, 67-79). We are not surprised to see the importance of hope mentioned in the discussion of the acquisition of virtue; here Isidore recommends that the sinner maintain the careful balance between hope and fear that we saw Ratio applying in Book I:

Hope and dread should endure unceasingly in your heart.
Faith and terror should be equally in you, as should hope and fear; thus hope for mercy, just as you fear justice; thus may hope of indulgence always draw you up, just as the fear of Hell should always afflict you.

---

171 See Synon. I, 78. “Beati qui custodiunt judicium, et faciunt justitiam in omni tempore” (Ps. 105:3); “Qui enim perseveraverit usque ad finem, hic salvus erit” (Matt. 10:22).
172 As Ratio herself calls this long speech (Synon. II, 100).
173 Genèse et originalité, pp. 171-172.
174 Synon. II, 25: “Incessanter in corde tuo spes et formido consistant. Pariter sint in te timor atque fiducia, pariter spes et metus; sic spera misericordiam, ut justitiam metuas; sic te spes indulgentiae erigat, ut metus gehennae semper affligat.” As Jacques-Guy Bougerol points out, Isidore describes the correct relationship between hope and fear as the upper and lower grinding stones of a mill in his commentary on Deuteronomy 24:6 (see the Expositiones X, 2, PL vol. 83, col. 363), imagery which Snyder has shown was drawn from Gregory’s Moralia in Job. See Bougerol, La théologie de l’espérance, vol. 1 (op. cit.), pp. 23; 135; 303, n. 29; and Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 24, n. 78.
Isidore’s emphasis on the proper balance between hope and fear echoes that found in the work of several of his sources, especially that of Augustine and Gregory. Augustine felt that hope and fear were providential gifts sent to keep the Christian’s spiritual progress on track. We find in the third part of Book II that the responsibility for sustaining this balance in others also fell to those who had been put in positions of leadership. Isidore warns such authority figures not to be too hard on their subordinates, for “where fear is, despair occurs.” While fear is healthy in moderation, a relationship governed by fear alone can only cause despair.

Isidore ends the Synonyma with the joyful thanks which Homo extends to Ratio (II, 101-103). We have evidence that the text’s first readers were thankful for Ratio’s lessons as well. In 632, near the end of Isidore’s life, his former student Braulio, later Bishop of Saragossa, wrote requesting that Isidore send him a copy of the work. Isidore’s reply indicates that he was no longer completely satisfied with his peculiar little dialogue: “We sent to you the little Book of Synonyms, not because it is of any use, but because you had wanted it.” Though discounted by its author, the Synonyma would go on to enjoy great success with medieval readers, especially those

175 Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 11.
176 Ibid., pp. 22-23.
177 Fontaine has noted the influence of Stoic moral philosophy throughout the second book, especially in those sections pertaining to the vita activa. See La culture classique, vol. 2, pp. 696, 702-705.
178 Syn. II, 76: “[U]bi metus est, desperatio occurrit.”
179 Fontaine often describes the penultimate “strophe” (102) as a hymn of praise inspired by the fifth book of Cicero’s Tusculan Disputations. See Genèse et originalité, p. 172; idem, “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” pp. 178-180; idem, La culture classique, vol. 2, pp. 702-704, 728, 819.
180 Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, p. 172.
in monastic circles. Modern scholars are only now beginning to gauge the extent of its influence. In the thirteenth century, the grammarian and poet Jean de Garlande had the work in mind when he dubbed the “stilus isidorianus,” a style of writing which he described as “capable of moving one to piety, joy and understanding.”

Despite the wide audience that the Synonyma would reach in later centuries, Isidore’s preface tells us that the first audience for which he intended the work was quite exclusive indeed. Isidore explains that a certain little parchment had come into his possession “which they called Synonyma.” Inspired by the formula he found there, he decided to write a lament “for myself and the wretched.” Though Isidore intended the Homo/Anima character to serve as a kind of Everyman figure, few would

---


185 Modern scholars have long speculated about the identity of this mysterious schedula (see the full quotation of Isidore’s prologue below). Its name is clearly a reference to the formula which Isidore followed, i.e. synonymia. A few early MSS show the variant “schedula Ciceronis,” leading some to suggest that Isidore had seen the Synonyma once attributed to Cicero (De synonymis liber ad L. Victuriun). Elfassi has proven that the text in question is the Glossulae multifariae idem significantes found in the fourth-century Ars grammatica of Charisius. See “Genèse et originalité du style synonymique,” pp. 227-228.

186 Synon., Prologus alter, 3: “Venit nuper ad manus meas quaedam schedula, quam Synonyma dicunt; cujus formula persuasit animo quoddam lamentum mihi, vel miseris condere. Imitatus profecto non euis operis eloquium, sed meum votum.” Though the Latin here is admittedly cryptic, Fontaine first posited the “for myself and the wretched” interpretation in 1965 and it has since become the standard translation. See “Auteur ‘ascétique’,” pp. 166, 185-186.
dispute the idea that Isidore also saw the work as an outlet for his own worries about the state of his soul. Isidore would thus be following his own teachings on penance as Fontaine has described them:

[I']intériorisation augustinienne et monastique dont témoigne le ‘monologue de contrition’ des Synonymes trouve aussi son expression dans la conception isidoriennede la pénitence, où l’attention aux exigences de la discipline canonique tend à céder le pas à des démarches intérieures et personelles.

As we will now see, even a work Isidore wrote in a far less evocative genre would include this personal element in its treatment of penance.

The Sententiae: the first Summa theologica

In his classic article on the Synonyma, Fontaine finds thematic parallels between its two books and the second and third books of Isidore’s Sententiae. The two works were certainly composed with similar aims in mind. Written in his final years, the Sententiae was the last product of the marriage between his efforts as a teacher and as a compiler of early Christian theology. Its editor even argues that the text loosely mirrors Isidore’s weekly lesson plan, since one often finds six to eight subdivisions within each chapter. Drawing most extensively from Augustine’s Confessiones and

187 Fontaine, La culture classique, vol. 2, pp. 886-887.
188 Ibid., vol. 3, p. 1164.
189 As dubbed by Cazier, ed., Sententiae, p. XIII.
191 Like Lawson and Andrés (De eccles. off., pp. 13-14; Liber diff. II, p. 24), Cazier found the works of Gregory to be a useful tool for dating those of Isidore. He also noted significant parallels between the Sententiae and the canons of the Fourth Council of Toledo (Vives, ed. and trans., pp. 186-225). In 633, Isidore presided over this council, which modern scholars consider the culmination of his work as a legislator. See Fontaine, Genèse et originalité, p. 235; Cazier, Isidore de Séville et la naissance de l’Espagne catholique (Paris: Beauchesne, 1994), p. 6. While Cazier was reluctant to give a precise year, arguing that the work had probably never been officially published, he concludes that it was the product of the last years of Isidore’s life (Sententiae, pp. XIV-XIX).
192 Cazier, Sententiae, pp. XX-XXI.
Gregory’s *Moralia in Job*, Isidore sought to create a basic handbook for Christian enrichment and education in the tradition of Augustine’s *Enchiridion*. While Augustine wrote his manual in the form of a treatise, Isidore chose to compose his work as a collection of *sententiae*, maxims or sayings meant to epitomize a writer’s most notable ideas for didactic or mnemonic purposes. This compressed format, along with the work’s approachable written style, allowed Isidore to make the often complex and esoteric content of previous patristic theology more accessible to his students.

The large audience which the work enjoyed throughout the medieval period suggest that Isidore was successful in that aim; about five hundred manuscript copies of the work have survived, dating from the eighth to the fifteenth centuries.

Despair would be covered in this work under a number of headings dealing with sin and penance, as well as in its own right. Isidore first presents the Pauline virtues at the beginning of Book II (chapters II-IV), after an opening chapter “[d]e sapientia.” He also covers them in a peculiar order, putting hope at the end of the famous trio.

---

Ibid., pp. LIV-LX. For more on the large debt the *Sententiae* owes to the *Moralia in Job*, see Paul Meyvaert, “Uncovering a Lost Work of Gregory the Great: fragments of the early commentary on Job,” *Traditio* 50 (1995), pp. 55-74, esp. p. 72, n. 40: “The impression I, at least, receive is that at the stage when he was composing the *Sententiae*, Isidore’s encounter with Gregory was recent and rather overwhelming.” In his investigation of an early twelfth-century MS from Bec, Meyvaert posits that Isidore did not use the final recension of the *Moralia* when writing the *Sententiae*, but Gregory’s earlier homilies on Job, now lost.

Ibid., pp. X-XII. Cazier gives a brief summary of Christian examples of this genre from both before and just after Isidore’s time; in the latter category falls the *Sententiae* of Taio of Saragossa. He notes that the structure of this collection of patristic excerpts mirrors that of Isidore’s *Sententiae*, the originality of which, he argues, lies in its thematically sophisticated arrangement (p. XII).


Cazier, *Sent.*, p. VIII.

See n. 211 below. Not to be discussed here is Isidore’s first reference to despair in the *Sententiae*, the only one found in its first book (*Sent.*, I, XIX, *De lege*). When explaining the challenges of Biblical study, Isidore states that the simpler passages exist so that readers will not despair over the more obscure ones, which are there to hold the interest of the more astute readers: “Ne ergo de obscuris desperatio fiat, ea quae manifesta sunt satiant, et ne de intellectis fastidium existat, ea quae clausa sunt desiderium excitant. Nam pleraque, quanto magis latent, tanto magis exercitium praebent” (p. 63).
Cazier explains this rearrangement with reference to the overall structure of the *Sententiae*; he argues that the first four chapters of Book II mirror the expected spiritual progress of the reader as he makes his way through the work’s three books. He finds the key in the first line of Book II: “Every person who is wise according to God is blessed. Blessedness is the knowledge of divinity; the knowledge of divinity is the power to do good works; the power to do good works is the fruit of eternity.” Thus the *Sententiae* takes its readers from an intellectual understanding of God (wisdom/Book I), through the process of conversion and personal reform (faith/Book II), and finally cultivates their ability to live and do good in society (charity/Book III). Only then could they look forward to their future rewards in the next life (hope), as Isidore demonstrates in the last two chapters of the *Sententiae* (“De breuitate huius uitae” and “De exitu”).

For example, Book I serves as a “préalable de la foi” which Cazier shows to be a commentary on the Apostolic Creed. Here Isidore prepares the reader for conversion with an introduction to orthodox Christian dogma that includes the conception of God, creation, the Trinity, the Church and the end of time. As we have shown above, Book II starts with a discussion of wisdom and the three Pauline virtues, followed by chapters on grace and predestination (V and VI). Cazier then notes the key for understanding the rest of Books II and III, quoted from the seventh chapter of Book II, “De conuersis”:

---

199 “On peut souligner que l’ordre inhabituel, foi, charité, espérance, coïncide avec le dessein général des Sentences de la foi à la vie éternelle par les œuvres” (Cazier, p. XXIV).
201 Ibid., pp. XIX-XXI. Cazier notes that this scheme also explains why the *Sententiae* has several discussions of sins and/or vices: for example, those vices listed at the end of Book II pertain to the individual; those found in Book III to vices encouraged by man’s role in society (p. XX, n. 31).
202 Ibid., pp. XXI-XXIV.
The progress of each convert has three parts: first, correcting evil; second, doing good; third, pursuing the reward for good work… Therefore there is no use in doing good unless evil has been corrected. No one will be able to progress to the contemplation of God unless he has first been eager to exert himself in good works.\textsuperscript{203}

Cazier views Books II and III as two aspects of “\textit{virtus boni operis},” one negative and one positive. Book II deals with individual conversion and personal morality, i.e. correcting one’s bad deeds, and Book III with one’s actions in society, i.e. doing good deeds for oneself and others.\textsuperscript{204}

It is within this context that we must read the first reference to theological despair in the \textit{Sententiae}, found in the fourth chapter of Book II (“\textit{De spe}”):

He who does not cease to behave badly seeks indulgence from the kindness of God with an empty hope; he would rightly seek that indulgence if he were to cease acting badly. We should be very anxious that we neither persist in sinning due to the hope of forgiveness which God promised, nor, since he justly draws attention to sins, we despair of forgiveness; but with either danger having been escaped, we both avoid evil and hope for forgiveness from the kindness of God. For every just man glows with hope and terror, since now hope excites him to joy, and now terror dooms him to the dread of Hell.\textsuperscript{205}

We have already learned the importance of maintaining the right balance between hope and fear. According to Augustine, the fruitful tension between these two prevented the

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{203} Ibid. II, VII, 28-38: “Tripertitus describitur esse uniuscuiusque conuersi profectum, id est primum corrigendi a malo, secundum faciendi bonum, tertium consequendi boni operis praeimum… [E]rgo non proficit facere bonum, nisi correctum fuerit malum. Non poterit quisquam ad contemplationem Dei proferi nisi se prius in bonis studuerit actibus exercere” (p. 106).

\textsuperscript{204} This interpretation confirms Fontaine’s earlier findings, mentioned on p. 72, n. 190 above, of thematic parallels with the two books of the \textit{Synonyma}.

\textsuperscript{205} Ibid. II, IV: “(4, 1) Qui male agere non desistunt, uana spe indulgentiam de Dei pietate requirunt; quam recte quaererent si ab actione praua cessarent. (4, 2) Metuendum ualde est ut neque per sperm ueniae quam promittit Deus perseueranter peccemus, neque, quia iuste peccata distingit, ueniam desperemus; sed utroque periculo euitato, et a malo declinemus et de pietate Dei ueniam speremus. Omnis quippe iustus spe et formidine nitet, quia nunc illum ad gaudium spes erigit, nunc ad formidinem terror gehennae addicit” (pp. 98-99). Also mentioned by Bougerol, p. 211; 373, n. 85.
\end{footnotesize}
reforming sinner from falling into despair, the result of too little hope and too much fear, or from falling prey to its counterpart, presumption. Though Isidore does not mention presumption by name, he describes its symptoms perfectly; the penitent continues to sin without any true contrition or making any effort to change, relying too heavily on God’s mercy.

This chapter on hope strikes the reader as short and stark, especially considering the much greater length of those on faith and charity. Cazier points to its place at the end of Isidore’s scheme for the work as a whole, requiring that this chapter serve as “plus une mise en garde contre le relâchement qu’une definition positive de la troisième vertu.” We find a more encouraging tone in the next reference to despair, in the chapter “[de exemplis sanctorum.” Isidore explains that:

The disasters and recoveries of the saints are written for such a use, so that they instill hope in human salvation, so that someone who has fallen does not despair of forgiveness while repenting, so long as he sees that the saints were reconciled even after their ruin.

Later in this chapter, he cites David as one of the “examples of the saints by which man is built up,” since his story of sin and reconciliation demonstrates God’s mercy.

Isidore dedicated the fourteenth chapter of Book II, most of which he drew from Gregory’s *Moralia in Job*, to “the despair of sinners.” Appropriately, this chapter

206 Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 22-23: “This balance is the basis of Augustine’s thought on despair; almost never does he mention despair without also discussing presumption.” See pp. 69-70 above.
207 “De fide” and “De caritate” have 15 and 9 subdivisions of text respectively, as opposed to the two for “De spe.”
208 Ibid., p. XXIV.
209 *Sent.* XI, 3: “Ob hanc utilitatem scribuntur sanctorum ruinae et reparationes, ut schem faciunt salutis humanae, ne quisquam post lapsum paenitendo desperet ueniam, dum conspicit sanctorum reparationemuisse etiam post ruinam” (p. 115).
immediately follows those on “the contrition of heart” and “the confession of sins and penance,” thus continuing Isidore’s arrangement topics in Book II to mirror the process of conversion. Here he explains that one does not return to God through any movement in physical space, but by progress in one’s moral development. Using Gregory’s analogy, he claims that while continuing to live in sin is to die, to despair is to descend into Hell. Isidore then returns to a familiar theme, warning against the cunning enemy who will gladly take advantage of the doubts of the newly converted:

> Often the devil sees those who have converted to penance and lures them, knocked down by the immensity of [their] crimes, into desperation, so that, with the hope of forgiveness taken away, he drags into mistrust those whom he was not able to keep continually in sin. But the penitent should foresee the clever traps the enemy sets for him; and thus let him fear the justice of God just as, no matter how great his crimes, he should have confidence in His mercy.

He goes on to remind the reader that God rejoices more for the “anima desperata” that has been converted than for those who had never been lost.

Isidore ends the chapter with another familiar and comforting idea, once again drawn from the *Moralia*: “No one should despair of forgiveness even if he is converted to penance at the end of [his] life. For God judges each person according to his end,

---

215 Ibid. II, XIV, l. 12-18: “Saepè diabolos eos quos consuerit ad paenitentiam aspicit inmanitate scelerum perclusos ad desperationem deducit, ut, subtracta spe ueniae, trahat in diffidentiam quos non potuit retinere perseveranter in culpam. Sed paenitens praeuidere debebat callidas contra se hostis insidias; sicque Dei iustitiam metuat ut tamen, quamuis in magnis sceleribus, de misericordia eius confidat” (p. 125).
not the life he led beforehand.”216 Still following Gregory, he supports this claim by citing the lines in Leviticus in which the Lord specifies that the rump [cauda] of a beast must be offered as a sacrifice, “whence the end of life [should be offered] in penance.”217 He notes the purgative power of daily tears of contrition and good works, for “many regarded by celestial grace in their last days are turned back to God through penance.”218 Returning to his own words for the chapter’s last line, he reiterates that “[i]n the life of man, it is the end that should be considered, because God does not regard how we lived before, but how we will be toward the end of life.”219 The fact that Isidore made sure to repeat this message at the close of his chapter on despair indicates how vital he thought this lesson was for those in its throws.

In the next chapter, Isidore deals with “those who have been abandoned by God.”220 He explains that without God’s aid, no one can repent their sins, “for some are thus despised by God, so that they cannot cry over their evil deeds, even if they wished.”221 He attributes this circumstance to “the council of unclean spirits [who], denied the chance to return to justice after their collusion, wish to lock up the doorway of penance to man.”222 They seek to carry out this aim by trapping men in sin, so that they are either abandoned by God, or “they despair of the cruelty of the scourge.”223

---

218 Ibid. II, XIV, l. 37: “Multi superna respecti gratia in extremis suis ad Deum reuertuntur per paenitentiam…” (p. 126).
219 Ibid. II, XIV, l. 43-45: “In uita hominis finis quaerendus est, quoniam Deus non respicit quales ante uximius, sed quales circa uitae finem erimus” (p. 126). Again, cf. De eccles. off. II, XVI.
220 Ibid. II, XV, “De his qui a Deo deseruntur” (pp. 126-128).
221 Ibid. II, XV, l. 4-5: “Nonulli autem ita despiciuntur a Deo, ut deplorare mala sua non possint, etiam si uelint” (p. 126).
222 Ibid., l. 6-9: “Consili inmundorum spirituum hoc est, ut quia ipsis negatum est post praevariationem regredi ad iustitiam, obserare aditum paenitentiae hominibus cupiant” (p. 126-127).
223 Ibid., l. 11: “…aut deserantur a Deo, aut flagelli inmanitate desperent” (p. 127).
Sometimes God Himself allows demons to possess His enemies, or to afflict just men, for reasons He alone understands. Isidore would return to the connection between despair and demonic interference in Chapters V and VI of Book III. Here we learn that “[t]he mind of the just man is often tortured by the power of demons with various pains of vexation, from whence it is sometimes crowded into the constriction [angustiam] of despair.” Demons even make use of the time their target is sleeping, instilling a fear of Hell in the converted sinner’s dreams which drives the sleeper to despair. As though to counter the foreboding this discussion might evoke in the reader, Isidore follows this section on diabolical forces with chapters “[d]e oratione” and “[d]e lectione.” He tell us here that we should not despair of the power of prayer to reach God. The idea of God’s tormented elect, as well as the link between demonic powers and despair, would be explored by many writers in subsequent centuries.

In Chapter XVII of Book II, Isidore turns from his discussion of sinners to deal with the sins themselves. Again relying on the *Moralia in Job*, he lays out four ways in which one might sin “in deed” (*opere*), which grow progressively worse: secretly,
openly, from habit and from desperation. After discussing the lighter, then more serious sins, hidden versus open sins, and the love of sin, Isidore dedicates a chapter to the dangers of making sin a habit. He illustrates the problem by using Gregory’s image of a pit:

To commit a sin is to fall into a pit; but to make a custom of sinning is to constrict the mouth of the pit, so that those who fall in are not able to get out. But sometimes God frees them, and exchanges their desperation for the conversion of freedom. For with His pity, sins are forgiven; with His protection, one can avoid committing worse sins.

In some cases, however, the sinner has heaped sin upon sin to such a degree that their punishment has begun here on earth. The despair of such sinners is so ingrained that they have no desire to repent; the pangs of conscience simply do not affect them. Both Cicero and Cassian would likely recognize such depraved characters.

The last reference to despair in the *Sententiae* occurs in Chapter XXIV of Book III, “De Hypocrisin.” Unlike the majority of Isidore’s teachings on this subject, in which the readers are addressed concerning their own spiritual welfare, in this instance he warns them against despairing over the spiritual welfare of others:

One should not despair of the salvation of those who still savour something of this world (adhuc aliquid terrenum sapiunt), while they are able and may in secret do those things from whence they are justified. For they are better

---

232 Ibid., l. 5-11: “[C]ommittitur opere nunc latenter, nunc palam, nunc consuetudine, nunc desperatione” (p. 130); cf. *Moralia* IV, 27, 49.
235 Ibid. III, II, l. 60-64: “Porro quibusdam et hic male, et illuc male est, quia corrigi nolentes et flagellari in hac uita incipient, et in aeterna percussionem damnantur. In tanto inmergi [sic] quosdam desperationis profundo, ut nec per flagella ualeant emendari” (pp. 199-200).
236 Cf. pp. 34-5 and p. 49 above.
than the hypocrites, because they are bad in the open and
good in secret; the hypocrites are bad in secret and show
themselves to be good in the open.\footnote{Sent. III, XXIV, l. 33-37: “Non eorum desperanda est salus qui adhuc aliquid terrenum sapiunt, dum possint et in occultis agere unde iustificentur. Hii enim meliores sunt hypocritae, eo quod mali sint in aperto, et in occulto boni; hypocritae uero in occulto mali sunt, et boni se palam ostendunt” (p. 261).}

The passage brings to mind one of our first encounters with despair in this study, the \emph{desperatus}\footnote{Cf. pp. 31-32.} that Isidore defined in Book X of the \textit{Etymologiae}, he who was “bad and lost and no longer of any prosperous hope.”\footnote{Pierre Cazier, “Derrière l’impersonnalité des \textit{Sentences}: aperçus sur la personnalité d’Isidore de Séville,” in \textit{De Tertullien aux Mozarabes, II: Antiquité tardive et Christianisme ancien (Vie—IXe siècles). Mélanges offerts à Jacques Fontaine}, ed. Louis Holtz and Jean-Claude Fredouille (Paris: Institut d’Études Augustiniennes, 1992), pp. 9-18. See also Fontaine, \textit{Genèse et originalité}, pp. 236, 242-243, 358; “Pénitence publique et conversion personelle,” esp. pp. 149-151.} He too was judged to be in spiritual
danger by those around him. Here Isidore reminds his readers that appearances can be
deceiving, especially when judging something so mysterious and private as the
relationship between God and the individual.

At two separate points in the \textit{Sententiae}, Isidore admits to his own tumbles into
Gregory’s metaphorical pit of sin and expresses his concerns about getting out again.

Modern students of the \textit{Sententiae}, especially Fontaine and Cazier, have noted the
surprisingly personal quality of Isidore’s manual.\footnote{Etym. II, 11, l. 1-2.} In the \textit{Etymologiae}, Isidore
defined the \textit{sententia}, as opposed to the \textit{chrie}, as a “dictum impersonale.”\footnote{Sent. II, XVI, “De his qui ad delictum post lacrimas reuertuntur,” 4b, (p. 129); III, 1, “De flagellis Dei,” 1b (p. 194). See Cazier, “Derrière l’impersonnalité,” pp. 15-17.} Yet
Isidore refers to himself in the first person singular twice in the work, once in the
middle of Book II, and again at the beginning of Book III.\footnote{Sent. II, XVI, “De his qui ad delictum post lacrimas reuertuntur,” 4b, (p. 129); III, 1, “De flagellis Dei,” 1b (p. 194). See Cazier, “Derrière l’impersonnalité,” pp. 15-17.} Each reference was
composed as a short, memorable poem written in the same evocative tone as the lament
of \textit{Homo} in the \textit{Synonyma}. Thus at the end of his chapter on those who return to their
sins even after repenting, he writes: “Woe unto me, Isidore the wretched, who neglects
to repent deeds of the past, yet still carries out deeds worthy of repentance!“242 Just after opening Book Three, which starts with a chapter on God’s punishments, Isidore adds another poetic confession: “Have mercy, O Lord, on wretched Isidore, doing unworthy things and suffering worthy ones, continually sinning and daily undergoing Your punishments.”243 Cazier argues that these lines, written in the last years of Isidore’s life, should be read in light of his decision to undergo a rite of public penance in the days before his passing.244 By sharing his own worries about the state of his soul while presenting ways to cope with those concerns, Isidore set a high but obviously attainable standard for his flock to follow.

242 Ibid. II, XVI, l. 25-26: “Vae mihi, Isidoro misero, qui et paenitere retro acta neglego, et adhuc paenitenda committo” (p. 129).
243 Ibid. III, 1, l. 7-9: “Miserere, Domine, misero Isidoro indigna agenti et digna patienti, assidue peccanti et tua flagella cotidie sustinenti” (p. 194).
244 See the account of Redemptus, Epistola de transitu sancti Isidori, in PL 81 (Paris: Garnier, 1850), col. 30-32. In fact, Cazier argues that these lines have a more authentically personal quality than even the Synonyma, which he finds too artificial. See his Isidore de Séville, p. 274-275, n. 2, and p. 292.
“The Last Candle”

It would be hard to overestimate the influence of Isidore’s work on the subsequent centuries of the Middle Ages. In 1983, Fontaine wrote that “Isidore est, avec Bède, l’auteur spirituel le plus important du haut Moyen Age postérieur à Grégoire.”245 The truth of his assertion does not apply solely to the contribution of the *Etymologiae*, “qui, entre toutes les œuvres d’Isidore, ont informé le plus profondément la langue, les catégories intellectuelles et même l’idearium de tant d’auteurs carolingiens.”246 It is not even restricted to the impact of those works dealt with in this chapter. For example, the liturgy of Spain would later become known as “Mozarabic” or “Isidorian,” the latter an homage to his role in its early development.247 He is widely considered the author of the first recension of the popular law collection known as the *Hispana*, now dubbed the *Isidoriana*, which he probably compiled after presiding over the Fourth Council of Toledo.248 Though Jacques Verger found that his popularity had begun to wane among the specialized scholars of the universities during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries,249 Dante placed him in the company of such luminaries as Thomas Aquinas, Bede and Richard of St. Victor in the Heaven of the Sun.250 Just as Isidore compiled and elucidated the choicest quotations of the thinkers that came before him, his own work would be sifted through and excerpted in turn, compiled by generations of students into *florilegia* and chronicles well into the later Middle Ages.251

---

246 Fontaine, “La figure d’Isidore,” p. 197.
251 Barney et al., *Etymologies*, p. 25, n. 71.
There is still no good monograph on Isidore’s life and opera in English,252 and only in recent decades have most of his works been edited in modern critical editions, new volumes of which are still in progress.253 Consequently, English-speaking scholars are only slowly revising their assessment of his contribution. In a recent entry on Isidore published in A Companion to Philosophy in the Middle Ages, we find the assertion that:

…it is a commonplace to say that Isidore was the last candle of classic [sic] learning at the beginning of the Dark Ages, for he was a scholar and supporter of ancient learning in an intellectually poor world. The amount of information found in the Etymologies, or in his other encyclopedia, the De natura rerum, is impressive, but he often restates views that are not quite clear to him and his etymologies range from the true to the ridiculous… Isidore does not add information from his own age, but restricts himself to the compilation of materials available to him from prior times.254

While there is definitely some truth in this statement, its criteria for assessing the value of Isidore’s contribution are too restricted, placing disproportionate emphasis on the traditional understanding of originality.255 Only three years later, the English translators of the Etymologies caution against such a narrow view:

To assess Isidore’s achievement we cannot look to original researches or innovative interpretations, but rather to the ambition of the whole design, to his powers of selection and organization, and to his grand retentiveness. His aims were not novelty but authority, not originality but accessibility, not augmenting but preserving and transmitting knowledge.256

252 Ibid., p. 4, n. 2.
253 Andrés, pp. 7-8, n. 3, gives an exhaustive listing of the modern critical editions produced before the publication of her own in 2006.
255 See pp. 20-22 above.
256 Barney et al., pp. 10-11.
As we have seen in this study of Isidore’s thought on spiritual despair, while Isidore did cull the best advice for his despairing parishioners from both pagan and Christian sources, the way in which he presented and presonalised them to suit his audience was certainly original. Isidore also reassured his students by revealing that even his foot was known to slip on occasion.
Chapter Three
The Rara Avis Presumes to Sing:
Despair and presumption in the works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I noted that the works of Isidore of Seville enjoyed a large readership throughout the Middle Ages; this was one of the factors that made them such an excellent introduction to the most generally accepted theological teachings on theological despair. The same wide audience could hardly be posited for the works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. Modern scholars have uncovered few medieval references to the life and œuvre of the tenth-century Saxon canoness.¹ What little we know about Hrotsvit and her activity as a writer comes from the writings themselves.² The majority of her works have been preserved in only one manuscript, the famous Emmeram-Munich Codex (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Clm 14485), which was brought out of obscurity by German humanist Conrad Celtis in 1493. Celtis and his humanist colleagues in the Sodalitas Rhenana eagerly celebrated this discovery; they cited Hrotsvit’s works, and especially her plays, as evidence of a Germanic inheritance of Latinity and classical learning in keeping with Germany’s role as the political heir of the Holy Roman Empire.³

The Codex remains the oldest and most complete version of Hrotsvit’s works that have come to light, dating from the last quarter of the tenth century.4

This manuscript served as the basis for the publication of an editio princeps in 1501, after which Hrotsvit’s sparse medieval Rezeptionsgeschichte was counterbalanced by the fame and critical attention her work garnered throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. So effusive was the praise of her early-modern admirers that a nineteenth-century Austrian scholar, Joseph von Aschbach, would call the very existence of Hrotsvit into question.5 Aschbach asserted that the Emmeram-Munich Codex was forged by Celtis and his circle in order to revise German literary history to their liking.6 This argument was immediately attacked by contemporary scholars making use of internal evidence, and finally disproved by the emergence of more manuscripts containing Hrotsvit’s work in the early decades of the twentieth century.7 These discoveries would not put off Hrotsvit’s most stubborn detractors, however. In 1945, Zoltán Haraszti, an employee of the Boston Public Library, wrote an article in support of the old forgery theory.8 As recently as 1999 it was again presented by Alfred Tamerl,

---

4 In 1962, Bernhard Bischoff identified the work of five different hands, which he believed belonged to “(Gandersheimer) Nonnen, vielleicht noch zu Hrotsvits Lebzeiten” (as quoted by Berschin, Opera, p. X, n. 9). By 1990, as he wrote in a letter to Monique Goullet, Bischoff had decided that “le Clm 14485 de Munich a été copié dans le dernier quart du Xe siècle, par six scribes différents, et qu’il n’y a pas l’ombre d’un doute sur le fait qu’il ait été à Gandersheim.” See Goullet’s review of Alfred Tamerl, Hrotsvith von Gandersheim: eine Entmystifizierung, in Moyen Âge 107:3-4 (2001): 607-609, p. 609.
who contends that the humanist abbess Caritas Pirckheimer played a central role in the alleged scheme. The continuing attraction of this long-refuted claim only confirms the extent of Hrotsvit’s renown among the lettered of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The majority of modern critics and scholars, while never doubting the authenticity of Hrotsvit or her writing, have often understood her as a singular and puzzling offshoot of Ottonian literary culture. As early as the mid-sixteenth century, her works caused the German monk and humanist Heinrich Bodo of Clus to comment that “there is a rare bird in Saxony” (*Rara avis in Saxoniam*). Centuries later, Stephen Wailes would echo this sentiment in his 2006 monograph: “Indeed she is an extraordinary phenomenon.”

Hrotsvit’s gender provides the most obvious explanation for such sentiments; though the factors contributing to Hrotsvit’s “oddness” are not limited to her sex, it does tend to make her other peculiarities all the more striking. Despite the now widely-recognized idea of an “Ottonian Renaissance” that took place in tenth-century central Germany, we

---


11 Quoted by Wilson, *Rara avis*, p. ix.


cannot help but be intrigued that an otherwise obscure canoness had the education and opportunity to undertake such a sophisticated and ambitious project. As Wailes puts it:

The earlier Middle Ages were not a period propitious for the realization of literary talent in women; one must look widely to find any other women in the ranks of the accomplished writers of this age. Central Germany was not a region with a rich intellectual or artistic heritage, nor was there continuity with the sponsoring and flowering of such talent in Carolingian Europe. It is true that historians have long written about an “Ottonian renaissance,” but (as in the case of early-modern Germany) the word “renaissance” is used loosely in reference to a florescence, not a revivification, and Hrotsvit is an early instance of this.14

Like Celtis and his colleagues, we are especially intrigued by her decision to compose six of her works as plays, drawing from the long-defunct dramatic tradition of the Roman world.15 She did so, however, for the express purpose of flying in the face of Terence, the ancient practitioner of this lost art most widely read and respected in her own day.16 Of its own merit, this daring approach to cultural authority would invite scholarly attention, be it crafted during the tenth or indeed any other medieval century. The fact that it was taken by a female author makes it all the more exceptional and worthy of study.17

---

15 Sandro Sticca, “Sacred Drama and Tragic Realism in Hrotswitha’s Paphnutius,” in *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, ed. Herman Braet, Johan Nowé and Gilbert Tournoy (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1985), pp. 12-44, esp. pp. 14-15. In his overview of modern scholarship on Hrotsvit, Wailes notes that “[t]he plays have received far more attention than the [legends], of which there has been little study; discussion of her histories has emphasized the panegyric on Otto the Great and his forebearers, with the story of the founding of Gandersheim rarely discussed beyond respectful and affectionate summaries” (p. 21).
17 In her discussion of scholarly opinion on Hrotsvit, Gold notes that her twentieth-century critics sought either to ignore Hrotsvit’s gender or to place undue and anachronistic emphasis on it (pp. 43-45). While many of these critics have congratulated Hrotsvit for what they perceive as her precocious feminism, M. R.
Hence scholars of Hrotsvit usually attach an impressive list of “firsts” to her accomplishments, as for instance the one developed by Katharina Wilson in 1984:

She is the first known dramatist of Christianity, the first Saxon poet, and the first woman historian of Germany. Her dramas are the first performable plays of the Middle Ages, her epics are the only extant Latin epics written by a woman, and, finally, she is the first medieval poet to have consciously attempted to remould the image of the literary depictions of women.

Such a resume helps explain why Walter Berschin, the most recent editor of her works, described her as “a comet that shone forth for a few years and lit up the so-called Dark Ages in an astonishing manner.” These impressive distinctions, along with her aforementioned lack of widespread medieval fame, have also contributed to the perception of Hrotsvit as an anomaly disrupting an otherwise predictable tradition of Ottonian letters, “an artist without precedent and without succession.”

The exceptional nature of “Berschin’s Comet” posed some concern when I initially considered whether to include her in this study. Given the limited dissemination of her works and their minimal influence on subsequent authors, it could be argued that

---

Sperberg-McQueen responds to their views by noting “some of the disturbing ways in which, while championing feminine virtue, the plays nonetheless reinforce certain anti-feminist, patriarchal values” (p. 48). See her article “Whose Body is it? Chaste Strategies and the Reinforcement of Patriarchy in Three Plays by Hrotswitha von Gandersheim,” *Women in German Yearbook* 8 (1992): 47-71. Though this chapter does not address the question of Hrotsvit’s alleged feminism, her gender will be discussed as it pertains to Hrotsvit’s conception of herself as a writer and a penitent Christian, as well as her choices in the areas of character and plot development.

18 Wilson, “The Saxon Canoness,” p. 30, also p. 42, n. 3. To this list could also be added “the first person in Germany to employ the Faust theme,” from Wilson, *Plays*, p. xiii; “the only female historian of monasticism during the tenth century,” as noted by Thomas Head in his article “Hrotsvit’s *Primordia* and the Historical Traditions of Monastic Communities,” in *Rara avis*, pp. 143-164, here p. 143; and “the first love poet of the Latin Middle Ages,” from Sticca, “Sacred Drama,” p. 12.

19 “Paucis annis evolutis Hrotsvit ad instar cometae splendida enituit et Saeculum Obscurum, quod dicunt, miro modo clarificavit” (Berschin, pp. IX-X). This comment was likely inspired by that of Rudolf Köpke, who compared Hrotsvit to a meteor in his *Die älteste deutsche Dichterin* (Berlin: Ernst S. Mittler und Sohn, 1869), p. 120, quoted by Wilson, *Ethics*, p. vii.

Hrotsvit’s writing was simply too marginal to be incorporated in any study of medieval thought on theological despair. The problem seems especially glaring for a study that sandwiches the case of Hrotsvit between those of Isidore and Dante, whose works were so well circulated and emulated both during their lifetimes and throughout the medieval centuries that followed. Yet herein lies Hrotsvit’s greatest asset for the purposes of this investigation: she was well aware of her own peculiarity, knowing that it would likely limit her audience and cause her very legitimacy as an author to be questioned. As I will note below, much recent scholarship has focused on uncovering the strategies Hrotsvit developed to pre-empt the criticism of her more doubtful readers.21

One such strategy which I believe has been understudied to date is Hrotsvit’s use of the themes of conversion and penance,22 especially her portrayal of herself as a penitent. Not only do her works often feature characters moved to convert and repent, but she also described her own audacious emergence as a writer using penitential language and role-playing.23 Part One of this chapter focuses on her prefaces and epistles, where she presented herself as a struggling amateur in need of merciful indulgence from her more learned superiors, just as a contrite sinner would need the

---

21 See pp. 97-99.
22 Hrotsvit’s interest in conversion and penance per se has been well documented by previous scholarship. See Wailes, p. 87; Katharina Wilson, trans., Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: a florilegium of her works (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1998), pp. 10-11, 13-15; Plays, pp. xvii, xxiii-xxiv; Ethics, pp. 30-32, 38-40; “The Saxon Canoness,” pp. 33, 35-36; Dronke, pp. 60, 68, 71.
23 Other scholars have noted Hrotsvit’s affinity for role-playing, though not in reference to a confessional or penitential interaction. See Ulrike Wiethaus, “Pulchrum Signum? Sexuality and the Politics of Religion in the Works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim Composed between 963 and 973,” in Brown et. al., Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, pp. 136-138; Wilson, Plays, xxvii; Ethics, pp. 71-72, 79. In her discussion of Hrotsvit’s development of and emphasis on a feminine perspective in her works, Barbara K. Gold argues that “[b]y creating a three-way link among the presentation of herself, the characters in her dramas, and her female audience, she constructs an ideal feminine self that is slowly revealed through the masks that she creates for herself and for her characters. Indeed, she becomes, in her Prefaces, one of her own characters” (p. 45). She later adds that “[t]he elements of disguise and role changes that are emphasized in her dramas reinforce similar elements in Hrotsvit’s more personal Prefaces. Her use of theatre to create characters and her theatrical presentation of herself in her Prefaces are thus mutually determinating ways of creating an ideal feminine self” (p. 46).
consolation and guidance of a kind confessor. As Christ does not deny mercy to the truly repentant sinner, Hrotsvit reasoned, so her more discerning readers could not scold her too harshly for choosing to write, or for any flaws that appeared in that writing. She thus alerted her readers to the importance of penitential themes for the works as a whole while disarming her harshest potential detractors.

It has been shown often enough, however, that Hrotsvit loved to invert her readers’ expectations.24 As Peter Dronke’s close study of her prefatory material has shown, Hrotsvit’s meek admission of her literary “sins,” e.g. the “rusticity” of her composition, her sometimes imperfect meter and her use of apocryphal sources, was in truth a subtle but increasingly confident justification of her iconoclastic assumption of the roles of author and poet.25 The same care should be applied when reading the confessional elements found in Hrotsvit’s prefaces; they were not simply a clever way of anticipating and silencing her critics, nor just another example of the ancient topos of authorial self-effacement. For instance, throughout her prefaces she vacillates between defending herself against, and confessing to, the charge of presumption, a vice of particular interest to students of theological despair.26 Hrotsvit ultimately declares that she will presume to continue her work, deciding that the greater sin would be to repress her God-given talent for composition. Especially when studied in light of her subsequent plotlines, these initially humble admissions become an ironic and even triumphant

---

25 Dronke, pp. 64-78.
26 See Chapter Two, pp. 69-70, 75-76.
revelation of how she herself came to terms with her unconventional, and sometimes spiritually hazardous, determination to write.

Part Two of this chapter further elaborates her concept of presumption and despair by analysing specific examples of her presentation of these vices in her works. While Wailes has recently studied Hrotsvit’s meditations on the dangers of despair, especially as found in *Basilius* and *Abraham*, little attention has been paid to her depictions of presumption, its vicious counterpart, in *Theophilus* and *Pafnutius*, despite the widespread scholarly consensus that these four works were meant to be understood as a conceptual unit. This omission is especially striking when we consider that some form of *praesumptio* or *praesumere* appears in all three of her prefaces, two of her *epistolae*, and in all but four of her subsequent works. This discussion of her narratives will show that Hrotsvit understood presumption and despair as closely interrelated forces impeding the sinner striving to repent. In each work studied, an intercessor will be required to help the penitent strike the appropriate balance between the two and thus to restore his or her relationship with God.

Part Two begins with a discussion of *Maria*, the first of Hrotsvit’s legends, in which the Virgin Mary defies Jewish legalism and masculine authority in a manner her society found presumptuous and disobedient. Hrotsvit and her audience, however, know

---

27 Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics*, pp. 95-96, pp. 162-163, pp. 172-177; “Beyond Virginity: Flesh and Spirit in the Plays of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim,” *Speculum* 76:1 (Jan. 2001): 1-27, esp. pp. 3-4, 16-21. For the sake of simplicity, I have used the more traditional abbreviated titles for each work, which Berschin uses in the page headings of his edition. This will prevent confusion between *Maria* the legend and *Maria* the play (here referred to as *Abraham*). On the current scholarly preference for abbreviated titles which feature the more central female characters over the secondary male ones (e.g. *Thais* instead of *Pafnutius*), see Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics*, p. 21.

28 To date, I have only seen Thais’ sinful presumption discussed by David S. Chamberlain in his article “Musical Learning and Dramatic Action in Hrotsvit’s *Pafnutius*,” *Studies in Philology* 77:4 (1980), pp. 334-335.

29 See pp. 127-131 below.

30 Those four being *Maria*, *Ascensio*, *Gongolfus* and *Basilius*.
that Mary was simply obeying a higher authority. Hrotsvit believed that her poetic gift had been granted by that same authority, and like Mary, she insisted on braving her own society’s disapproval in order to use it. Since this legend’s events incorporate the Incarnation, the intercessor here is Christ Himself, and the sinners needing reconciliation are all of humanity. Hrotsvit makes it clear that those Jews not converting to Christianity in future generations will live their lives in disbelieving despair. Part Two will then focus on Theophilus, Basilius, Abraham and Pafnutius, the four centrally-placed works in which she closely investigates the vices of presumption and despair as obstacles to the conversion of individuals. In each case, intercessors follow the model of Christ in a variety of ways in order to gain forgiveness for their sinful charges.

Though in these four works Hrotsvit clearly establishes a vicious dichotomy of presumption and despair, the observant reader would note with interest that elsewhere in the works, the actions and words of her saintly protagonists are often labelled presumptuosa by their depraved antagonists. Hrotsvit’s audience would easily recognise the allegedly presumptuous defiance of her Christian martyrs-to-be against pagan oppression and male authority as brave and virtuous affirmations of faith. Indeed, she occasionally portrays some level of presumption as a positive, even necessary, state of mind for the sinful protagonist seeking redemption. She goes so far as to depict such worthies as John the Baptist and the Virgin Mary as “presuming” when acting in the service of humanity. In the case of Abraham, a young sinner would have been saved from committing the greater sin of despair had she only “presumed” to confess her original, lesser sin.31 Thus Hrotsvit informs us indirectly that all Christians, when asking for divine mercy, must inevitably presume upon that mercy. Yet despite the sinful human

31 See p. 192 below.
nature that necessitates this presumption, a nature illustrated brilliantly by Hrotsvit’s narratives, she makes it clear throughout that divine mercy never fails the truly contrite in their efforts to repent their sins. As we have already seen in the previous chapter, this message was widely considered the ideal remedy for the despairing penitent.

Viewed in this light, Hrotsvit’s tongue-in-cheek confession becomes a sincere and joyful vindication of her decision to write for the glory of God. As was the case with Isidore and his *Synonyma*, Hrotsvit intended her poignant portrayals of presumption and despair to be more than a demonstration of the proper relationship between God and sinner, though the moral instruction of her audience was certainly an important consideration. Her multivalent depictions of these two vices not only highlight the complexity and mystery of this relationship, but when used to reinterpret the personal admissions of her prefaces, they also serve to strengthen her assertion of herself as a writer; indeed, I believe that for Hrotsvit, these two purposes dovetailed. I would posit that, like her protagonists, Hrotsvit struggled to follow the dictates of her faith as she understood them in an often hostile society, and that her extraordinary desire to craft such an extensive and learned *opus* may indeed have led to accusations of presumption, coming both from her contemporaries and even from Hrotsvit herself. Similarly, Hrotsvit’s experience with despair may have been just as immediate, since either her literary ambitions, or indeed the repression thereof, could have been considered sinful. Hrotsvit’s efforts to reconcile her intellectual and spiritual needs to society’s expectations of a tenth-century Saxon noblewoman, even one committed to the religious life, were

---

32 Indeed, Wilson views Hrotsvit’s authorial intent as “essentially Augustinian (or, more generally, patristic) in its formulation,” i.e. the spiritual edification and inspiration of her audience (*Plays*, p. xii). See also *Ethics*, p. viii, where she cites “the ethics of her authorial stance” as “her desire to praise God to the best of her ability and to preach his word.”
likely trying in the extreme. A study of how this *rara avis* sang her own confession, while certainly enriching our knowledge of medieval approaches to the problem of theological despair, will also shed light on the rigours that formed such an *avis* and inspired her to sing.

**Part I: Penitential Prefaces**

Hrotsvit clearly intended to present her eight legends and six plays as two distinct but complementary books. She introduced each group with its own preface, and after the last of the legends, she added an epilogue whose title declares: [e]xplicit liber primus. *Incipit secundus dramatica serie contextus.* Berschin posits that the works were written in essentially the same order in which they are found in the Emmeram-Munich Codex. Relying on the scant chronological clues left by Hrotsvit, he dates the composition of Book I to sometime after 962, and Book II to ca. 965. Though one of Hrotsvit’s two epics, the *Gesta Ottonis*, follows these books in the Codex, it was probably not part of her original *magnum opus*. There is no similar transitional epilogue at the end of Book II, and the preface Hrotsvit wrote for the *Gesta* informs us that it was composed at the behest of Gerberga II, abbess of Gandersheim and niece of German Emperor Otto I.

---

33 *Opera*, I, 1.1-9.29 (pp. 1-2); II, 1.1-9.22 (pp. 132-133).
35 Berschin, p. VIII-IX. Berschin makes the former estimate based on Hrotsvit’s allusion to her abbess, Gerberga II, as *neptis imperialis* (imperial niece), in the preface to Book I (7.10). He argues that Gerberga could not be described as such before 2 February 962, when her uncle Otto I was crowned emperor. Stephen Wailes objects to Berschin’s conclusion, arguing that this phrase only indicates the date of the final version of the preface, since the legends found in Book I could have been composed years earlier (*Spirituality and Politics*, pp. 20-21; p. 241, n. 10).
36 *Opera*, III, *Praefatio*, 3.8-11; Dronke points out that Paul von Winterfeld and subsequent editors have referred to the *Gesta* as Book III, causing some confusion in the study of the interrelation of works in Hrotsvit’s original scheme of legends and plays (p. 64). Berschin has chosen to group it with Hrotsvit’s
Berschin believes it was begun in 965 and finished sometime before 2 March, 968.\textsuperscript{37} While it is clear that the second epic, the \textit{Primordia coenobii Gandeshemensis}, was written sometime shortly after the \textit{Gesta}’s completion, the exact date cannot be determined.\textsuperscript{38} The preface of the \textit{Gesta}, like the two previous ones, will shed light on Hrotsvit’s deft employment of penitential language and role-playing, and will also allow us to begin exploring her ambiguous usage of forms of the noun \textit{presumptio} and the verb \textit{presumo}. Attention to her treatment of this vice will inevitably clarify her portrayal of its counterpart, \textit{desperatio}, as well as Hrotsvit’s understanding of the relationship between her writing and her spiritual health.

As discussed above, recent scholarship has noted Hrotsvit’s frequent use of disparaging or diminutive language in her depictions of herself as a woman, her literary production and her talent as an author. In the prefaces, prologues and letters which proceed her works, Hrotsvit points out her “womanly fragility” (\textit{feminea fragilitas})\textsuperscript{39} and notes the “rusticity” (\textit{rusticitas})\textsuperscript{40} of her style, concerns in keeping with both the traditional perceptions of her gender and the standard rhetorical convention of authorial humility.\textsuperscript{41} She also refers to herself as a “little woman” (\textit{muliercula}),\textsuperscript{42} and her talent and its products are likewise diminutive; her gift as an author is only a little one.

\footnotesize
second history, the \textit{Primordia}, dubbing the two epics the \textit{Pars Prior} and \textit{Pars Posterior} of Liber III, though he makes it clear that these are editorial designations.  
\textsuperscript{37} Berschin, p. IX.  
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{40} I, \textit{Praefatio}, 5.22; II, \textit{Praefatio}, 9.18; II, \textit{Epistola}, 4.16; III, \textit{Praefatio}, 7.12-13; III, \textit{Praefatio}, 11.2; \textit{Prologus} II, 13, 36. For the practice of Late Latin authors referring to their own \textit{rusticitas}, see Tore Janson, \textit{Latin Prose Prefaces: studies in literary conventions} (Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1964), pp. 139-140. Janson notes that by this period and throughout the Middle Ages, the prefaces of poetical and prose works began to be “quite similar in content” (p. 10), allowing us to apply Janson’s findings to Hrotsvit’s case with few qualms. 
\textsuperscript{41} On the latter, see Janson, \textit{Latin Prose Prefaces}, pp. 120. On the related tradition of apologizing for deficient style or authorial incompetence, see ibid., pp. 124-133. 
(ingeniolum), and she describes her output as “little works” (opusculi), “little songs” (carminula), “little verses” (versiculi), or simply a “little book” (libellus). In fact, so frequent is her employment of this particular grammatical form throughout her works that Paul von Winterfeld reserved a special section for diminutive nouns in the Index grammaticus of his 1902 edition, noting that “Hrotsvit indulged in these hardly less than Catullus.”

Both Peter Dronke and Katharina Wilson warn us against accepting Hrotsvit’s self-deprecating language at face value. As Dronke writes:

> These prefaces are written in the most artificial prose of which Hrotsvitha felt capable—yet paradoxically they are also full of self-revelations, at least between the lines. If we can look beyond Hrotsvitha’s overwrought façades, beyond her topoi of humility that become almost presumptuous through sheer over-insistence, we can discover what was really on her mind.

Dronke then attempts to determine just that by means of a thorough and critical analysis of her prefatory material. He finds that her eloquent self-denials, upon closer inspection, reveal Hrotsvit’s underlying assurance and her growing confidence in her abilities as a poet. The content of the works themselves also support this more nuanced reading.

Both the legends and dramas feature heroic female martyrs whose courage in the face of
a gruesome death throws the existence of such gender-linked fragility into doubt.

Katharina Wilson notes what she terms “retroactive ambiguities” in Hrotsvit’s use of diminutives in her narratives; in other words, the minimizing self-descriptions of the prefaces become difficult to accept when she inserts those very words into the speeches of her heroines’ pagan tormenters. We will find a similar inversion of meaning shortly when we first encounter Hrotsvit’s treatment of the concept of presumption.

**Book I: “Not a misdeed of presumption”**

Hrotsvit makes her interest in penitential themes evident from the first lines of her text. She begins the preface of Book I by immediately insisting on its alleged imperfections, thus anticipating the arguments of her potential critics:

I offer this little book,/ small in stylistic merits, but not small in the efforts it took/ to the good will of the wise/ for correction and advice/ at least to those who don’t enjoy to rail/ against authors who fail,/ but, rather, prefer to correct the work’s flaws. I do confess [fateor]/ that my failings are rather more than less/ in the handling of meter, style, and diction,/ and that there is much in these works warranting correction./ Yet, the one admitting openly her failing [fatenti]/ should find forgiveness prevailing/ and her mistakes deserve kind help.

---

51 For example, we find Diocletian referring to Agapes, Chonia and Hirena as “viles mulierculę” in Dulcitius, 9.1, and Hadrian calling Fides, Spes and Charitas “tantille mulierculę” in Sapientia, 1.3. Wilson, “Introduction,” p. 10; Ethics, pp. 12-13; Dronke, pp. 77-79. Patricia Demers reaches a similar conclusion in her analysis of the preface to Book II: “In teaching the reader to savour the rich ambiguities of the erudition and wit of this supposedly limited writer…Hrotsvitha thereby prepares the reader for a comparable reversal of expectations in the plays themselves. Dronke praises Hrotsvitha as ‘supersubtle’ in her ‘distinctive literary coquetry’ (p. 83). Hrotsvitha’s tactic appears to me [Demers] less a matter of flirting with the reader than of schooling her or him in ways of reading material which will radically subvert conventional notions” (“In virginea forma,” p. 50).

52 When quoting Hrotsvit in English, I will use the translations in Katharina Wilson’s Florilegium for the prefatory material of Books I and II unless otherwise noted. I will also occasionally consult the translations included in Dronke’s study. His are often more literal and precise, as he makes less of an effort to reproduce the effect of Hrotsvit’s rhymed prose prefaces.

53 Trans. Katharina Wilson, Florilegium, p. 19. Opera, I, Praefatio, 1.1-2.9: “Hunc libellum parvo ullius decoris cultu ornatum sed non parva diligentia inlaboratum omnium sapientium benignitati offero expurgandum eorum dumtaxat qui erranti non delectantur derogare sed magis errata corrigere · Fateor
These opening lines are an excellent example of Hrotsvit’s aforementioned love of overturning her readers’ expectations. Her ostensibly humble admission of her weakness as an author and the flaws of her “little book” (*libellum*) soon becomes a pointed exclusion of those readers seeking to disparage either, i.e. “those who [do] enjoy to rail/ against authors who fail,” thus putting her would-be attackers quickly on the defensive. She goes on to confess (*fateor*) to specific failings in her work, i.e. “in the handling of meter, style, and diction,” but again, punctuated this thought with the reminder that those freely acknowledging error should not be mocked or condemned for it, but be forgiven and aided in its emendation. Though Hrotsvit does not make a direct analogy between the forgiveness of literary errors and spiritual ones, her frequent use of terms often associated with sin and penance, e.g. *expurgandum, erranti/ errata/ errasse/ errores, corrigere/ correctio, fateor/ fatenti, venia, viciis*, would make the connection clear to most readers.

Hrotsvit then defends her reliance on apocryphal sources, claiming that “it was not a misdeed of presumption [*crimen presumptionis inique]* but the innocent error of namque me haut mediocriter errasse non solum in dinocondis syllabarum naturis verum etiam in dictionibus componendis · pluraque sub hac serie reprehensione digna lattitare · sed erroses fatenti facilis venia · vicisise debetur pia correctio · ” (p. 1).

Janson notes that “there is a clear tendency in writers using the scrutiny theme to stress the benevolence of the scrutinizer, i.e. usually the dedicatee, and to speak in contrast of the presumed malevolence of other critics” (p. 142). See also p. 158, n. 3: “[s]ome writers seek to protect themselves from attack from the beginning, by pleading for assistance from the dedicatee.” As we will see below, Hrotsvit dedicated the first five legends to Gerberga in the first *Prologus* of Book I (*Opera*, p. 3). Her well-educated superior and sometime teacher would likely be a far more sympathetic and helpful audience than most.

Cf. Janson, pp. 130-133.

On the traditional association of literary vices with moral ones in the thought of Isidore of Seville, and indeed in Christian thought in general, see Jacques Fontaine, *Isidore de Séville et la culture classique dans l’Espagne wisigothique*, vol. 1 (Paris: Études augustiniennes, 1959), pp. 125-126, 132-133. See also Janson, (pp. 141-142), who notes several instances in his own study in which Latin authors, both Christian and non-Christian, ask their readers for *venia* (pardon) on account of defective style (see pp. 126, 131, 135-136, 141-142). Indeed, he notes that Christian authors, after apologizing for their rhetorical or grammatical errors, would then assert the uselessness of such skills in attaining the Kingdom of God (pp. 141-142). This contrasting of literary *virtutes* and *vitia* with moral ones became just as standard as their association. After all, the Gospels themselves were simple, unembellished narratives, and the apostles were not known for their advanced rhetorical training (pp. 134, 136-137, 140-141).
flawed assumption.” She explains that when she started writing, she was unaware that her sources were of questionable origin. After discovering this problem, she decided to continue her project anyhow because, as she asserts, “what appears to be false today/ may perhaps be proven true another day.” Dronke believes this statement could be “an implicit challenge” of such learned determinations of legitimacy, as well as an assertion of the moral truth of such texts, even if their origins and ascriptions are questionable. Thus Hrotsvit again turns a guilty confession into a bold affirmation of her actual feelings on the matter.

As Hrotsvit continues to declare her supposed insecurities, more hints of her true confidence and determination emerge. “As it is,” she writes:

I am in dire need/ for the support and help of many indeed/ especially because I lacked all confidence and strength when I first started/ and these verses crafted/ as I was neither mature in years nor sufficient in learning./ Neither did I dare [presums] consult the discerning/ and show my drafts to the wise/ or ask them for advice/ so as not to be prohibited from writing on account of my rusticity. Thus, I first began to compose in secret, all alone/ struggling to write, then destroying what was poorly done,/ trying to the best of my ability, and with all my might/ to put together a text—be its merit ever so slight—/ using the writings I was able to gather here, in our Gandersheim Abbey.

---

57 Wilson, trans., ibid. Opera, I, Praefatio, 3.10-12: “Si autem obicitur quod quedam huius operis · iuxta quorundam estimationem sumpta sint ex apocrifis · non est crimmen presumptionis inique sed error ignorantię” (p. 1). Dronke translates the phrase: “[T]here’s no blame here for sinister presumption./ only an ignorant assumption” (p. 65), which better captures the force of inique.

58 Ibid. Opera, I, Praefatio, 4.15-16: “[Q]ua quod videtur falsitas · forsan probabitur esse veritas” (p. 1).

59 Pp. 66-67. Cf. Wilson, Ethics: “Verity, then, is defined in rhetorical rather than empirical terms here: when the reliability of the source can no longer be taken for granted, she substitutes for that truth the truth of intention” (p. 5).

60 Wilson, trans, ibid. Opera, I, Praefatio, 5.16-6.6: “Cum res sese ita habeant · tanto ad perfecti defensionem opusculi permultorum iuvamine egeo · quanto in ipsa inceptione minus ulla proprie vigoris fulciebar sufficientia · quia nec matura adhuc aetate vigens · nec scientia fui proficiens · sed nec alciui sapientium · affectum meq intentionis consulendo · presumsi enucleare ne prohiberer pro rusticitate · Unde clam cunctis et quasi furtim · nunc in componendis sola desudando nunc male composita desruendo satagebam · iuxta meum posses licet minime necessarium aliquem tamen conficere textum ex sentenciis scripturam · quas intra aream nostri Gandeshemensis collegeram cenobię” (pp. 1-2).
Though still playing the role of the nervous beginner, here Hrotsvit reveals her decision to undertake her difficult project in secret rather than being hindered by her superiors, indicating a courage and resolve not in keeping with her self-portrayal. Moreover, she co-opted another ancient trope for her own purposes, one referred to by Tore Janson as “the author’s dilemma” in his classic study of Latin prose prefaces. Janson notes the frequency with which Late Latin authors declared themselves conflicted over taking on the role of author, supposedly torn between their humble reluctance to write, consistent with the commonplace themes of authorial modesty and inadequacy noted above, and the request received for the work in question from one or even a number of colleagues, acquaintances, superiors, etc. As the existence of the work itself affirms, the author obviously decided to fulfill the request rather than appear selfish or disobedient, usually dedicating the work to the requestor. The dedicatee was also charged with the task of inspecting the work for flaws of grammar or style and praying for the writer’s success. Hrotsvit, however, had received no such request for her legends; indeed, as we just noted, she even feared that had she revealed the early drafts to others, she might have been ordered to stop. Hence Hrotsvit exchanged the traditional prefatory “dilemma” for her own personal one, discarding the persona of the reluctant but supported writer in favour of a furtive but determined younger self.

Hrotsvit’s wording of this admission, that she preferred this secrecy because she did not presume (nec...presumi) to show her work to the wise, should capture the reader’s interest as well, occurring as it does less than ten lines after her first denial of a potential charge of presumption. The definition of presumption we briefly introduced in

---

61 Dronke, p. 66.
62 Janson, pp. 120-121.
63 Ibid., pp. 121-124, 145.
the last chapter was necessarily narrow, since there we only encountered *presumptio* as the vice complementary to despair, a sinful overabundance of hope in God’s mercy and/or a deficiency of fear in God’s justice.\(^{64}\) In order to understand better the subtleties of Hrotsvit’s usage of the concept, we must first explore how presumption was more generally defined in Hrotsvit’s *milieu*.

**Presumption, Obedience and Secrecy in Hrotsvit’s World**

In his article on the use of *presumere* and its substantive form *presumptio* in early monastic sources, Pierre Miquel discovered that the terms could be understood in either their “sens normal” or “sens péjoratif.”\(^{65}\) His “sens normal” corresponds to the primary definitions of *praesumptio* found in Lewis and Short, those more prevalent in the classical period: “I. A taking beforehand, a using or enjoying in advance, anticipation… III. A representing to one’s self beforehand, a conception, supposition, presumption.”\(^{66}\) As presumption’s vicious meaning had already led us to guess, Miquel affirmed that the “sens péjoratif” is found more generally in post-classical works, and especially in the works of Christian authors. It corresponds to the tertiary meanings of presumption listed by Lewis and Short: “a. Boldness, confidence, assurance, audacity, presumption; b. Stubbornness, obstinacy; c. Prejudice.”\(^{67}\) In these post-classical definitions we see the seed of the far more pejorative meaning that would eventually become the term’s primary denotation in modern English: “The taking upon oneself of more than is warranted by one’s position, right, or (formerly) ability; forward or overconfident opinion or conduct;

\(^{64}\) See Chapter Two, pp. 69-70, 75-76.


\(^{67}\) Ibid.
arrogance, pride, effrontery, assurance.”68 One can understand how the more negative “sens péjoratif” developed from the neutral “sens normal,” at least in the case of the sources in question; to anticipate or enjoy something before the appointed time, or to make an assumption without all the necessary information, could easily lead to tensions in the closely regulated world of early Christian monasticism, with its strong emphasis on humility and obedience.

Miquel’s study, which seeks to find textual precedents for the frequent use of praesumere and praesumptio in the Regula Benedicti, confirms this casual observation. Miquel analysed the occurrence of these terms in a number of celebrated sources, such as the Vulgate, the Collationes and Instituta of John Cassian, and the Leonine Sacramentary, as well as in an assortment of lesser known monastic rules.69 Quoted most extensively were the works of Cassian, which Miquel found did not have much discernible influence over Benedict’s references to presumption.70 Nevertheless, they would have had a great deal of sway over the meaning of presumption in most monastic communities throughout the Middle Ages. Miquel noted that in the great majority of cases, Cassian used presumption in the negative sense. In the Collationes, which treats issues relating to anchoritic monasticism and spiritual development,71 Cassian consistently employed a form of praesumere to describe those brothers who preferred their own moral discernment to that of a teacher or elder, or, in extreme cases, that of God Himself. The presumptuous were usually those who in some way expressed an

70 Ibid., p. 429. For Cassian’s treatment of despair as a progeny of the principle vice tristitia, see Chapter Two, pp. 48-50.
71 See De institutis coenobiorum et de octo principalium vitiorum remedii libri XII, ed. Michael Petschenig (Vienna: F. Temsky, 1888), p. 25, where Cassian explains the contrasting purposes of his two main bodies of work. Quoted in Chapter Two, p. 29, n. 90.
inflated opinion of their own spiritual attainments, taking on tasks of instruction or asceticism which were beyond their abilities.\textsuperscript{72}

The terms could, however, be applied with a positive connotation; as Miquel found, “[d]ans certains cas—assez rares—\textit{praesumere} n’a pas un sens péjoratif et désigne la confiance en Dieu.”\textsuperscript{73} For example, Cassian explains that a monk wishing to move forward in his profession should not presume on his own labour, but on divine help.\textsuperscript{74} In Conference XX, \textit{De paenitentiae fine et satisfactionis indicio}, we are instructed that the Lord sends us emotional cues that allow us to presume (\textit{praesumamus}) that we have been forgiven.\textsuperscript{75} Cassian was not without precedent in these instances; in the Vulgate, the book of Judith contains two examples of quite a similar usage:

O Lord God of heaven and earth, behold their pride, and look on our low condition, and have regard to the face of thy saints, and shew that thou forsakest not them that trust on thee [\textit{praesumentes de te}], and that thou humblest them that presume of themselves, and glory in their own strength (6:15);

O God of the heavens, creator of the waters, and Lord of the whole creation, hear me a poor wretch, making supplication to thee, and presuming of thy mercy (9:17).\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{72} Miquel, pp. 426-428. In addition to the vicious definition of presumption noted in Chapter Two, in the \textit{Collationes} Cassian lists it among those vices arising from cenodoxia (later known as \textit{vana gloria}), which is itself part of the “sevenfold tinder and root of vices” (V, 16). He later notes it as arising from the corruption of the rational part of the soul, along with cenodoxia, elatio, imuidia, superbia and contentio (XXIV, 15). See \textit{Collationes XXIV}, ed. Michael Petschenig (Vienna: C. Geroldi filium, 1886), pp. 141-143, 691.
\textsuperscript{73} Miquel, p. 427.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{Collationes}, XI, 9: “Quem statum si quis de adiutorio dei, non de studii sui labore praesumens meruerit possidere...” (p. 322).
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., XX, 8: “[L]argita nobis est diuina dignatio ipsamque remedii opem nostro conmisit arbitrio, ut indulgentiam nostrorum scelerum pro nostro praesumamus affectu dicentes ei: \textit{dimitte nobis debita nostra}...” (p. 564).
\textsuperscript{76} Judith 6:15: “Domine Deus caeli et terrae intuere superbiam illorum et respice ad nostram humilitatem et faciem tuorum sanctorum ad tende et ostende quia non derelinquis praesumentes de te et praesumentes de se et de sua virtute gloriantes humilias”; and 9:17: “Deus caelorum creator aquarum et dominus totius creaturae exaudi me miseram deprecantem et de tua misericordia praesumentem.” The Douay-Rheims version of the first passage translates the positive instance of \textit{praesumentes} as “them that trust,” while the negative instance is translated with the English cognate, thus showing the lasting prevalence of the negative connotation of presumption.
We will see later in this chapter that Hrotsvit occasionally gave presumption just such a positive connotation in her narratives, requiring the reader to treat all of her uses of the term with more care. The examples just cited show that she was following the best of authorities in doing so.

In most cases, however, those living the regular life in the early Middle Ages would have associated *praesumptio* and its verbal forms with contemptible thoughts and behaviour. The fundamental guideline could be found in Chapter LXX of the *Regula Benedicti*: “In the monastery, let every occasion of presumption be avoided.”\(^7^7\) The *Instituta*, Cassian’s other great work, also deals with problems facing coenobitic communities such as Hrotsvit’s own Gandersheim; consequently, its provisions against presumption are often less abstract than those found in the *Collationes*, pertaining more to instances of disobedience or self-promotion that disrupt the daily life of the monastery. Examples cited by Miquel include prohibitions against dressing differently from the rest of the community, praying with the excommunicate before they are reconciled, leaving one’s cell without the permission of an elder or superior, eating more than one’s allotment of food, and clinging to private property.\(^7^8\)

Of especial interest for our purposes is Cassian’s censure of the *operis peculiaris praesumptio*,\(^7^9\) which Miquel translates as “*[l]e choix d’un travail particulier entrepris sans permission.*”\(^8^0\) Hrotsvit’s decision to begin her legends in secret certainly falls into this category. In his chapter on the observance of Lent, Benedict likewise prohibited any

---


\(^7^8\) Miquel, pp. 428-429.

\(^7^9\) *Collationes*, IV, 16, p. 58.

penitential exercises undertaken without the abbot’s permission, “since that which is done without the permission of the spiritual father will be imputed to presumption and vain glory, and not to merit.”\textsuperscript{81} While in this instance Benedict was referring to excessively rigorous Lenten devotions, starting any challenging endeavour without the abbot’s permission would likely be considered presumptuous in a regular community.

In such an environment, Hrotsvit’s clandestine undertaking could easily earn this label. In her preface, however, she does not defend herself against the charge of presumption on account of her decision to write, nor for her decision to start writing without permission, though the reader should reasonably expect her to do either or both of these things. Hrotsvit, on the contrary, states that she did not presume to explain her intentions by consulting any of the wise, lest she be forbidden on account of her rusticity: \textit{nec alicui sapientium affectum meæ intentionis consulendo presumsi enucleare ne prohiberet pro rusticitate.}\textsuperscript{82} This particular example of “presumption,” i.e. asking permission, would have been exactly what most living the regular life would have deemed necessary to begin their projects with a clear conscience, yet it might have easily spelled the end of their projects as well, especially in those cases when the aspiring author was female. Hrotsvit likely anticipated that her choice to write without this permission would draw charges of presumption, but decided that it was easier to apologize once underway than to be explicitly forbidden before she could even begin. By depicting herself as too humble and convinced of her own inadequacy to ask for permission, she both addressed these charges and cleverly invalidated them. Surely such a self-effacing creature could not be considered presumptuous.

\textsuperscript{81} \textit{La règle}, XLVIII, 9: “[Q]ui quod sine permissione patris spiritualis fit, praemunitioni deputabitur et uanae gloriae, non mercedi” (p. 606).
\textsuperscript{82} \textit{Opera}, I, \textit{Praefatio}, 5.20-22.
Before returning to the discussion of Hrotsvit’s first preface, I would finally like to consider whether the secrecy which she alleged was actually possible given what can be assumed about the life she led. Most scholars believe that she was a canoness, since as such she would have had more personal freedom than the nuns living alongside her.83 For example, the canonesses could keep their personal property, have private servants and books, host visitors, and come and go with relative ease.84 This less constrained life, it is generally assumed, allowed Hrotsvit the time and tools necessary for her education and development as a writer. Despite these privileges, however, the canonesses of Gandersheim were still bound by many of the strictures of the regular life. Along with the rest of the community, they followed the Benedictine Rule and observed the canonical hours.85 We can safely assume, therefore, that Hrotsvit would have striven to uphold the monastic virtue of obedience, and to avoid the dangers of the *operis peculiaris praesumptio*. Her wish to embark on such a challenging and time-consuming project would very likely have required the knowledge and blessing of her abbess. I would suggest, therefore, that Hrotsvit’s circuitous and less than sincere defence against the charge of presumption was not devised for the sake of placating Gerberga, who Dronke believes was not only her abbess and teacher, but her close friend as well.86 This verbal maze was more likely constructed to stave off criticism from those male authorities and scholars that, as we will see shortly, we know were involved in the education of both women, and who would at the very least become acquainted with Hrotsvit’s plays and

83 Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics*, p. 17; Dronke, pp. 55-56.
84 Dronke, p. 56.
85 Wilson, “*The Saxon Canoness*,” p. 31.
86 Ibid.
epics. As Wilson noted when discussing the *exordia* of the legends, Hrotsvit risked flouting the authority of such worthies in order to follow a higher authority, that of Christ Himself, and His commandment to preach His word to the best of her ability. I will further consider the problem of female obedience and male authority in the second part of this chapter.

**Book I resumed: “an instrument of some utility”**

After admitting the clandestine beginnings of her project, Hrotsvit goes on to describe her education. She credited Rikkardis and unnamed others with her early instruction, while citing Gerberga for overseeing her more advanced training. That she even mentioned her former teachers suggests that before beginning her works, Hrotsvit was accustomed to relying on the guidance of superiors in her scholarly endeavours. Indeed, since she lived under Gerberga’s authority throughout her writing career, she may still have been receiving instruction from her abbess while composing her works, or at least have studied alongside her, thus making her decision to begin in secrecy, if this were truly the case, all the more striking. She then returns to the topic of her alleged inadequacy:

> However difficult and arduous and complex/ metrical composition may appear [*videatur*] for the fragile feminine sex,/ I, persisting/ with no one assisting/ still put together my poems in this little work/ not relying on my own

---

87 Pp. 117-119, 122-123.
88 “Unlike Greek and Roman rhetoricians and unlike her contemporaries whose *exordia* tend to emphasize the commissionary nature of their works, Hrotsvit’s overriding purpose is to follow Christ’s mandate and to spread his ideas to the best of her ability” (Wilson, *Ethics*, p. 28).
89 Pp. 135, 148-152.
powers and talents as a clerk/ but always trusting in heavenly grace’s aid/ for which I prayed…

Hrotsvit has again presented the views of her hypothetical critics, only to discredit them in the next breath. While she initially echoes the sentiments of some of her readers, who likely believed that poetic composition was too difficult for women, her use of the verb videatur simultaneously undercuts this agreement; it only seemed too difficult. Of course, the legends themselves belied this assumption as well, since at the time this preface was written, Hrotsvit had already completed at least the first five legends of Book I. Her further assertion, that she worked “not trusting in [her] own powers, but only in the ever merciful help of heavenly grace,” was also more than a simple admission of weakness, becoming instead a powerful self-endorsement. Clearly the required grace, with its implication of divine approval, was forthcoming, or she would not have progressed so far. Divine grace, as we will see below, would also prove to be a central theme in Hrotsvit’s narratives.

Hrotsvit then explains her choice to compose in meter, and in doing so reveals her ultimate purpose in writing:

…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,/ but that, struck by the mallet of eager devotion,/ it bring forth a tiny little sound of divine praise/ and, thus, if for no other purpose but for this case,/ it may

---


91 On the timing of the composition of Book I, see pp. 112-113 below.

92 “[S]olo tamen semper miserentis superœ gratiœ auxilio non propriœ viribus confisa” (8.14-15). I have used my own translation here, as Wilson’s effort to reproduce Hrotsvit’s rhyme has slightly distorted the meaning of these lines.
be transformed into an instrument of some utility/
regardless of the limits of my ability.  

Making reference to the Parable of the Talents (Matt. 25: 14-30), Hrotsvit felt that her 
talentum ingenioli, however disparaged it might be by some members of her audience, 
was divinely granted. As such, its most fitting use would naturally be in praise of its 
creator, while to stifle it would be vicious laziness and ingratitude. Thus those who 
would prefer that Hrotsvit suppress her talent would be silencing this metaphorical music 
of praise and promoting the sinful neglect of her God-given abilities. We will see that 
this use of musical imagery would not be Hrotsvit’s first. Neither was she the first poet 
to mark the similarities between musical and metrical composition. The Bible also 
offered her numerous examples of divine praise expressed musically.

Hrotsvit concludes the preface by coming full circle, reiterating her initial 
requests for indulgence and correction:

Therefore, reader, whoever you may be,/ if you live rightly/
and are wise in God, don’t withhold the favour of your 
benign goodwill from these flawed pages/ that are not built 
on the authorities of precedent or the wisdom of sages./ If,
by chance, you find here something well wrought, give all 
credit to God’s grafting/ but for all the flaws, assign blame 
to my poor crafting./ Do this, however, not by viciously 
attacking or by begrudging/ but by indulgently judging/

---

93 Wilson, trans., Florilegium, p. 20. Opera, I, Praefatio, 8.15-22: “…huius carmina opusculi dactilicis 
modulis succincte apposui · ne crediti talentum ingenioli sub obscuro torpens pectoris <antro> rubigine 
egneglegentię exterminaretur · sed sedule malleo devotionis percussum aliquantulum divine laudationis 
referret tinnitus · quo si occasio non daretur negociando aliud lucrari · ipsum tamen in aliquod saltim 
extreme utilitatis transformaretur instrumentum · ” (p. 2).
94 Wilson, Ethics, p. 5; Dronke, p. 66.
95 Dronke, p. 66, notes that writing in order to avoid idleness is also a common topos of the early medieval 
preface.
96 See also Katharina Wilson, “Hrotsvit and the Sounds of Harmony and Discord,” Germanic Notes 14:4 
(1983): 54-56, esp. 54.
97 Wilson, ibid., believes that Hrotsvit’s use of the word malleus in this image is a reference to Jer. 23:29: 
“Numquid non mea verba sunt quasi ignis, dicit Dominus, et quasi malleus conteners petram.” I am not 
convinced that Hrotsvit had this verse in mind, since the malleus in her metaphor is not of divine origin, 
like the verba of Jeremiah, but is Hrotsvit’s own sedule devotionis.
because the force of the censoring lance is broken/ when, at the onset, humble words of confession are spoken.\textsuperscript{98}

Hrotsvit loads her conclusion with just as many pitfalls for the ill disposed as she used earlier. Any who disapprove of her efforts are not to be esteemed as “wise in God.” If the better passages are to be credited to God, this evidence of His gracious support can only reflect well on Hrotsvit’s project as a whole. The final lines again emphasize the power of confession, a power that serves as her final and best defence against the criticism soon to be levelled, and that she will demonstrate repeatedly in the pages to come.

The preface is not the only place in Book I where Hrotsvit employs penitential language. Berschin finds it likely that she wrote both Books I and II in two separate stages, and has accordingly divided each book in his edition into a \textit{Pars Prior} and \textit{Pars Posterior}.\textsuperscript{99} In the case of Book I, Hrotsvit herself attests to a compositional hiatus, or what Hugo Kuhn termed a \textit{Schaffenspause}.\textsuperscript{100} After the fifty-one line preface, she includes a further twelve-line poem in which she dedicates her “little songs in need of cleansing” (\textit{purganda...carminula}) to her abbess.\textsuperscript{101} Here Hrotsvit follows the convention of asking the dedicatee to correct her work, again using a form of the verb \textit{purgare}.\textsuperscript{102} However, Hrotsvit specifies that Gerberga should do so “[w]hen you are

\textsuperscript{98} Wilson, trans., \textit{Florilegium}, ibid. \textit{Opera}, I, \textit{Praefatio}, 9.23-29: “Unde quicumque lector si recte et secundum deum sapias · egenti paginę · que nullius praeceptoris munitur auctoritate opem tue rectitudinis ne pigriteris adhibere deo videlicet si quid forte probetur recte compositum · meéque negligentę designando universale vitiorum nec tamen vituperando · sed indulgendo quia vis frangitur obiurgationis ubi intervenit humilitas confessionis · ” (p. 2).

\textsuperscript{99} \textit{Opera}, p. VIII.

\textsuperscript{100} Quoted by Dronke, p. 64.


\textsuperscript{102} \textit{Ibid.}, 9: “Hanc quoque sordidolam tempta [agrees with Gerberga] purgare camenam.”
weary, after your varied labours…by way of play,” again downplaying the importance and sophistication of her work.103

About two-thirds of the way through Book I, at the end of the fifth legend, Hrotsvit included another brief poem which Berschin has termed a *Benedictio ad mensam*. Here Hrotsvit asks Christ to “benignly consecrate the dishes [*fercula*] of the table I have proffered, making these banquets [*dapes*] wholesome for those who taste them.”104 Some scholars have considered this little blessing as evidence that at least the first five legends were read in the refectory of Gandersheim during meals.105 Dronke, however, argues that one may only definitively conclude that Hrotsvit’s use of *fercula* and *dapes* were metaphorical references to her works.106 She then headed the sixth legend with another dedicatory poem to Gerberga, mirroring the longer one found at the beginning of the book: “Behold, Lady Gerberga, I offer you new little verses/ joining these songs to the little ones already written…”107 Thus the last three legends were written at some interval after the first five, likely after Gerberga had approved the earlier set and allowed Hrotsvit to continue her project. As we will see later, this break in the *contextus* of Book I also reflects Hrotsvit’s exploration of the interrelation between presumption and despair.108

103 *Ibid.*, 7-8: “Et, cum sis certe vario lassata labore,/ Ludens dignare hos modulos legere.” Trans. Dronke, p. 67. For the convention of requesting that the dedicatee edit one’s work, see Janson, p. 141-143.
106 *Ibid*.
108 See p. 175 below.
Book II: *Clamor Validus/Vox Clamantis*

In the preface to Book II, both Dronke and Wilson find evidence of Hrotsvit’s increasing confidence as a writer. She introduces her book of plays by attesting that “many Catholics” (*plures...catholici*) are beguiled by the eloquent but morally corrupting works of pagan writers, preferring their compositions to the simpler style of the Scriptures. While there are those who have developed a healthy habit of sacred reading and a dislike of most pagan writers, Hrotsvit explains, they still enjoy the plays of Terence. As a consequence of their appreciation for Terence’s sophisticated style, they are also dangerously influenced by the evil deeds depicted in his works. To combat this problem, Hrotsvit assigns herself a powerful new role:

> Therefore I, the Strong Voice of Gandersheim [*Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis*], 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 be praised/ within the limits of my little talent [*mei...ingenioli*].

While Hrotsvit still makes use of self-referential diminutives in this preface (e.g. *mei...ingenioli*), it becomes hard to accept her belief in the smallness of her talent a few lines after she has declared herself the Strong Voice of Gandersheim. This self-designation stems from the Latinization of the component parts of Hrotsvit’s name in the Old Saxon: *hruot=clamor*—shout or acclamation, *suid=validus*—strong. It also refers to a similar self-identification used by John the Baptist in John 1:23: “I am the voice of one

---

110 As to whether these assertions can be accepted as literally true, or were just another example of Hrotsvit’s humor, see Dronke, pp. 69-70.
112 Wilson, *Ethics*, pp. 146-147.
crying in the wilderness, make straight the way of the Lord!” (ego vox clamantis in deserto: Dirigete viam Domini). Since John the Baptist was the patron saint of Gandersheim, we should not be surprised that Hrotsvit took on a persona inspired by his words. Moreover, his Biblical mission to prepare the world for Christ’s imminent arrival served as an excellent model for her own mission to use Terentian style to spread the Gospel and praise God.  

Hrotsvit goes on to admit that she herself was confronted with the spiritual dangers such a project posed, but was willing to bear the risks for the sake of the greater good:

Not infrequently this caused me to blush/ and brought to my cheeks a scarlet flush,/ because being forced by the conventions of this composition/ I had to contemplate and give a rendition/ of that detestable madness of unlawful lovers and of their evil flattery,/ which we are not permitted even to hear. But had I omitted this out of modesty,/ I would not have fulfilled my intent; neither would I have rendered the praise of the innocent/ as well as I could, because the more seductive the unlawful flatteries of those who have lost their sense,/ the greater the Heavenly Helper’s munificence/ and the more glorious the victories of triumphant innocence are shown to be,/ especially/ when female weakness triumphs in conclusion./ And male strength succumbs in confusion.

While Hrotsvit has briefly reassumed the role of the penitent, confessing to exposing herself to material inappropriate for a woman living the regular life, she quickly re-emerges as the Strong Voice, turning this admission of wrongdoing into a proud

113 Wilson, ibid., p. 147, n. 11.  
114 Dronke, p. 70. For more on Hrotsvit and John the Baptist, see p. 121 and 213 below.  
115 Wilson, Florilegium, p. 41. Ibid., 4.13-5.3: “Hoc tamen facit non raro verecundari · gravique rubore perfundi · quod huaisalmodi specie dictationis cogente detestabilem inlicite amantium dementiam · et male dulcia colloquia eorum · quae nec nostro auditui permittuntur accommodari · dictando mente tractavi · et stili officio designavi · Sed <si> hec erubescendo neglegerem · nec proposito satisfacerem · nec innocentium laudem adeo plene iuxta meum posse exponere · quia quanto blandiciq amentium ad illicienium promtiores · tanto et superni adiutoris gloria sublimior · et triumphantium victoria probatur gloriosior presertim cum feminea fragilitas vinceret · et virilis robur confusioni subiaceret” (pp. 132-133).
statement of purpose. Regardless of the threat to herself, she will showcase the accomplishments of God and his saints, especially those dismissed as weak women by masculine authority. The preface itself, with its passionate denouncement of the salacious content of her model, demonstrates that she has completed the perilous task of Terentian composition while keeping her own Christian discernment intact. She has thus shown herself to be in better spiritual form than the *plures catholici* who had been lured astray by Terence’s wicked charms.116

Hrotsvit then notes the perils of comparing herself to Terence, again pre-empting those who would disparage her efforts:

I do not doubt that some will raise the objection with me, that the poorness of this composition is far inferior to the writing of him whom I resolved to imitate—more limited, and altogether unlike him. I admit it; yet I would explain to objectors that they cannot rightfully reproach me on the ground that I was trying perversely to compete with those who have far outstripped my want of art in loftier knowledge. I am not of such boastfulness as to presume [presumam] to compare myself with even the least of their pupils. I aspire only to this, that, though I can by no means do so fittingly, still with submissive devotedness of spirit I might redirect the gift of genius I have received back to the Giver. I am not so filled with self-love, then, that—in order to avoid human reproach—I would cease to proclaim the power of Christ, manifest in the saints, in whatever way he himself empowers me.117

116 Dronke, p. 70; Wilson, p. 77.
117 Trans. Dronke, p. 69. Wilson translates *abusive* as “presumptuously,” thus confusing my own point. Opera, II, Praefatio, 6.3-8.16: “Non enim dubito mihi ab aliquibus obici · quod huius vilitas dictationis multo inferior · multo contractior · penitusque dissimilis eius quem proponebam imitari · sit sententis · Concedo · Ipsius tamen denuncio · me in hoc iure reprehendi non posse · quasi his vellem abusive assimilari · qui mei inerciam · longe praecesserunt in scientia sublimiori · Nec enim tan † suum iactantiq · ut vel extremis me presumam conferre auctorum alumnis · sed hoc solum nitor · ut licet nullatenus valeam apte · supplici tamen mentis devocione acceptum in datorem retorqueam ingenium · Ideoque non sum adeo amatrix mei · ut pro vitanda reprehensione Christi qui in sanctis operatur virtutem quocumque ipse dabit posse cessem praedicare · ” (p. 133).
Here Hrotsvit sincerely acknowledges the failings of her work (*Concedo*), recognizing that there are those whose compositions could far outstrip her own in terms of scholarship and skill. She does not presume to compete with the likes of these, she explains, but instead measures the success of her work according to a different and, clearly in her view, superior standard: whether she has given thanks to God for His gifts and preached His message. For this greater purpose she will write despite the risk of reproach, a risk that perhaps the scrupulous scholars alluded to above were not brave enough to take. She does not presume to compete with such writers because her presumption is of a higher kind, that presumption which allows humankind to address God in praise and petition. She finishes her second preface by stating that if her work pleases anyone, she will be glad, but if not, it was still worth the effort for her own sake (*memet ipsam tamen iuvat quod feci*), since in this second book she has experimented with the dramatic form (*in hoc dramatica vinctam serie colo*). The Strong Voice of Gandersheim is content to write for herself and God alone.

After the preface to her plays, Hrotsvit included a fifty-six line letter to “certain wise supporters” of her work (*Epistola eiusdem ad quosdam sapientes huius libri fautores*). It is widely believed that these “supporters” had seen Hrotsvit’s first four plays, from *Gallicanus* to *Abraham*, since these are extant as a separate group in a twelfth-century manuscript from Cologne. The letter indicates that after this first part of her dramatic series was well received, Hrotsvit was inspired to continue working. Her last two plays, *Pafnutius* and *Sapientia*, each bear the evidence of Hrotsvit’s renewed

---

118 See pp. 105-106 above.
120 See Frenken, “Eine neue Hrotsvithandschrift,” pp. 101-114; Dronke, p. 75; Wilson, *Ethics*, p. 108. For a codicological description of Köln (Cologne), Historisches Archiv der Stadt W 101, see Berschin, pp. XVIII-XIX.
confidence, both containing a scene in which more enlightened characters give their counterparts, and thus the audience, an extensive lesson in some aspect of philosophy. As was the case for Book I, we will see below how this compositional break also emphasizes the connection between the vice of despair, treated in *Abraham*, and that of presumption, dealt with in *Pafnutius*.

At the start of the letter, the Strong Voice is put aside again in favour of the nervous and penitent amateur. Hrotsvit thanks her newfound supporters humbly and profusely for their attention and encouragement. As in the preface to Book I, she confesses her initial reluctance to show her early work to others:

I barely dared to show/ the rusticity of my little composition’s flow/ even to a few and then only to friends, and for this very reason the work almost ceased to grow,/ because just as there were only a few to whom I showed my work, there were not many who gave me encouragement and praise/ either pointing out what was to be corrected or urging me to continue as I had begun my ways. But now, since the testimony of three is said to constitute truth [Deut 19:15], invigorated by your judgement I will presume [*praesumo*] to continue my works/ trusting in God and with His permission and to submit it to the examination of learned clerks.

This penitent *persona* must have closely mirrored the reality of Hrotsvit’s spiritual life; as we have just seen, the preface and prologues of Book I indicate that Hrotsvit expected one of her earliest and most constant readers to be Gerberga, who as her abbess would

---


122 Cf. pp. 112-113 above and pp. 196-197 below.

123 Wilson, trans., p. 43. *Opera*, II, *Epistola*, 4.16-5.26: “Denique rusticitatem me quem dictatuncule actenus vix audebam paucis ac solummodo familiaribus meis ostendere · unde paene opera cessavit dictandi ultra aliquid huiusmodi quia sicut pauci fuere qui me prodente perspiccerent · ita non multi · qui vel quid corrigendum ineset enuclearent · vel ad audendum aliquid huic simile provocarent · At nunc quia trium testimonium constat esse verum · vestris corroborata sentenciis fidicialius praesumo et componendis operam dare si quando deus annuerit posse · et quorumcumque sapientium examen subire · ” (p. 134).
have had the most immediate responsibility for the care of Hrotsvit’s soul. Perhaps another such spiritual advisor was also numbered among the sapientes fautores to whom Hrotsvit addressed this letter. For example, Dronke finds it likely that Hrotsvit knew and could even have been taught by Ottonian court luminaries such as Bruno of Cologne and Rather of Verona. Chamberlain posits that Hrotsvit’s interest in the quadrivium was stimulated by Gunzo of Novara, an Italian scholar who had accompanied Otto I to Germany during the winter of 965-6, bringing with him about one hundred books, and then residing at the imperial court. Such masters could just as likely have been spiritual as well as intellectual advisors.

With the newfound support of her teachers and possibly her confessors, Hrotsvit strives to leave behind the stigma of starting her work in outright disobedience at worst, and morally questionable secrecy at best. As noted earlier, it was likely that Hrotsvit sought to avoid the censure of these male authorities as she began her work, since Gerberga was probably aware of the project from its inception. She describes her decision to continue her work as “presuming” (praesumo), a disclosure seeming to fit with the humble tone of her letter. Yet the more perceptive members of her readership would understand that her presumption was not of an insolent or contumacious kind, but was akin to the presumption seen in Judith 6:15 and 9:17, that permitted to those confident in God’s benevolence and mercy. Clearly this presumption would have positive results, since it produced the plays that the audience was about to enjoy.

As her letter continues, however, Hrotsvit’s admissions become even more intimate, and we find that her confidence did not come easily:

---

I am torn between two contradictory emotions: joy and fear: I rejoice with all my heart/ that God, by whose grace alone I am what I am [1 Cor 15:10], is praised in my art;/ but I also fear to appear to be more than what I am. I am convinced that both would be wrong: to deny God’s gracious gift to one;/ and to pretend to have received a gift when one has received none.\(^\text{127}\)

As most scholarly readers of Hrotsvit’s prefaces have concluded, and as had been demonstrated above, she usually contradicts her claims of inadequacy with clever demonstrations of her learning and skill. This profession of her joy and fear is no different; the excerpt itself includes a reference to Paul, and the rest of her letter boasts the employment of the obscure Greek philosophical terms *per dynamin* and *per energian*, culled from a letter of Jerome;\(^\text{128}\) an image drawn from Boethius’ *Consolatio Philosophiae*,\(^\text{129}\) foreshadowing the lessons in Boethian music and mathematics included in *Pafnutius* and *Sapientia*; and a reference to Matthew 11:7.

Yet perhaps Hrotsvit scholars, in their eagerness to establish her self-assurance and virtuosity, have also passed over the coexisting evidence of the darker moments her vocation to write must have given her. A closer look at the Gospel allusion, for example, yields indications of Hrotsvit’s self-doubt. She compares herself to a reed in the wind in order to describe the renewing effect of her supporters’ encouragement.\(^\text{130}\) She now has the confidence to send them her work for their consideration, “which I have written with such an intention/ but have preferred to keep hidden until now rather than show it openly.

---

\(^{127}\) Wilson, trans., p. 43. *Ibid.*, 6.26-6.5: “Inter hēc diversis affectibus gaudio videlicet et metu in diversum trahor · Deum namque cuius solummodo gratia sum id quod sum in me laudari cordetenus gaudeo · sed maior quam sim videri timeo · quia utrumque nefas esse non ambigo et gratuitum dei donum negare · et non acceptum accepisse simulare · ” (pp. 134-135).


\(^{130}\) *Ibid.*, 11.21-25: “Quia enim attactu vestri favoris atque petitionis harundineo more inclinata · libellum quem tali intentione disposui · sed usque huc pro sui vilitate occultare · quam in palam proferre malui · vobis perscrutandum tradidi · ” (p. 135).
because of its worthlessness." We are reminded of the reed used as a girdle by the Pilgrim in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, which miraculously regrew after being picked. There, as it had for centuries beforehand, the reed serves as a symbol of Christ’s resurrection and the renewal available to all Christians via His self-sacrifice. Hrotsvit knew the superficial reader would recall this traditional symbolism and give her reference no further thought. When considered in its original context, however, we learn that the reed in the wind was not a positive image. In Matthew, Christ used this image in order to convey what John the Baptist was not: “And when they went their way, Jesus began to say to the multitudes concerning John: ‘What went you out into the desert to see? a reed shaken with the wind?’” Christ wanted the crowd to understand that John would not be moved by every novelty or trend, or bend easily to the opinions of others. Thus to those readers more versed in Scripture, as the addressees of her letter certainly were, Hrotsvit seems to indict herself for being affected by their approval, perhaps wishing that she had always been sure of her gift and its divine origin.

Hrotsvit’s concern over the appropriate balance of emotions inspired by her newfound recognition mirrors the spiritual problems she will depict in her plays, in which troubled characters such as Maria and Thais will struggle to find the correct balance between hope for salvation and fear of damnation. Hrotsvit does not wish to imitate her sinners, wrongly presuming that she has a gift, or wrongly despairing of its existence, in the same way that they either presumed that they would be saved without proper

---

131 Wilson., trans., p. 44.
133 Hollander, p. 22.
134 Matt 11:7: “Illis autem abeuntibus coepit Iesus dicere ad turbas de Johanne, ‘quid existis in desertum videre, harundinem vento agitatam?’”
contrition, or despaired of their salvation despite God’s boundless mercy. She desires to presume on God’s bounty as outlined in those verses of Judith, secure in the knowledge that her poetic abilities are indeed divinely inspired, and should be used in His honour and service. She does not, however, wish to presume that her powers are greater than they are.

Hence in the last lines of her epistle, Hrotsvit asks that her supporters inspect and amend her work with care, “[a]nd then, righted according to the rules of correct composition [ad normam rectitudinis reformatum], send it back to me, so that, enlightened by your instruction/ I may be able to recognize where I have failed [peccassem] the most.”135 As in the preface to Book I, Hrotsvit has blended the language of moral correction with that of compositional correction, though in this instance, the role of confessing penitent seems quite close to reality. Knowing that these authorities, at least, approve of her work thus far, she calls on them not only for their stylistic prowess or metric precision, but more importantly for their spiritual discernment, so that she does not lose her hard-won balance. Thus she casts her supporters into the role of her Basilius or Pafnutius, the wise intercessors that correctly diagnose spiritual problems and help the sinner regain a proper relationship with God.

**Gesta Ottonis: “a convenient resting-place”**

The last of Hrotsvit’s prefaces introduces the *Gesta Ottonis*,136 the only one of her works that we know she was ordered to write. Its rhymed prose lines were addressed to

---

136 The work is untitled in the Emmeram-Munich Codex, but is commonly known by scholars as the *Gesta Ottonis* (Berschin, p. 276; Wales, p. 205).
Gerberga, who commissioned a poetic celebration of the deeds of her imperial uncle, Otto I.\(^{137}\) We learn in its closing lines that Gerberga also ordered Hrotsvit to present the finished work to Archbishop William of Mainz for further inspection and approval.\(^{138}\) The preface is followed by two prologues, one addressed to the emperor himself, and the other to his heir, the young Otto II. Thus, as was the case with the plays, we can confirm the existence of a male audience, members of which held significant temporal and spiritual authority over our author.\(^{139}\) Yet the Strong Voice that she discovered in the course of writing Book II has been put away in the face of her reluctance to write on such a worldly and traditionally masculine subject matter.\(^{140}\) Despite the clear license to write resulting from her abbess’s mandate, Hrotsvit still frequently expresses concern about appearing presumptuous; she refers to presumption three times in the course of the forty-seven line preface, and one further time in the prologue to Otto I. True to her reputed love of complexity, however, her humble confessions of inadequacy in this case were meant to mask her intention to follow Gerberga’s order in a way that suited her own wishes.

The *Gesta* represents a departure from the majority of Hrotsvit’s *opus*, i.e. Books I and II, which are based on hagiographic sources and were undertaken due to Hrotsvit’s own conviction that she must use her gift to praise God and preach His word. Scholars agree that the *Gesta* does not resemble history in the technical sense, “insofar as history is a record of events and a close analysis of motives, causes, and consequences…” [The

---

\(^{137}\) *Opera*, III, *Praefatio*, 2.8-3.11.


\(^{139}\) See pp. 118-119 above.

\(^{140}\) Wailes, pp. 205-206: “The letter shows that this task was not to Hrotsvit’s taste: in the self-deprecatory comments about her sex, her inadequate education and want of personal experience, and in her complaint that she lacks adequate sources and guidance, one senses a carefully disciplined reluctance to write as directed.”
*Gesta* was meant as a philosophical reflection on the Christian values of princes as revealed in the progress of the Ottonian dynasty."  

Hrotsvit first mentions presumption when attesting to the difficulty of the task set before her, citing the lack of reliable written sources and eye-witness accounts. She describes her frustration by using the image of a traveller lost in a wood:

…where every path was covered over and mantled with heavy snow. In vain he tries to follow the directions of those who are showing the way only by a nod. Now he wanders through pathless ways, now by chance he comes upon the trail of the right path, until at length, when he has traversed half of the thick-treed domain, he attains the place of long sought rest. There staying his step, he dares not [non presumeret] proceed farther, until either he is led on by someone overtaking him or follows the footsteps of one who has preceded him.  

Due to her alleged incompetence with such a subject and the problematic nature of her sources, Hrotsvit explains that she has “pause[d] in a convenient resting-place”; in other words, she limits herself to dealing with the deeds of Otto’s line from the time of his grandfather, Duke Otto of Saxony, to Otto’s own imperial coronation in 962. Wailes notes the irony of this decision, since Hrotsvit would have been far better acquainted with the events immediately before and after this date, during the years she  

141 Wailes, p. 206.  
142 All translations of Hrotsvit’s epics or “Book III” are taken from Mary Bernardine Bergman, *Hrosvithae Liber tertius: a text with translation, introduction, and commentary* (Covington, KY: The Sisters of Saint Benedict, 1943), here quoting p. 39. *Opera*, ibid., 5.16-5.4: “ubi omnis semita nivali densitate velaretur obducta · hicque nullo duce · sed solo prəmonstrantium nutu inductus · nunc per devia erraret · nunc recti tramitem callis inprovise incurreret · donec tandem emensa arboreq medietate spissitudinis · locum optaq comprehenderet quietis · illicque gradum figens ulterius progredi non presumeret · usque dum vel alio superveniene induceretur · vel precedentis vestigia subsequeretur · ” (pp. 271-272).  
144 Wailes, pp. 208-209.
herself became an active writer, than with those that began unfolding years before she was born.145

Hrotsvit then reports her fear that she will be reproached “because I have dared [praesumpserim] to disgrace by my uncultured style matters that should be set forth with the festal eloquence of choice expression.”146 She ultimately passes the responsibility for such criticism to her abbess, “since I undertook this little work not of my own presumption [meq presumptionis], but at thy bidding.”147 Of course, it could be argued that Hrotsvit was in fact presuming by carrying out only part of her abbess’s order, i.e. by not “presuming” to continue to work past the point she chose. As she did in the preface to Book I, Hrotsvit has defended herself against one potential charge of presumption by misdirecting her audience, openly worrying that she will be labelled presumptuous for a far lesser fault.148 Here she expresses concern about the presumption of writing on such a lofty subject, an irrational concern given that she has been ordered to do so.

She goes on, in the prologue addressed to the emperor, to claim that any factual errors that appear in the following work were not the result of “baneful presumption of mind” (mala... praesumptio mentis);149 she has simply made the best possible use of the accounts others have provided her. Again, in the prologue to Otto II, she begs indulgence of the young heir: “If I were not urged by thy dread command, under no circumstance, should I have such self-assurance as to presume [auderem] to offer to thy scrutiny this

145 Ibid.
146 Bergman, trans., p. 41. Opera, ibid., 8.15-18: “Unde etiam vereor me temeritatis argui · tendiculasque multorum non divitare convitii eo quod pomposis facete urbanitatis exponenda eloquentiis praesumpserim dehonestare inculti vilitate sermonis · ” (p. 272).
147 Ibid. Opera, ibid., 9.21-22: “presertim cum si meq presumptionis · sed vestrum causa iussionis · huius stamen opuscili coeperim ordiri · ” (p. 272).
148 See pp. 107-108 above.
149 Ibid. Opera, III, Prologus ad Ottonem I Imperatorem, 20 (p. 273).
little book with its obvious lack of polish.”150 Hrotsvit’s fear of this “dread command” (praeccepto...metuendo) may be simply a literary convention; we should remember that Otto II was merely a child at the time she wrote, and was probably not privy to the decision to commission her work.

Such a comment reminds us that, though here Hrotsvit reprised the role of the meek penitent that first appeared in Book I she remained the cagey and versatile writer who had unveiled the Strong Voice of Gandersheim in the preface of Book II. While she could easily play whichever role her work required, sometimes seeming to inhabit both characters at once, we must not allow the apparent ease and fluidity of Hrotsvit’s performance make us insensitive to the hard realities that made it necessary, and the sincere doubts and misgivings which it sometimes expressed. As is the case for any good actor or author, roles and characters are often inspired by situations encountered in life, giving rise to what Dronke refers to as “indirectly autobiographical moments.”151 Given how frequently she brought up the problem of presumption in reference to herself, we can conclude that our author not only expected such a charge to be brought against her, but had quite likely levelled this charge against herself as she was coming to terms with her calling as a writer. As we will see in Part II, Hrotsvit was clearly well acquainted with both presumption and despair, and believed that the two vices were closely connected in the mind of the sinner estranged from God.

150 Bergman, trans., p. 43. Opera, III, Prologus ad Ottonem II Imperatorem, 11-14: “Si tis praecepto non urgerer metuendo,/ Non foret ullamodo mihimet fiducia tanta,/ Ut tibi praesentis scrutandum rusticitatis/ Auderem satis exiguum preferre libellum” (pp. 274-275).
151 Dronke, p. 77.
Part II: *Purganda Carminula*

In 1950, Hugo Kuhn first posited that the interrelation of the component parts of Hrotsvit’s works merited closer study.\(^{152}\) He argued that she had deliberately arranged her eight legends, six plays, two historical epics, and even the incomplete *Tituli* on the Apocalypse of John, in order to highlight the frequent correlations built into their themes, plots and characters. Kuhn found that each work contained a central *Hauptthema*, along with a secondary *Seitenmotiv*, which would in turn provide the *Hauptthema* for the subsequent work. He believed the primary purpose of these arrangements was to illustrate the virtue of virginity, which he declared to be Hrotsvit’s *Grundthema*.\(^{153}\) The influence of Kuhn’s findings has endured, and his ideas have since been emended and elaborated by Dronke and Wilson,\(^{154}\) while the primacy of virginity as the *Grundthema* of Hrotsvit’s plays has recently been criticized by Wailes.\(^{155}\) Though questions still persist about the exact role of the final two epics in her greater scheme,\(^{156}\) it is now generally accepted that Hrotsvit intended her legends and plays to be read as two interconnected cycles comprising an overall whole.

In their respective studies of the ordering of Hrotsvit’s works, both Dronke and Wilson have revealed the emphasis Hrotsvit placed on the process of conversion and repentance. As we can see from the comparative list given below, two complementary works treating this theme were centrally placed in each cycle (shown in bold).\(^{157}\)

---


\(^{153}\) Kuhn, “Dichterisches Programm,” p. 94.

\(^{154}\) See Dronke, pp. 60-64; and Wilson, *Ethics*, pp. 14-27.

\(^{155}\) See his article “Beyond Virginity,” in n. 27 above.

\(^{156}\) Dronke, p. 64; Wilson, *Florilegium*, pp. 13-14, 15. See n. 36 for the textual problems posed by the inclusion of the epics.

\(^{157}\) Schematic based on that found in Dronke, p. 60. See also Wilson, *Ethics*, p. 19.
While Dronke and Wilson have each conducted extensive analyses of the complex parallels and inversions to be found within and between each book, I will only be discussing those that pertain to the works most closely studied below, i.e. the first legend and the four centrally-located conversion tales.

As we will see shortly, *Maria* not only introduces the reader to Hrotsvit the developing poet, but also recounts the dawn of the Age of Grace, i.e. the Incarnation. Thus *Ascensio*, a brief narrative version of the biblical Ascension of Christ (Acts 1:1-11), can be understood as the second part of *Maria*, since here we see the assumption of Christ’s corporal being into heaven. Understanding *Maria* and *Ascensio* as two parts of the same narrative allows us to draw a useful parallel between the openings of Books I and II, since the latter begins with *Gallicanus*, a play which quite clearly has two parts according to the textual evidence. Including the incomplete *Iohannes sive Tituli in Libro Apocalypsis* in the cycle of Hrotsvit’s plays, though also problematic, can be justified from both a textual and thematic standpoint; the Emmeram-Munich Codex shows the *Tituli* immediately following *Sapientia* (i.e. *Passio Sanctorum Virginum Fidei*,

---

159 For the proponents of this view, see Wailes, *Spirituality and Politics*, p. 246, n. 1. Wailes himself argues that the *Ascensio*’s undeniable thematic connection to *Maria* should not prevent us from treating it as a separate work, as the manuscript tradition does (p. 51).
160 Berschin, ed., *Opera*, p. 156.
Spei and Karitatis), and the work’s depiction of the end of the sixth age, i.e. the Age of Grace, would certainly be a fitting conclusion to a set of texts which began with its opening.

A lengthy treatment of Maria, the first and longest of Hrotsvit’s works, may seem to be an odd component of this study. Unlike the four central conversion narratives, Maria does not seem at first glance to deal with the connection between presumption and despair. Maria is one of the four works in which Hrotsvit does not use some form of the verb *praesumo* or its substantive derivatives. However, we will see that in Maria Hrotsvit reprises in narrative form many of the issues just raised in the preface to Book I, e.g. her defensive assumption of the role of author and the use of that role to praise the gracious Creator Who called her to it. Most importantly for our purposes, here we also see more evidence of her interest in obedience to divine will at the risk of flouting lesser, earthly, and often male authority. Hrotsvit presents the Virgin as the “paradigm of unswerving, unquestioning submission to God’s will” and “of the monastic/ascetical ideal of virginitas.” Hrotsvit thus provided an *exemplum* for herself and her sisters at Gandersheim while also giving further justification for her choice to compose, a choice that some might call presumptuous. Like her protagonist, Hrotsvit felt called to follow what she felt was God’s will for her despite the criticism she expected from the uncomprehending and often hostile society in which she lived.

I will then discuss Theophilus, Basilius, Abraham and Pafnutius, Hrotsvit’s strategically-placed conversion narratives, where we will see her understanding of presumption and despair explored in the greatest depth. Unlike the first and last elements

161 See n. 30 above.
162 Wilson, *Ethics*, p. 33, 34.
of Hrotsvit’s double cycle, which involve universally recognized events in salvation history and their actors (i.e. the Holy Family and the Incarnation; the Apostle John and the Apocalypse), these works are far more personal in focus. Each deals with the conversion, penance and redemption of an individual Christian. Hrotsvit gives them pride of place, however, making them the “double bill” at the centre of each book,\(^\text{163}\) thus indicating that their message of divine mercy for the inveterate sinner was just as universal in significance for her audience and all Christians.

While the plots and characters of each “double bill” closely mirror each other, they also display striking differences, demanding that the reader accept each narrative as a separate, unique case demonstrating an all-encompassing divine truth. As Wilson notes:

> While these echoes might be described, on the technical level, as instances of amplification or expolition, that is, the recapturing of the subject from different angles to insure reader compliance, the exact balance of the recurrences between male and female protagonists serves the additional purpose of definition, of the schematization of an ideal applicable to both sexes. In this manner, the formal and thematic redoubling not only underlines unity of intent and the clear perception of all the works as an organic whole, but it also effects a kind of hermeneutic retake: a rereading of hagiographic plots which encourages an accretion of meaning or even reinterpretation, in novel, even strange generic environments.\(^\text{164}\)

Hrotsvit’s four “hermeneutic retakes” on conversion each feature a character led astray by his or her own set of sinful predilections and temptations. Their rejection of God’s healing grace and submission to sin can be attributed either to presumption or despair. In her portrayal of each character’s reconciliation to God, Hrotsvit demonstrates the need to

---

\(^{163}\) Dronke, p. 62.

\(^{164}\) Wilson, *Florilegium*, p. 13.
reach a healthy balance between hope and fear, thus avoiding the closely-related
tendencies either to presume upon or despair of God’s mercy. She also expresses her
own belief that all mortals, even the Virgin Mary as Theophilus’ intercessor, must
presume upon God’s mercy when asking for forgiveness for sin. Despite humanity’s
great presumption, however, God’s gracious nature ensures that His mercy is always
forthcoming for the sincere penitent. It is this saving presumption which Hrotsvit
proudly claims in her prefaces, cleverly appropriating any accusations of presumption
hurled against her and, more importantly, staving off any despair which her controversial
compulsion to write may have caused her.

Maria: *Unica spes mundi, parens parens, desperatę natę*

The first of Hrotsvit’s legends proves to be her longest by far, containing 903
lines in total. Its sixteen-word title is also the longest of any of Hrotsvit’s works:
*Historia nativitatis laudabilisque conversionis intactae dei genitricis, quam scriptam
repperi sub nomine Sancti Iacobi fratris domini.* The title hints at her insecurity about
the legend’s source. We noted above that Hrotsvit anticipated criticism for using
apocryphal sources in the preface of Book I, indicating that it was a subject about which
she was concerned during the earlier portion of her career. In the case of *Maria*, she
carefully specifies that she found the text “written under the name of Saint James”
(*scriptam sub nomine Sancti Iacobi*) rather than confidently declaring its author. We
now know that Hrotsvit is referring to the *Protevangelium Iacobi*, also known as the

---

165 The next longest legend, *Gongolfius*, only comprises 582 lines.
166 Most scholars simply refer to the text as *Maria*, a convention that will be followed here as well.
167 See pp. 100-101.
Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew. Sadly, we do not know which redaction of the text she used, so it is difficult to determine how exactly her version of the legend differs from her source.  

Her caution here, as well as the qualms expressed in the first preface, also indicate Hrotsvit’s worry over her lack of experience as an author. More signs of this uncertainty emerge in the body of the legend, in the form of occasional asides in the first person such as *ni fallor*, “unless I am misled,” and *credo*, “I believe.” As other scholars have shown, Hrotsvit’s confidence would grow along with her body of work. Her apprehensions about her abilities are little evident in the later legends and plays, which she gives simpler titles (e.g. *Lapsus et conversio cuiusdam servi; Conversio Thaidis meretricis*) and are free from authorial interjections. These inaugural worries cannot have been too dire, however; Wailes notes her summary treatment of the Annunciation and Joseph’s misgivings about Mary’s pregnancy, as they are recorded in Luke 1:26-38 and Matthew 1:18-25. Here Hrotsvit declares that she will spend more time on those things that are less likely to be mentioned in church, i.e. those elements of the Pseudo-Matthew not included in the gospels. Wailes finds such a non-traditional emphasis striking in an amateur female poet and sees it as evidence that “dispels any suspicions that she is a passive author, submitting to authorities. She chooses material for her

---

169 Wailes, p. 50.
172 *Maria*, 538-542: “Haec evangelici demonstrant cuncta libelli/ Nostras et fragiles excedunt denique vires./ His nos transmissis, constant quia cognita cunctis,/ Sermonem vobis tantum faciemus ab illis,/ Rarius in templo que creduntur fore dicta” (p. 23).
writing because it agrees with what she wishes to say, and she modifies it carefully so
that her own ideas will be served.”\textsuperscript{173}

Hrotsvit prefaces Maria with a prayer addressed to the Virgin herself. These
opening lines reflect a number of the themes and techniques just encountered in
Hrotsvit’s preface to Book I: the use of diminutive and self-effacing language and the
demonstration of her feminine weakness as a kind of divinely-endorsed strength. The
verses to follow are “new little songs” (nova carminula), and Hrotsvit describes herself as
a “handmaiden” (famula) and a “suppliant” (supplex), gifted with only a “womanly
muse” (feminea camena).\textsuperscript{174} Hrotsvit goes on to declare her deficiencies in the face of
the task she has set herself:

I am conscious that any effort of mine to sing thy merited
praise far exceeds my feeble powers, for the whole world
cannot adequately extol thee, who shineth far beyond the
praises of the angels, since thou as a Virgin hast carried in
thy chaste womb Him Who rules and sways the universe.
But He Who once commanded a mute beast to speak in
praise of His sacred Name, and Who by the words of an
angel caused thee, O tender Maiden [virguncula] to
conceive of the Holy Ghost and has made thee the Mother
all-incomparable of His Son, without the violation of thy
virginity: He, if it please Him, is able to loose the strings of
my tongue and to touch my heart with the dew of His
grace.\textsuperscript{175}

As God caused the donkey to speak to Balaam in the Book of Numbers (22:28-30), so He
will also aid Hrotsvit, another “mute beast,” in her poetic endeavours, with the Virgin’s

\textsuperscript{173} Wailes, p. 50.
\textsuperscript{174} “Tu dignare tuę famule clementer adesse/ Hrotsvitę votis carminulisque novis,/ Quę tibi femineę studio
famulante camene/ Iam supplex modulis succino dactilicis...” (Ibid., 17-20).
\textsuperscript{175} When quoting Book I in English, I will use the admittedly dated text of M. Gonsalva Wiegand, “The
Legends of Hrosvitha: text, translation and commentary,” (PhD diss., St. Louis University, 1936), unless
otherwise noted. Wiegand, trans., pp. 7-9.
kind intercession. As the subsequent 900 verses make evident, the Virgin’s support and
God’s grace were obviously forthcoming for Hrotsvit’s first major composition.

We saw previously, however, that this self-deprecating manner cannot be so
easily accepted. The powers of our female author may not be so feeble after all; as we
have just been reminded, it was a mere virguncula who was chosen to bring Christ
Himself into the world, thus earning a special place of honour in this world and the next.

Stephen Wailes points out that “[t]he linking of Mary’s parturition with Hrotsvit’s
writing” helps to justify the latter in the eyes of the reader.176 As he further explains:

[F]or a woman presenting herself as a poet, the story of
Mary’s birth, dedication and service to the Lord was an
implicit correction of any perceived ambition and self-
assertion on the part of the author: while it might seem
presumptuous for this simple canoness to write verse and
offer it to the public (so those around her may have
thought), perhaps indeed her heart was in the right place, as
she chose to write about female humility and service.177

Her efforts to produce this song of praise also allow her to avoid becoming “a companion
to those ungrateful and slothful servants who neglect to send according to their ability
praise to the Most High-throned.”178 As she asserted in the first preface, Hrotsvit
believed that had she not taken on this project, the spiritual consequences would have
been far more dire than those incurred by writing. We will soon see that, like Hrotsvit’s
decision to write, Mary’s demonstrations of “female humility and service” would often
take a form not acceptable to the masculine authorities that traditional Jewish society set
over her.

176 Wailes, p. 48.
177 Ibid., p. 49.
178 Wiegand, trans., p. 9. “Ne comes ingratis condampner iure pigellis,/ Quos piget altithrono psallere pro
modulo” (Ibid., 41-42).
Hrotsvit’s opening prayer also introduces new themes, foreshadowing their prominence in the work to come. Especially significant for our purposes are its first four verses, which refer to the Virgin’s instrumental role in the history of salvation, and celebrate her obedience to divine will in carrying out this role:

Sole Hope of the world, Illustrious Queen of the heavens, Holy Mother \(parens\) of the King, Resplendent Star of the Sea; who, O sweet Virgin, hast by obedience \(parens\) restored to the world that life which the virgin of old forfeited.\(^{179}\)

Wiegand loosely translated the second instance of \(parens\) as the present participle of the verb \(pāreō, pārēre,\) literally “obeying.” Her translation reflects the emphasis Hrotsvit will place on the virtue of obedience throughout the text.\(^{180}\) However, this word could also be the present participle of \(pariō, parēre,\) meaning “bearing, giving birth.” This latter participle gives rise to the noun \(parens, parentis,\) i.e. “parent, mother, father,” which we see as the first instance of \(parens\) above. Hrotsvit intended this ambiguity; medieval thinkers commonly contrasted the story of Eve, the mother of humanity and the “virgin of old” \(virgo vetula\) whose disobedience brought original sin into the world, with that of Mary, whose obedient motherhood \(parens parens\) brought about God’s response to this sin.\(^{181}\) Hence Hrotsvit first dubs Mary “the only hope of the world” \(unica spes mundi\) because she was the chosen vessel through whom Christ was born, thus offering hope of eternal life to all.\(^{182}\) Had Christ’s Incarnation and self-sacrifice not occurred, humankind would have no way to reconcile itself to God.

\(^{179}\) Trans. Wiegand, p. 7. \(Maria,\) 13-16: “Unica spes mundi, dominatrix inclita celi,/ Sancta parens regis, lucida stella maris,/ Quæ parens mundo restaurasti, pia virgo,/ Vitam, quam virgo perdiderat vetula” (p. 4).

\(^{180}\) See pp. 142, 148-152, 156-157.

\(^{181}\) See Homeyer’s note for lines 15-16 (p. 48). See also Wilson, “The Saxon Canoness,” p. 39.

\(^{182}\) See Susan Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 45: “The source of all Christian hope is, of course, Christ Himself. His sacrifice is sufficient atonement for all human sin.” In the later Middle Ages, Mary in
Thus Hrotsvit presents the events leading to Mary’s parturition as a necessary precursor to the current age under Grace, i.e. the time of Christ’s new covenant, as opposed to the previous age under the Law, i.e. the covenant the Lord made with the Jewish people in the time of Noah.\textsuperscript{183} Paul set the precedent for this idea by opposing Adam and Christ, also with reference to the opposition between the Law and Grace, obedience and disobedience:

\begin{quote}
Therefore, as by the offence of one [Adam], unto all men to condemnation: so also by the justice of one [Christ], unto all men to justification of life. For as by the disobedience of one man, many were made sinners: so also by the obedience of one, many shall be made just. Now the law entered in that sin might abound. And where sin abounded, grace did more abound. That as sin hath reigned to death: so also grace might reign by justice unto life everlasting, through Jesus Christ our Lord.\textsuperscript{184}
\end{quote}

Hrotsvit will allude to these interrelated Pauline oppositions throughout the narrative.

For example, Hrotsvit often portrays the Jewish people under the old covenant as abusing or misunderstanding the Law, paying more attention to the corrupt customs that have accreted around it. Mary and her parents, on the other hand, are the ideal proto-Christians, managing to keep faith with both the letter of the Law and with the Spirit that

---

\textsuperscript{183} Wailes, pp. 39-43; Wilson, p. 32, 34. Wailes notes that Paul refers to this opposition in a number of places in Romans and Galatians.

\textsuperscript{184} Romans 5:18-21: “igitur sicut per unius delictum in omnes homines in condemnationem sic et per unius iustitiam in omnes homines in iustificationem vitae. sicut enim per inoboedientiam unius hominis peccatores constituti sunt multi et per unius oboeditionem iusti constituentur multi. lex autem subintravit ut abundaret delictum ubi autem abundavit delictum superabundavit gratia. ut sicut regnavit peccatum in morte ita et gratia regnet per iustitiam in vitam aeternam per Iesum Christum Dominum nostrum.”
established it. Such Jews will be well prepared to accept Christ’s new covenant, while their misguided and unbelieving counterparts will be further alienated from God.

Hrotsvit makes it clear that because of the salvific nature of Christ’s birth, the story of Mary’s life was of cosmic significance. The first five lines of the legend emphasize the universal import of the events to be portrayed:

When one thousand lustra of the gliding world had been completed, that happy era [félix étatula sexta] began in which God with faithful solicitude ordered all things to be fulfilled which the prophets had long since foretold, predicting that Jesus would soon come into the world[.]  

With these lines, Hrotsvit locates her narrative on the timeline of world history. The term *lustrum* denotes a period of five years; in Roman times it was used to refer to a rite of purification which the people were required to undergo every five years after the census. It was commonly believed that the Incarnation had taken place five thousand years after creation, and began the sixth age of the world.  

The setting of this legend will be the entire mundus labens, since the story has significance for the sinful planet as a whole. While Wiegand chose to translate *[m]undi labentis* from line 45 as “of the gliding world,” I posit that a better translation would be “of the falling world,” i.e. the world after the Fall of Man. This translation would reflect better Hrotsvit’s frequent contrasting of the sinful age under the Law, in which she begins her narrative, with the subsequent, redemptive age under Grace, the dawn of which the readers will witness as the tale unfolds. It would also provide a fruitful contrast with

---

185 See 2 Cor. 4-6, 12. As Wailes notes, “[i]n the subsequent episodes of Joachim’s story, Hrotsvit shows repeatedly how Mary and her parents both fulfill and transcend Jewish law and custom” (p. 43).
186 Trans. Wiegand, p. 11. *Maria*, 45-49: “Mundi labentis lustris nam mille peractis/ Incepit quando felix étatula sexta,/ Qua duas impleri iussit pietate fideli,/ Quicquid veraces iam precinuere prophetæ,/ Qui mundo Iesum mox predixere futurum” (p. 5). I inserted the Latin in l. 46 for the sake of clarity, since Wiegand chose not to translate the word *sexta*.
187 On the Christian concept of the six ages of the world, see Homeyer, p. 49, note for line 46.
Hrotsvit’s later descriptions of the world as a *stabilis orbis*, which we first see her using after Anna and Joachim have been informed of Mary’s impending conception.\footnote{See pp. 144-145 and note 216 below.}

Later in the legend, after Mary’s birth, Hrotsvit describes her beauty as surpassing earthly language:

> All human tongues, of whatever words they might be capable, cannot express, nor can any of them throughout the entire fixed earth worthily describe, the exquisite beauty of this babe, nor fittingly laud the life and character of her who is worthy to be praised throughout all ages. For this child, as soon as she was taken from the cradle, shone resplendently before the whole world because of her matured character.\footnote{Trans. Wiegand, p. 39. *Maria*, 326-332: “Omnes humanę nequeunt comprehendere linguę,/ Nec potis est stabilis, quamvis verbum sonet, orbis/ Istius infantis preclaram dicere famam,/ Sed nec mirandae vitam moresque puellę/ Quis laudare modis potis est per saecula dignis,/ Hęc quia continuo cunis subtracta puella/ Maturis omni lucebat moribus orbi” (p. 15).}

Again, Hrotsvit makes it clear that the life of this special child will have import for all inhabitants of the world. As the story continues, we are told that Mary’s “beauty excelled the dazzling splendour of the sun and utterly surpassed in its loveliness every human countenance,”\footnote{Trans. Wiegand, p. 41. *Maria*, 348-350: “Ipısius faciem niveo candore nitentem/ Tradunt ardentis radios precellere solis/ Necnon humanum penitus devincere visum” (p. 16).} and that as she grew, her fame “had spread abroad over this solid earth \textit{(stabilem...orbem)}.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 43. *Maria*, 377: “Cuius cum stabilem volitaret fama per orbem” (p. 17).} Young Mary’s worldwide fame, as well as her otherworldly precocity and beauty, foreshadow those of her son, and are fitting attributes for the *unica spes mundi*.

Wailes divides this long legend into three main parts: from the miraculous birth of Mary to the despairing Anna and Joachim (45-263); from Mary’s childhood to the Nativity (264-587); and the infancy of Christ and the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt...
(588-862). Hrotsvit begins her tale by describing Joachim, Mary’s father, as “a certain old man of the ancient law.” We are told that from his earliest years, he lives “justly, zealously and holy” according to the strictures of the old covenant. These and other clues in the text make it clear that Joachim is the type of the virtuous man living in the age under the Law. Despite his goodness, however, he will soon suffer bitterly due to the excessive legalism of Jewish society. Though he and his wife Anna have been married for twenty years, she has given him “no hope of a child” (non...spem partus). The audience knows, as the characters in question do not, that the spes partus of this couple represents something far greater than their own desires, but refers to Mary, and through her, to Christ, the hope of all of humanity for freedom from sin.

Indeed, it could be asserted that the majority of references to hope (spes) in Hrotsvit’s works should be interpreted not only in light of the particular circumstances in which they are mentioned, but also with reference to Hrotsvit’s overarching interest in depicting the fulfillment of God’s plan in each of her narratives. In other words, the hopes of her protagonists and reformed sinners are in keeping with God’s will, and are thus ultimately realised, while those of her antagonists or sinners before their conversion are not, and will come to nothing. For example, we can apply this interpretive rule not only to the hope of Anna and Joachim for a child, but to those uses of spes or sperare we will come across later in the legend, such as Herod’s hope that he can kill the infant Christ, and the hope of the pagan priests that the ruler of Sotines would punish the Holy

192 Wailes, p. 40.
193 Ibid., p. 11. Maria, 50-51: “[Q]uidam…senior sub lege vetusta” (p. 5).
194 Ibid. Maria, 54-55: “Hic in mandatis generiticis ab ubere legis/ Extiterat iustus necnon digne studiosus” (p. 5).
195 Wailes, pp. 42-43.
196 Maria, 83-84: “Hanc autem memorant sterilem non tempore parvo/ Spem partus homini nullam conferre fideli” (p. 6). My translation.
Family for causing the idols of their temple to come crashing to the ground. Neither of these vicious hopes will come to fruition.

Hrotsvit goes on to recount a certain festival day on which Joachim attempts to offer incense in the temple. Ruben, an envious priest, scolds him, claiming that it is not lawful for him to touch incense or offer any sacrifice, since the Lord had so clearly scorned him by denying him a child. Ruben’s bitter words cause Joachim to flee his homeland:

[I]n grief and sadness of heart he left the sacred place and sought the forest, where he had in time past been accustomed to pasture his flock. Here he made his way by devious paths into a far-distant place, taking with him his flocks, each with its own shepherd, and he hid in those recesses while pasturing. Neither did he care to return to the fatherland which he had left, for in his heart he suffered a great humiliation because of the bitter words of Ruben who had derided him.

Joachim’s shame drives him out of his society, with which he has never before been in conflict. Hrotsvit makes it clear, however, that though Joachim has lost the favour of God’s authorities on earth, he has not lost favour with God Himself. This incident proves to be only the first time in Hrotsvit’s narrative that a protagonist will run afoul of legalistic Jewish authorities despite clear evidence of divine favour. In the case of Joachim, Hrotsvit establishes early in the legend that his generous support of the less

197 Maria, 695, 844. See also the realized hope of Joachim that his shame has been blotted out, p. 144, n. 212, and that of Mary to remain a virgin, p. 152, n. 243.
198 Wailes cites a quotation from Prudentius, a late Christian poet who had a great deal of influence on Hrotsvit’s writing, discussing the inability of the Jewish people to understand the underlying spiritual meaning of the Law. As Wailes quotes: “[F]or it is not a carnal law that came down from heaven, the law which thou [the Jewish people] dost honour in the flesh, but one pregnant with Christ, that should give birth to my hope” (p. 42). Just as Christ is equated with hope by Prudentius, so Hrotsvit equates Mary with that same virtue, since she was the vessel through which He was incarnated.
199 Ibid., 86-93.
200 Trans. Wiegand, p. 15. Maria, 95-102: “[M]aerens abiit silvas tristisque petivit,/ In quis sepe gregem consuevit pascere pridem/ Ac in longinquam pergens per devia terram/ Ipsum cum propriis secum ducendo magistris/ Hic in secretis latitat pascendo latebris./ Nec post ad patriam placuit remeare relictam/ Passus namque gravem secreta mente pudorem/ Ex Ruben verbis, qui se causatur, amaris” (p. 7).
fortunate and the clergy had earned him “such a recompense that his own substance was increased very rapidly, and he excelled all his associates in prosperity”; 201 indeed, Joachim’s many blessings were likely the cause of Ruben’s jealous outburst. Despite this earthly scorn, however, we soon learn that God had one more blessing in store for Joachim and his wife.

Joachim and his flocks remain in hiding for five months, and Anna’s sufferings soon mirror those of her husband as no word of his welfare reaches her during this time. “[F]earing [desperans] that he was no longer alive, [Anna] wept day after day, nor did she know any solace for her grief.”202 Readers of the Introduction will recognize Anna’s despair as a version of Murray’s “despair of the present,” i.e. despair caused by a situation in which some earthly good, such as one’s life, honour, wealth or freedom, or those of a loved one, are about to be lost with no hope of recovery.203 However, the audience’s knowledge makes Anna’s personal despair over the fate of her husband take on a wider, more spiritual significance; not only is the life of her spouse at stake, but humanity’s chance at eternal life. The grieving wife makes an impassioned prayer, asking that she at least know whether Joachim is alive or dead: “I fain would honour his remains with the greatest pomp and consign those noble members to a worthy resting place.”204 In the approaching age under Grace, Anna would have a far better comfort than giving her husband the proper funeral rites the Law required, since she would know that he had been saved by Christ’s redeeming sacrifice.

201 Trans. Wiegand, p. 13. Maria, 72-76: “Digne mercedem suscepit denique talem,/ Ut propria substantiola bene multiplicata/ Ipsius gentis proceres precelleret omnes;/ Nec sibi consimilem portaret terra potentem,/ Quem sic cunctarum fulciret copia rerum” (p. 6).


203 See Chapter One, pp. 7-8.

204 Trans. Wiegand, ibid. Maria, 120-121: “Funus sed summa colerem praenobile pompa/ inclita condigno committens membra sepulchro” (p. 8).
Anna goes on to ask that she be given a child, and renews her longstanding promise that if this plea is granted, “I would early present it to Thee in Thy sacred temple in obedience [obsequio] to the manner of the prescribed law and dedicate it to Thy service.” Given the popularity of child oblation among noble families in the tenth century, Hrotsvit’s own parents or those of her sisters at Gandersheim may have made just such a commitment. In response to her prayer, Anna is visited by an angel who consoles her with news of the eminent fulfillment of her greatest wish: “[B]elieve that, by the decree of the Most High God, thou shalt conceive a child, and the fruit of thy womb will in all truth be wonderful among all nations.” Anna, however, is frightened and overwhelmed by this heavenly messenger and his mysterious revelation. Not understanding that her prayers have been answered, she goes home and continues her heartfelt petitions, lying in her bedchamber in fearful devotions throughout the rest of that day and the following night.

Just like her husband Joachim, Mary’s mother-to-be must also bear the scorn of an uncomprehending Jewish society. Hrotsvit demonstrates this unearned burden by including a brief but telling incident between Anna and her maid occurring immediately after the angelic visitation. When Anna asks the servant why she had not come to her while she was clearly in such distress,

…the insolent maid answering her mistress hurled at her a word in derision in the low murmur customary among servants: “If God despised thee by making thee barren, tell me, what does the cause of the divine wrath concern me?”

\[\text{205} \text{Ibid., p. 19. } \text{Maria, 135-138: “Invoco, coniugii primo quod tempore vovi, Si ventris fructum mihi praestares pius ullum, Hunc mox in templo sisti tibi rite sacrato/ Obsequioque tui legali more sacrari” (p. 8).} \]
\[\text{206} \text{Wilson, Ethics, pp. 149 and n. 21.} \]
\[\text{207} \text{Trans. Wiegand, p. 21. } \text{Maria, 144-146: “Consilioque dei germen tibi credito summi, Hoc, quod ventre tuo procedet tempore certo, Vere fiet idem populis mirabile cunctis” (p. 9).} \]
But Anna bore this opprobrium patiently, pouring out her grief in silent tears.\textsuperscript{208}

Like Ruben, the maid has incorrectly assumed that Anna and her husband have lost God’s favour and are being punished for some unknown fault. The angel’s words have just shown that nothing could be further from the truth; indeed, God has chosen them to usher in a new covenant that will apply not only to the Jewish people, but to all humanity. While Ruben and Anna’s maid imagine the Lord as wrathful and legalistic, the angelic tidings just described, as well as the wondrous events related throughout the legend, reveal a gracious and mysterious God with which Hrotsvit’s Christian audience would be familiar.

Meanwhile, we learn that “at that same hour that same angel” has appeared to Joachim in his pastoral hideaway, commanding Joachim to return to his wife.\textsuperscript{209} When Joachim objects, asking why he should subject himself to such shame again, the angel responds: “Believe that I am a heavenly citizen, given to thee as a guardian by the grace of the Most High King, Who granted that through me Anna, thy just wife, should be consoled whilst amid tears she poured out her efficacious prayers.”\textsuperscript{210} The angel goes on to announce to Joachim what he has just told Anna, that to them will be born a child that will be revered by all the world for generations to come. Joachim, delighted by this news, offers the angel food and shelter, which he politely refuses with telling words: “Desist, I pray thee, henceforth to call thyself my servant, but consider thyself a companion to the angelic hosts. As for me, terrestrial nourishment is not needful, for I

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid., p. 21. \textit{Maria}, 156-161: “Reddidit econtra domine lasciva famella/ Obprobris iactum servili murmure verbum:/ ‘Si te despexit sterilem faciens deus’, inquit,/ ‘Dic, rogo, divine cause quid pertinet ad me?’/ Anna sed obprobrium patienter pertulit istud/ Effundens tantum lacrimas subtristis amaras” (p. 9).

\textsuperscript{209} Ibid., p. 23. \textit{Maria}, 162-163: “hac ipsa...hora” and “praedictus.../ Angelus” (p. 9).

\textsuperscript{210} Ibid., p. 23. \textit{Maria}, 174-177: “‘Me fore caelestem,’ dicebat, ‘credito civem/ Custodemque tui factum pietate superni/ Regis, qui iustam consolari dedit Annam/ Per me, dum perculas flendo profunderet almas” (p. 10).
am constantly satisfied with the presence of God on high.” The angel advises that whatever Joachim had planned on serving to him be offered as a sacrifice to God, advice which Joachim happily follows, “confident [sperans] that the one-time opprobrium of Ruben had been blotted out.” Hrotsvit’s readers would have recognized Joachim’s joyful sacrifice and hope of forgiveness as a precursor to the grace to be found under the approaching new covenant.

After Anna and Joachim have been informed of their impending happiness, Hrotsvit provides yet another clue that the age under Grace is near, one she has painstakingly interpreted for the reader:

And thus gradually the grace of the Heavenly Father began to break forth to the world in resplendent rays, and ancient discord was brought to a definite end (stabilem...finem) as soon the celestial citizens had promised companionship with themselves to those earthborn citizens whom hitherto they had disdained by reason of the guilt of their sire Adam. Neither did the clemency of the All-father lie hid from the angelic host when in the fullness of time, He in His mercy decreed to send His own Son into the womb of a virgin, in order that this Son, born of the Father before all ages, might in time assume flesh of a Virgin Mother, and thus save all mankind by His all-holy Blood, and that after this the wily enemy of man might not rejoice in holding the world in his malicious snare (laqueis...malignis); but that the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and likewise of the Fostering Spirit, equal in nature, might under the triune Name reign as is just throughout the peaceful world (stabilem...orbem) even unto the end of time.

211 Ibid., p. 25. Maria, 197-200: “Desine, posco, meum post hēc te dicere servum,/ Esse sed angelice consortem credito turme./ Nam mihi terrenis opus est non vescier escis,/ Quem pascit domini semper praesentia summi” (p. 11).

212 Ibid., p. 27. Maria, 204: “Sperans obprobrium Ruben cessasse vetustum” (p. 11).

213 Trans. Wiegand, pp. 27-29. Maria, 209-225: “Iam tunc clementis paulatim gratia patris/ Incoepit radiis mundo lucessere claris/ Atque prior stabilem discordia sumere finem./ Cum sua celestes primum consorcia/ Olim terrigenas primitabant habituros,/ Quos prius e meritis Adam sprevere parentis./ Nec latuit tunc angelicum clementia coetum/ Omnipatris, proprium qui mox post tempora natum/ Mittere virgineum miserans disponit in alvum,/ Ut sine principio natus de patre superno/ Carnem virgineo sub tempore/ sumeret alvo/ Omnes atque suo salvaret sanguine sacro,/ Ne post hēc generis humani callidus hostis/
This long expository passage clarifies the angel’s earlier words to Joachim: “[C]onsider thyself a companion to the angelic hosts.”\(^{214}\) The announcement of Mary’s imminent conception brings a “definite end” (\textit{stabilis finis}) to the estrangement between the citizens of heaven and those of earth, since it both foreshadows and sets into motion the chain of events that will lead to the Incarnation and hence the salvation of mankind. The earth can no longer be described as \textit{labens}, as it was in the first lines of the narrative;\(^{215}\) since its redemption is approaching, Hrotsvit here and in several other places in the poem will refer to the world as a \textit{stabilis orbis}, i.e. a world that is no longer \textit{labens} as a consequence of its own sinfulness.\(^{216}\)

Scholars have often pointed out Hrotsvit’s fondness of Augustinian themes, and her references in this passage to \textit{celestis cives} as opposed to \textit{terrigenae} would certainly cause her educated reader to think of the famous comparisons he drew between the City of God and the City of Man in his \textit{De civitate Dei}.\(^{217}\) As further miraculous events unfold, the Jews Hrotsvit depicts will have to decide which city they will inhabit. By following the example of Mary and her family, one of faith and obedience in the face of societal disapproval, some will join the City of God and become potential Christians. We should remember that in the case of each of the angelic visitations just discussed, the

\[^{214}\text{See n. 211.}\]
\[^{215}\text{See pp. 137-138.}\]
\[^{216}\text{For \textit{stabilis orbis}, see lines 225, 327, 337 and 543. As Winterfeld noted in his \textit{Index verborum}, p. 471, Hrotsvit only uses this expression three more times in her \textit{opera}: Gongolfus, 535; Theophilus, 153; Gesta Ottonis, 43. Winterfeld traced the source of this phrase to Boethius’ \textit{Consolatio philosophae}, Book I, Poem 2, verse 15: “What spirit turns the stable world”, an appropriate allusion to discuss the Immaculate Conception, a turning point in the history of salvation brought about by the Holy Spirit. See \textit{The Consolation of Philosophy}, trans. Richard Green (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1962), p. 5.}\]
\[^{217}\text{See Wailes, pp. 24-30, where he discusses the connection between Paul’s concept of the contention between the Spirit and the flesh and Augustine’s interpretation thereof in \textit{De civitate Dei}, which provides the theoretical framework for his thesis in \textit{Spirituality and Politics}. For other Hrotsvit scholars on her use of Augustine, see Wailes, pp. 243-244, n. 23.}\]
wondering mortal is commanded to believe (credito).\textsuperscript{218} Some, as we will see below, will follow the example of Ruben and Anna’s maid, continuing to obey the letter and not the Spirit of the Law, and joining the City of Man in the valuing of worldly approval and fleshly goods over spiritual ones. These Jews will continue to be desperantes.\textsuperscript{219}

Upon the moment of Joachim and Anna’s joyous reunion, Anna realizes that she has miraculously conceived, thus beginning the second third of Hrotsvit’s narrative, on the early life and motherhood of Mary.\textsuperscript{220} As noted above, it quickly becomes apparent that this infant will be no ordinary Jewish child, but is destined to play a role of cosmic importance. For instance, while Jewish custom dictated that the high priests had the right to name this newborn, Mary would be named by divine decree, an answer to her father’s prayer:

“O Thou, King of Heaven, Who alone dost name the stars, deign to indicate in a heavenly manner by some brilliant sign the name of this tender babe.” When he had said this, a mighty voice sounded suddenly from on high, commanding that the name “Mary” be bestowed upon the chosen child. “Stella Maris,” as our Latin tongue has it: Fittingly was this name conferred upon that holy child, because she is the brightest star shining for aye in the beautiful diadem of the eternal Christ.\textsuperscript{221}

Mary’s association with the stars in this passage reflects the connection Hrotsvit consistently makes in this legend between the stars or the celestial sphere and all things supernatural and divine. We find the angels described as having come “from the starry

\textsuperscript{218} \textit{Maria}, 144: “Consilioque dei…credito summi’”; 174: “‘Me fore caelestem,’ dicebat, ‘credito civem.’” My italics.
\textsuperscript{219} See Chapter Two, p. 45, note 81, on the Jews as desperate.
\textsuperscript{220} \textit{Maria}, 259-261.
\textsuperscript{221} Trans. Wiegand, p. 33. \textit{Maria}, 271-279: “‘Rex caeli, stellis solus qui nomina ponis,/ Istius tenerę nomen dignare puelle,/ Caelitus indicis per te monstrare coruscis./ Dixerat, et subito sonuit vox fortis ab alto/ Mandans egregiam Mariam vocitare puelle,/ ‘Stella maris’ lingua quod ergo latina;/ Hoc nomen merito sortitur sancta puella,/ Est quia praeclarum sidus, quod fulget in evum/ Regis in aeterni claro diademate Christi” (pp. 13-14).
heavens" (*astrigera aula*) and returning to “starry Olympus” (*astriger Olympus*). Anna addresses a prayer to the “Mighty King of Heaven, to Whom the starry sky is submissive.” As noted above, the angels are often dubbed “celestial citizens.”

Hrotsvit not only intends for these references to put the reader in mind of the traditional etymology of Mary’s name, but to emphasize the significance of Mary’s future for this world and the next. Moreover, these frequent allusions to the physical heavens foreshadow the starry signs that will predict the birth of her Son. The three kings that will later come to visit the baby Jesus are “astrologer kings, magi skilled in the law of the stars” (*reges astrologi...magi stellarum lege periti*), who have seen the new star (*nova stella*) foretelling the birth of the king of the Jews. When Christ is finally born, he is described as “the Child sent for us from the stars.”

When Mary turns two, her parents present her to the temple in order to fulfill Anna’s earlier vow. Hrotsvit notes the fitting irony of this arrangement, since she and her audience know that this child will one day herself be the Lord’s Temple as the Mother of God. The toddler, to the amazement of all watching, hurries up the temple’s fifteen steps, a feat the priests interpret as a sign that she will accomplish great things in her future. Hrotsvit muses on this event by interjecting a thirteen-line prayer on the wonders

---

227 *Maria*, 635-636, 640.
228 Ibid., 584; “puerum nobis de sidere missum.”
229 Ibid., 283-284.
of Mary’s conception, the Incarnation and Christ Himself, ending with the line: “He Who is called Jesus, to Whom be celestial praise. Amen.” Two lines later, Anna offers up a prayer of thanksgiving which not only mirrors the author’s, but also puts the reader in mind of Hrotsvit’s “presumptuous” preface:

“Almighty Ruler, sole Lover of righteousness, in Thy mercy Thou hast done wonderful things for Thy people; regarding with compassion the humility of my heart, Thou hast given to me, despairing of offspring, the joy of a daughter [desperate donasti gaudia natę]. I dare [audeo] indeed hereafter to bear gifts to Thee, neither do I fear lest my enemy will prevent my sacrifices and hinder me from frequently joining myself as an ally to the sacred ministers of the temple. For this day the heavenly citizens, in endless melody, praise Thee zealously by singing eternally a worthy canticle. Amen.”

Like Hrotsvit, Anna has put aside her fears that her enemies and critics will interfere with or belittle her gift. Though she had vowed to present Mary to the temple in obedience to the Law (obsequio), she still views her fulfillment of this vow as a kind of audacity, though clearly a positive audacity. In order to carry out her wishes, she must declare herself a partner to the temple priests (sociata), and thus just as worthy as they would be to make an offering. She also points out that in offering her prayers and gifts, she follows the lofty example of the heavenly choir of angels. Of course, we know that her donation has meaning far beyond the personal, since the daughter of whom she had despaired

---

231 Trans. Wiegand, pp. 37-39. Maria, 314-322: “Omnipotens rector, solus pietatis amator, Clementer proprio fecisti mira popello, Aspiciens humilem miserando meam quoque mentem Iam desperate donasti gaudia natę. Audeo percerce post hıc tibi munera ferre Nec vereor prohibere meum post hıc inimicium. Quominus stem sacris templi sociata ministris. Hinc te celestes conlaudant sedulo cives Condignum carmen modulando perenniter. Amen” (p. 15). I have inserted the Latin for most of line 317 into the translation above to show that Wiegand does not provide the most accurate translation. I believe that Hrotsvit’s meaning is better conveyed by the following: “You have given to me the joys of a daughter, of whom I had despained.”
232 See p. 142.
(desperata nata) will one day present the world with its Saviour, the solution to the despair of all.

Just as Anna has “dared” (audeo) to offer her divinely-granted treasure back to God in thanksgiving, so Hrotsvit has just offered her own “worthy canticle” in the previous lines. Indeed, as she asserted in her first preface, her poetry as a whole is an offering of thanksgiving and praise to the God whose original gift of intelligence and compositional talent had made it possible in the first place. She must likewise be audacious and write despite the real possibility of disapproval from those set in authority over her. Perhaps Hrotsvit had once been in a situation similar to Anna’s, despairing that she would ever receive the gift of such an ability, or that she would ever have the opportunity make use of that ability to render proper thanks and praise.

In her description of Mary’s life at the temple, Hrotsvit again provides the reader with glimpses of her own situation, in this case her daily life at Gandersheim. However, the young Mary she portrays would be an ideal for any Christian to follow, not just women devoted to the regular life:

[S]he in her infant frailty [never did] anything except what was most just in the commandments of the law, and she was ever zealous in chanting the psalms of David. Thus Mary lived, prudent, humble, inflamed with charity of soul, affable to all, resplendent with every virtue. No human ear ever heard her speak in a manner unkindly; no one knew her to offend in any way. Ever meek and most gracious to all was she, and indeed whatever speech flowed from her lips was flavoured with the nectar of supernal grace. And when anyone praised her with friendly words, she took care immediately to render thanks to God on high, nor did her tongue ever desist from singing divine canticles. And thus she presented herself to all her associates as a noble exemplar of universal righteousness.²³³

²³³ Trans. Wiegand, pp. 39-41. Maria, 333-347: “Nec quicquam membris gessit puerile tenellis./ Ast in praeceptis fuerat iustissima legis/ Necnon carminibus semper studiosa Davidis./ Hec prudens, humilis,
Hrotsvit presents the reader with a humble, meek young Virgin, certainly not the type of young lady one would expect to cause much trouble for her superiors. The image of Mary in constant prayerful song surely must have appealed to Hrotsvit as she carefully chose and arranged her own lines of praise to fit the meter. She also tells us that Mary was a weaver of the highest skill, another image well suited for comparison with poetic composition. Hrotsvit reports that Mary “set for herself a severe rule of life, living more strictly than the other virgins in whose company she dwelt.” She spent her day alternating between three-hour blocks of prayer and weaving, while in the evening she conversed with angels, learning to preserve her virginity and affection for the Lord. She was also able to perform miracles of healing, again prefiguring her divine Son.

Hrotsvit’s depiction of the Blessed Virgin living the prototypical pre-Christian regular life must have painted an inspiring picture for her sisters at Gandersheim. Indeed, the priest Abiathar notes that the temple had always housed “maidens of rare beauty and of tender age, the glorious progeny of kings.” Like the Temple, Gandersheim also prided itself on housing the daughters of nobility and royalty.

---

fervens dulcedine mentis/ Omnibus atque placens, tota virtute refulgens;/ Hanc hominis maledicentem non audiit auris,/ Offensam sed nec quisquam cognoverat unquam./ Semper erat mitis necnon gratissima cunctis,/ Et, quæ nempe suo profuxit ab ore loquela,/ Nectare gratiol/ę/ fuerat condita supern/ę/ Et cum quis verbis illi benedixit amicis,/ Mox grates domino curavit reddere summo,/ Nec sic divinis linguam retineret ab odis;/ Exemplumque suis in se praenobile cunctis/ Preponit sociis iam cunctigen/ę/ bonitatis” (pp. 15-16).


235 Maria, 353-355: “Nempe sibi normam statuens ipsa duram/ Omnibus in templo vivebat strictius ergo/ Virginibus reliquis illic pariter sociatis” (p. 16).

236 Maria, 356-376.


238 Wailes, p. 17, along with most other Hrotsvit scholars, notes that the sisters of Gandersheim were all drawn from the Saxon nobility and often included members of the imperial family.
Mary’s Jewish priests as deeply uncomfortable with the life which must have seemed so natural to Hrotsvit’s medieval readers, seeing it as an unseemly break with tradition. While Abiathar strives to find Mary a husband, she manages to evade his schemes. When the priest questions her determination to remain unwed, Mary replies, “firm in mind” (constans animo), by citing the examples of Abel and Elijah, both of whom preserved their virginity throughout their lives.\footnote{Maria, 390.} “These things I have learned being instructed in the precepts of the law, and learning them, I have set them firmly in my mind, and I have vowed ever to retain my virginal chastity.”\footnote{Trans. Wiegand, ibid. Maria, 401-403: “Haec didici certe legis ratione docente/ Et discens animo mandavi sedula fixo/ Meque puellarem vovi retinere pudorem” (p. 18).} Mary’s determined defiance must have come as a surprise to her superiors, especially since she has just been described in previous lines as a girl who never gave offence or spoke unkindly.\footnote{Maria, 338-339, as quoted on pp. 149-150.} As her well-formed arguments show, however, her understanding of the Law was clearly better than that of Abiathar and his colleagues, who do not make any specific recourse to the Old Testament when arguing that she should be married, but only vague references to custom.\footnote{Maria, 405: “Non hoc esse sui moris, dicunt Pharisiæ” (p. 18); 424: “More sed insolito sperat se virgo Maria/ Posse placere viris domini pro nomine spretis” (p. 19). My italics.}

By the time Mary turns fourteen, the Pharisees are unwilling to let this state of affairs continue. After calling the people together before the temple, Abiathar explains that the young girls who dwell there had traditionally been married off once they reached maturity, “and very often, in fact always,” he asserts, “they have pleased the Lord by this step. But the virgin Mary, contrary to the established custom, believes that [sperat] she
can please God by despising men for the sake of the Lord.” Abiathar, like his colleague Ruben, has presumed that his authority and understanding of custom allow him to interpret God’s will better than this defiant young girl. Moreover, he perceives her divinely-inspired hope to remain a virgin as a misdirected hope, a presumptuous defiance of ancient practice. The audience, however, knows of her daily conferences with angels, and that her inner resolve is miraculously in keeping with God’s plan despite her impending marriage and motherhood. Hrotsvit has submitted two sides of Mary for the reader’s inspection: the meek, kind friend to all versus the well-read, rebellious young woman eager to assert her spirituality on her own terms.

These seemingly opposed aspects of Mary’s personality are united by her obedience to God’s will, which Jewish society, with its excessive legalism, does not always correctly recognize. While she is generally at peace with the world around her, when her efforts to obey God according to her conscience are impeded, she will happily disobey her earthly authority and cause a problem big enough to require the entire community to solve. Hrotsvit presents both versions of Mary as worthy exemplars for her sisters; for example, she had undoubtedly known women who felt called to remain at Gandersheim despite the plans of parents or relatives. Hrotsvit may have felt that her own emergence as a poeta was the result of a similar vocatio, which she had to follow despite accusations of presumption and disobedience from her own uncomprehending male superiors.

The next two scenes in Hrotsvit’s narrative which interest us occur after the Virgin’s marriage to Joseph, at the time of the Nativity. Each illustrates the coming

243 Ibid., p. 51. Maria, 423-425: “Multo magisque deo placuerunt semper ab illo./ More sed insolito sperat se virgo Maria/ Posse placere viris domini pro nomine spretis” (p. 19).
divergence between those who will believe in Mary’s virginity and the divinity of her Son, and those who will remain without faith and thus despairing. As the couple travel towards Bethlehem, Mary has a vision, seeing “not indeed with the eyes of her body, but with those of her soul, two men standing near, the one mirthful, the other in tears.”\textsuperscript{244} When Mary reports what she has seen to Joseph, he scolds her for talking nonsense. As soon as Joseph finishes speaking, “a young man from the Lord” appears before him, explaining Mary’s vision and scolding Joseph in turn for his disbelief. “For in the weeping citizen she rightly perceived the Jewish race which will presently with malignant heart depart from God; on the other hand she saw the gentile nation, abounding in joy, because it shall come to the great blessing of the faith.”\textsuperscript{245}

Soon afterward Christ is born in a grotto filled with heavenly light and surrounded by a choir of angels. Joseph fetches two young women to assist his wife in caring for the babe. One of the pair, Salome, fears to approach the birthplace and “touch with her feet a place so replete with heavenly splendour.”\textsuperscript{246} Zelemi, on the other hand, “well believing such a great manifestation,” cites aloud more evidence of a recent miracle, such as the royal demeanour of the Child and Mary’s lack of pain, and then declares, “I believe that such great things could be done only by divine intervention.”\textsuperscript{247} Salome scoffs at such an idea, saying that she “would not believe the words she heard unless she could prove them

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{244} Trans. Wiegand, p. 63. \textit{Maria}, 549-551: “Aspexit non corporeis, sed mentis ocellis/ Comminus alma duos virguncula stare popellos,/ Unum ridentem necnon alium lacrimantem” (p. 23).
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid., p. 63-65. \textit{Maria}, 560-563: “Nam flentem populum merito vidit Judeorum/ Qui mox a domino discedet corde maligno,/ Contra gentilem sed leticia fluitantem,/ Ad fidei magnum quia perveniet sacramentum” (pp. 23-24).
\textsuperscript{246} Ibid., 67. \textit{Maria}, 591-592: “veretur/ Tangere speluncam pedibus splendore repletam” (p. 25).
\end{flushright}
by touching with her own hand the holy Virgin.”

Hrotsvit’s phrasing here is deliberate, for while Salome, like Zelemi, is confronted with other physical evidence of the Virgin birth, Hrotsvit makes a point of writing that Salome would not believe the words she heard (auditis...verbis). This situation would be mirrored in generations to come by those who heard the Word of the Gospels and still would not believe for lack of more tangible proof.

Unlike most future sceptics, however, Salome will soon suffer more directly for her doubt:

Then boldly [audacter] advancing she began to stretch forth her right hand, attempting to touch Mary. But such audacity [audacia] brought its own just punishment, for immediately the right hand which was to make trial withered, and well-deserving the woman suffered excruciating pain. Thereupon, crying out in the bitterness of her maddened heart, Salome bewailed the fault which had so unexpectedly deprived her of her right hand. Then according to Jewish custom [moreque Judaico] she rehearsed her own merits and, trusting fully in her own feigned justice, she sent up to the heavenly throne these words amid distress...

Unlike Anna’s audacious gift of thanksgiving, Salome’s audacious testing has certainly proven to be spiritually detrimental, and has reaped immediate and negative consequences. Salome appeals to the Lord by recalling her works of charity, though Hrotsvit has indicated that her good deeds are likely exaggerated. In doing so, she follows the Jewish custom (more Judaico) of excessive legalism, trusting too much in the power of her own goodness according to the Law and not enough in the power of God,

---


or, as it was put in Judith 6:15, presuming of herself and not of God. Despite her unworthiness, a beautiful youth soon appears and advises her to touch her wounded hand to the baby’s swaddling clothes. Salome is instantly healed and praises God for this miracle. Like Mary’s vision of the two men on the road, this incident highlights the opposition between those who will accept Christ’s divine origins and those who will doubt. As Salome’s miraculous healing shows, however, the new covenant will indeed prevail during the age under Grace, and thus even the doubtful and undeserving will be given many opportunities to believe and be saved.

After the Nativity the last third of Hrotsvit’s narrative begins, in which the focus shifts from the Virgin to the infant Jesus. Most of these lines concern the first two years of Christ’s life and the Holy Family’s flight into Egypt. Here we find an incident in which Hrotsvit makes the most literal connection between disbelief and despair. When Mary, exhausted from travelling in the desert heat, expresses a wish to eat some of the fruit at the top of a nearby palm tree, Joseph, “just in the observance of the law” (*moderamine legis iustus*), gives an exasperated answer:

I marvel Mary, that thou dost wish to speak thus, since thou dost see that the branches of the great tree touch the clouds and strike even the very stars of the highest heaven. But I am with deep anxiety wondering in my mind whether at least I may not perchance find a limpid spring, for we have not even a drop of water in our bags.” Thus spoke the venerable man, as though despairing [ceu desperaret] that Christ Who was present could do all things, even though concealed in human form.  

---

250 See pp. 105-106.
251 Ibid., p. 85. *Maria*, 762-770: “‘Hoc mirror certe nimium te dicere velle,/ Cum videas ramos magno de germine ductos/ Astris contiguos celum pulsare profundum./ Ast ego praecogito summa tantummodo cura,/ Si saltim valeam puram comprehendere lympham./ Utribus in nostris quia nec est guttula fontis.’/ Haec heros igitur venerandus sic loquebatur,/ Ceu desperaret, quod praesens omnia posset/ Christus, corporeis tectus fuerat quia membris” (p. 31).
In response to Joseph’s doubt, the Baby Jesus commands the palm tree to bend low and allow Mary to pick as much fruit as she likes. Christ then causes a spring to pour forth from the roots of the tree, and an angel to take one of its branches to be planted in the gardens of heaven. In depicting this miracle in the face of despairing doubt, Hrotsvit makes reference to Numbers 20:2-13, in which God instructs Moses to strike a rock in the desert and thus bring forth water to allay the doubts of the people. Now Joseph finally understands the great power of the Child entrusted to his care, and asks Christ to ease their path through the desert. Jesus happily grants this request, allowing a journey that should have taken thirty days to take only one.

Hrotsvit ends her first legend with a prayer addressed to Christ, a choice in keeping with the work’s aforementioned shift in focus and that prepares the reader for the next legend, the *De ascensione domini*, in which the risen Christ is the protagonist. Here Hrotsvit reviews many of the themes just explored throughout *Maria*: the power and majesty of Christ’s will, His graciousness, the wonder of the Incarnation, the Flight into Egypt, the fulfillment of ancient prophecies, and the divine self-sacrifice of the Crucifixion. While touching on these topics, she also refers to Christ’s obedience in several places, reflecting her praise of Mary’s obedience in the opening prayer: “Who will worthily admire and sufficiently praise the gifts of Thy great bounty [*tuē pietatis...magne*]?”; “Thou didst in obedience to His Will [*per praecepta patris*] take up Thine abode in the womb of Thy Mother”; “Thou didst dutifully [*pie*] take nourishment from Thy Virgin-Mother’s breasts”; “Thou didst not fear the impious Herod, yet in obedience alone [*sola...pro pietate*] Thou didst seek flight, that thus Thou mightest show

---

252 See also Chapter Two, pp. 44-45. She makes a more direct allusion to this episode in *Gongolfus*, 287-290: “Haec sunt virtutis propriae miracula, Christe./ Qui quondam populo utpote Judaico/ Petram iussisti latices effundere dulces/ Et fel triste laci dulce satis fieri” (p. 52).
Thyself dutiful \textit{pie} in the form of flesh.\textsuperscript{253} Thus Hrotsvit again extols the virtue of obedience to divine will by providing an even loftier exemplar than the Blessed Virgin. Christ Himself, though He was the Son of God and even God Himself, showed himself obedient by fleeing to Egypt, though due to his divine omnipotence it was not necessary. As was the case for His mortal relatives, Joachim, Anna and Mary, His obedience was not always understood or respected by sceptical onlookers. In the last six lines of \textit{Maria}, Hrotsvit changes her prayer to one of thanksgiving, again expressing gratitude for the gifts she has been given:

\begin{quote}
What gifts shall I render now to the Creator, worthy of all the good He hath bestowed upon me, Who graciously and in his wonted goodness hath permitted me, an unworthy servant, to render thanks, however feeble? For this, may the angelic hosts, I pray, unceasingly praise the Lord.\textsuperscript{254}
\end{quote}

As she first intended, Hrotsvit has begun to use her divinely-granted talent for writing to return a gift of praise and thanksgiving to the Creator, mirroring the endless praise of the heavenly choirs of angels. Those who would question her own obedience must reckon with the obvious skill of the writing itself; as she said in her first preface: “If, by chance, you find here something well wrought, give all credit to God’s grafting.”\textsuperscript{255}

\textit{“To Ask With Polluted Lips” I: Theophilus and Basilius}

The first of Hrotsvit’s two “double bills” on conversion, containing the legends of \textit{Theophilus} and \textit{Basilius}, is widely considered to be the earliest instance of the Faust

\textsuperscript{253} Ibid., p. 95 (\textit{Maria}, 866, 868); Ibid. (\textit{Maria}, 870-871); Ibid., pp. 95-97 (\textit{Maria}, 881); Ibid. (\textit{Maria}, 882-884).

\textsuperscript{254} Ibid., p. 99. \textit{Maria}, 898-903: “Qualia retribuam factori munera nunc iam/ Pro cunctis digne, mihimet quæ reddidit ipse,/ Qui pius indignam solita pietate famellam/ Me, licet exiles, fecit persolvere grates?  His super angeliciæ celorum, posco, caterve/ Collaudare deum non cessent sedulo verum” (p. 35).

theme in German literature. Each story features a Christian protagonist who makes a pact with the devil to renounce his faith for the attainment of some earthly goal, but divine intervention soon causes him to regret his decision and convert back to Christianity. With the support of a saintly intercessor, and in the face of demonic opposition, the sinner is eventually reconciled to God. As we will see shortly, however, Hrotsvit balanced the similarities in her first “double bill” with a number of contrasting aspects of plot and characterization, making the reader consider the same issues in differing circumstances.

Hrotsvit begins her fourth legend by describing its protagonist and title character, Theophilus, as a man of good family and education who has held the high ecclesiastical office of vicedominus for many years. During this time, he fulfills his duties with diligence and charity, earning the respect and love of his flock. When the local bishop dies, the clergy and people of the diocese unanimously wish to consecrate Theophilus in his stead, declaring him “most fitting because of his outstanding achievements” (praecipuis aptum meritis). He stridently refuses, however, loudly declaiming his sinful inadequacy. As Wailes points out in his own analysis of this legend, so far the episode accurately mirrors the typical consecration narrative. The chosen candidate at first protests his selection on account of his own perceived faults, but eventually submits to the united will of the community, which medieval readers would recognize as a manifestation of divine will.

---

256 Ibid., 10.
258 See Wailes, p. 80.
Theophilus, however, is steadfast in his refusal, forcing the archbishop to select another candidate. The careful reader will find that Hrotsvit’s choice of words in this opening scene undercuts the validity of Theophilus’ objections. For example, she uses the adverb *satis* (sufficiently, enough) to note that his family is noble enough (*satis illustris*) and that he himself is educated enough, since he “had drunk sufficiently” (*satis exausti*) of the seven streams of the liberal arts as a boy; both of these qualities would have been considered essential for advancement.\(^{259}\) His rise in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, however, is ambiguously worded: “forthwith (*confestim*) advancing step by step (*gradatim*) in due honor, [he] reached an office well suited (*satis aptum*) for him,” i.e. the office of *vicedominus*.\(^{260}\) This use of the adjective *aptus* by the narrator, as well as its use to characterise the people and clergy’s view of Theophilus as noted above (*praecipuis aptum meritis*), stand in pointed opposition to Theophilus’ own stubborn claim before the metropolitan and assembled community that he was “not fit [*non aptum*] to rule the holy people of Christ.”\(^{261}\)

Hrotsvit’s odd phrasing of line 13 (*confestim...gradatim*) makes more sense to the reader after Theophilus refuses the episcopate. Though he has the rank and education necessary for promotion to high office, and has carried out the attendant responsibilities with outward correctness, all the while he has harboured a spiritual flaw that finally becomes apparent when called to accept a greater honour. Hrotsvit depicts Theophilus’ reaction to the metropolitan’s original summons as far from graceful:

> But Theophilus, constantly deprecating such a dignity, refused to come and obey the command of the

\(^{260}\) Ibid. *Theo.*, 15-16: “Digno confestim pro vectus honore gradatim/ Perveniebat ad officium sibimet satis aptum” (p. 78).  
\(^{261}\) Ibid., p. 257. *Theo.*, 51: “Non aptum sancto Christi populo dominari” (p. 79).
Theophilus’ unbending insistence on his deficiencies leads him to disobey the 
archbishop’s command to appear and ultimately to defy the will of the diocese and, by 
extension, divine will, by rejecting the episcopal office. This scene indicates more than 
excessive self-recrimination, but points to a more serious problem. As Wailes notes:

…surely Hrotsvit would have hinted at his extreme 
scrupulousness and self-doubt somewhere along the ladder 
of his ecclesiastical advancement if indeed this were an 
authentic part of his character. To establish him as notably 
self-critical earlier in his career would have made more 
admirable (not to say comprehensible) his refusal of 
consecration as bishop, but instead Hrotsvit reports that as 
vicedominus he lived with outward modesty in the pomp of 
magnificence (“tanti pompa splendoris” [18]).

Drawing on quotations from Gregory the Great’s Liber regulae pastoralis, Wailes argues 
persuasively that here Theophilus has committed the sin of obstinacy in the face of God’s 
will, a serious failing resulting from pride masquerading as humility. While I find this 
reading valid, I think this obstinacy is only one symptom of the greater spiritual failing of

---

262 Ibid. Theo., 45-56: “Ille sed execrans talem constanter honorem/ Presulis imperio parare negat 
veniendo,/ Donec invitus trahitur, turbis glomeratur/ Et, cum pontificis presentaretur ocellis,/ Stratus 
adusque solum voces spargebat in altum/ Infectum viciis sese dicens fore multis/ Non aptum sancto Christi 
populo dominari. His igitur querulis iterata voce profusis/ Antistes summus cessit postremo coactus/
Huncque, decus talis qui fastidivit honoris” (pp. 79-80).

263 P. 83.

264 Wailes quotes Gregory’s description of the obstinate clergyman who refuses to be made bishop even 
though it would serve the greater good of the community: “sub humilitatis specie superbe contradicat” (p. 
85).
presumption, one to which Hrotsvit will make repeated and more direct reference throughout the rest of the legend. Theophilus’ angry rejection of the episcopacy demonstrates his ingrained belief in the superiority of his own will and judgement to those of all others, even those of God Himself.

In Chapter Two, we discussed the patristic idea that the complementary sins of despair and presumption originate from an imbalance between hope and fear; those who have excessive fear of damnation and too little hope in God’s mercy will despair, while those with the opposite imbalance will presume.\textsuperscript{265} In his second Enarratio on Psalm 31, Augustine further refined this concept by identifying two types of presumption: presuming on one’s own virtue versus presuming on God’s mercy. In his depiction of the person suffering from the former type of presumption, we find a fairly accurate description of Theophilus:

\begin{quote}
[S]uppose someone is terrified of [damnation], and exalts himself in rash self-assurance, trusting in his own strength of character, and mentally resolving to fulfill all the righteous requirements of the law and to carry out all it enjoins without offending in any point whatever. If such persons think they can keep their lives under their own control and slip up nowhere, fall short nowhere, with never a wobble, never a blurring of vision, and if they claim the credit for themselves and their own strength of will, then even if they have carried out the whole program of righteous conduct as far as human eyes can discern, so that nothing in their lives can be faulted by other people, God nonetheless condemns their presumption and boastful pride. What happens, then, if someone has thought to justify himself and takes his stand on his own virtue? He falls.\textsuperscript{266}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{265} See Chapter Two, pp. 69-70, 75-76.

Though Theophilus was without vice in the eyes of his community, he was nevertheless guilty of a serious spiritual sin, refusing to turn the control of and credit for his virtuous life over to God. He secretly placed too much trust in his own judgement and ability to lead a righteous life, not recognizing the role of God’s grace in his accomplishments. When God made His will for Theophilus’ future known, deeming him fit to be consecrated bishop, Theophilus clung to his own assessment of himself as inadequate, an assessment reached using flawed human judgment, thus spurning God’s will and the decree of His omniscience. This type of sinner is reminiscent of those we saw mentioned in Judith 6:15, “them that presume of themselves, and glory in their own strength” instead of presuming of God. Hrotsvit was likely familiar with this bipartite understanding of presumption, since Augustine’s Enarrationes in Psalmos was one of the most influential psalm commentaries in use throughout the Middle Ages. We will see an illustration of Augustine’s other type of presumptuous sinner, one who presumes too greatly on God’s mercy, when discussing Hrotsvit’s depiction of Thais, the prostitute depicted in the last of her four conversion narratives.

Soon after his election, the newly consecrated bishop is advised to do away with the competition and forces Theophilus out of the post of vicedominus. At first, the wronged protagonist seems to react to this change of fortune with a properly Christian attitude: “[b]ut Theophilus, patiently bearing the loss of that precarious dignity, expelled from his heart all sadness and even rejoiced that, just as he had been relieved of manifold

---

268 Rara avis, p. 80.
269 See pp. 201-202 below.
duties, so he could now be proportionately more free [satis...liberius] to labor in the service of Christ.” However, as Hrotsvit’s use of satis reminds us, Theophilus’ judgement has led him astray before; he has refused the ideal famulatus Christi which God had intended for him, i.e. episcopal office, even though he was sufficiently (satis) educated and aristocratic. He thus lost his long-held position as vicedominus as well, and thereby lost the opportunity to continue the charitable service he had been carrying out for years in that capacity.

Earlier in the text, Hrotsvit describes this work as vicedominus in a passage reminiscent of the Biblical parable of the sheep and the goats, which would later serve as the source for “the seven corporal works of mercy”: “[b]ut above all to the poor of Christ and the afflicted orphans and to chaste widows and to all the strangers he distributed food and clothing with a prodigal hand; and never did he close his hospice to the wandering indigent.” Theophilus’ presumptuous refusal has deprived him of the chance to keep on fulfilling Christ’s mandate as vicedominus, or to set an even more visible example by doing so as a bishop. We can now guess, however, that during these years of service, Theophilus’ dangerous mindset caused him to credit his virtue to his own abilities alone and to discount the aid of God’s grace. In the absence of his rightful vocation, his presumptuous habit of mind leaves him surprisingly vulnerable to satanic temptation. As we will see, instead of allowing him to be a more devoted servant of Christ, Theophilus’ newfound leisure will result in a far more dangerous type of servitude.

---

Though Theophilus is ostensibly at peace with the loss of his position, Satan sees an opening and “assail[s] the inmost heart of this just man,” tormenting him with the memory of his former power.\(^{272}\) Wailes notes “the remarkable ease and alacrity with which the devil seduces him after his displacement,” citing this as more evidence of Theophilus’ long-hidden pride and love of worldly power, which was finally revealed by his thwarted episcopal election.\(^{273}\) There is no mention in this scene of Theophilus turning to Christ’s aid for his troubles, a tragic failing on the part of such an experienced and educated Christian. In order to regain his post, Theophilus seeks out a fraudulent Jewish magician, begging for his help with the pleas that should have been addressed to God, a perverse presaging of his contrition later in the narrative: “falling before him [the magician] and grovelling at his feet, Theophilus pleaded amid tears for his wicked help.”\(^{274}\) The magician also bears a sinister resemblance to a priest who has just heard confession and prescribes a fitting penance:

\[
\text{This seducer, maliciously rejoicing at the fall of the recrccant ecclesiastic, ordered him to come without fail on the following night, holding out the prospect of a ready remedy for his humiliation, if only in obedience [\textit{parendo}] to his persuasions, he was willing thereafter to live under the sway of the magician’s master. The unhappy man [Theophilus], captivated, alas, by these flattering suggestions, was eager to be bound to the service [\textit{obsequio}] of the fierce demon.}\(^{275}\)
\]

\(^{273}\) Pp. 83-84.
\(^{275}\) Ibid. \textit{Theo.}, 87-93: “Qui super errantis lapsus gaudendo malignus/ Nocte procul dubio iussit venisse futura/ Promittens promptam despectus esse medelam/ Si parendo suis vellet tantum suadelis/ Sub ditione sui post hce habitare magistri./ His hic infelix monitis captus male blandis/ Demonis obsequio sevi gestit religari” (p. 81).
Here Hrotsvit deliberately uses words such as the noun *obsequium* and a form of the verb *pāreō, pārēre* (to obey), which she employed in *Maria* to refer to the virtuous obedience of God’s will.²⁷⁶ In this context, however, they refer to a deliberate defiance of divine will, further evidence that Theophilus’ presumption is his principal vice. While Mary and Hrotsvit obeyed the promptings of the divine in the face of accusations of misdirected hope from some of their contemporaries, Theophilus did indeed presume by refusing to follow God’s will as made manifest by societal consensus. The further, radical disobedience of turning to Satan is an outgrowth of this original instance of presumption.

The magician leads Theophilus to Satan, with whom he makes a pact to renounce Christ, the Virgin Mary and the Virgin birth. In return, Theophilus will be immediately reinstated to his former post, though of course at the price of his eventual damnation. However, we may never be sure that Hrotsvit meant the audience to attribute Theophilus’ subsequent return to power to Satan’s machinations. The morning after the diabolic pact is made, the bishop assembles the clerical and lay leaders and orders that Theophilus be brought before him. Several lines are missing from the scene that follows,²⁷⁷ but when the text resumes we read that the bishop “wept amid holy lamentations for having sinned against and for having presumed [*praesumebat*] to cast away such a saintly man.”²⁷⁸ We must assume that the bishop has decided to recall Theophilus, since the next lines describe him exercising his former authority:

---
²⁷⁶ See pp. 135-136, 142, 151-152.
But Theophilus, overjoyed at the sudden gift of such unwonted distinction, extolled himself with unjust haughtiness of spirit, boastfully compelling the flock of the people entrusted to him to submit to his harsh orders; and, rejecting utterly the dignity of his celestial fatherland, he clung only to the love of earthly display. …[F]or a long time [diu] he had eagerly sought such empty gain at the advice of that wicked magician and had not ceased to give manifold thanks to cruel Satan, to whose copious gifts alone he attributed the flourishing wealth that had come to him…

Due to the missing lines, we may never be sure if the bishop’s penance, and hence Theophilus’ reinstatement, was actually brought about by Satan or was divinely inspired.

I find it more likely that something so salvific as the bishop’s recognition of his own presumption was caused by God, thus rendering Theophilus’ apostasy all the more tragic, and the mage’s admonishments to give thanks to Satan ironic in the extreme. Whereas Theophilus had once given himself too much credit for his accomplishments, only paying lip service to the divine power that had made them possible, now he seems to have transferred that lip service to the devil and still does not recognize God’s gracious intervention. We know that his presumption remains intact no matter where his allegiance lies; the above lines tell us that, far from rendering immediate thanks to God or Satan for restoring his lost honour, he “extolled himself with unjust haughtiness of spirit”; diving back into the pomp of the world, he is soon exercising his old authority with relish.

279 Ibid., pp. 265-267. Theo., 138-148: “Ast hic e subitis tanti lētatus honoris/ Donis plus equo tollit se mente superba/ Iactanter subiecorum cuneos populorum/ Ipsius obsequiis cogens succumbere duris/ Et spreto penitus patri us celestis honore/ Terrestris tantum pompe versatur amore./ Cumque diu vacuis inhiaret namque lucellis/ Atque monente mago numquam cessaret iniquo/ Sevo multiplicies Satane persolvere grates,/ Ex cuius largis creditid solummodo donis/ Accessisse quidem tantam sibi prosperitatem” (pp. 82-83).
Despite his apostasy and proud abuse of power, the Lord sees fit to inspire

Theophilus with a “just fear” (digna formidine) of the torments of Hell and “intense remorse” (compunctus summo merore) for his outrageous sins.\textsuperscript{280} Here Hrotsvit includes a thirty-line soliloquy in which Theophilus bemoans the enormity of his sin, the terrors of eternal damnation, and the coming of Judgement Day:

What shall I, a great sinner, say in that great day of Judgement, which even the saints must fear, when each according to his own deserts will receive the reward weighed in the just balance, in proportion to the quality of each one’s merits? Or who, will then any longer have compassion on me, when the just man is barely saved even through his abundant works?\textsuperscript{281}

Though Wiegand’s translation does not make it apparent, Hrotsvit again uses the adverb \textit{satis} to remind us that Theophilus’ judgement, being imperfect and mortal, has led him into this predicament. For example, though he rejoiced after losing his post that he would be “that much more free” (satis...liberius) to serve Christ, that very free time gave Satan the perfect opportunity to exploit his presumption. God’s justice, however, is perfect, and on Judgement Day, each person will be rewarded or punished sufficiently (satis) according to their merits or faults. By means of this salutary fear of judgement, the Lord has begun to restore the proper balance between hope and fear in Theophilus.

The lamenting sinner decides that his only hope is to beg for the aid of the Virgin Mary, though at first his fear almost overwhelms him:

For only the mother of Christ and powerful Queen of heaven and radiant, spotless temple of the Holy Spirit, remaining Virgin after the chaste joys of child-birth, she

\textsuperscript{280} Theo., 149-156.
\textsuperscript{281} Trans. Wiegand, p. 269. Theo., 172-178: “Quid dicturus ero nimium peccator in illo/ Tempore iudicii sanctis ipsis metuendi,/ Quando factorum mercedem quisque suorum/ Accipiet dignam satis aqua lance libratam/ Pro diversorum qualitate quidem meritorum?/ Vel quis forte mei tunc apponet misereri,/ Cum vix pro meritis iustus salvatur optimis?” (p. 84, my italics).
who was ever most benign to those who are converted to the Lord, and who would never delay her sweet kindness: she alone is able to bring to me the remedy of pardon, if she but deign to intercede for me with her Son. But if I should attempt to beseech her with lips polluted [pollutis... labellis], whom I have but lately denied with a frenzied heart, I am afraid of being consumed by fire hurled down from on high because the earth would not suffer to bear my heinous crime.282

Theophilus is now in a delicate state, since the saving fear which God has sent, sufficient (satis) to cause the necessary repentance, may also prevent him from seeking forgiveness if he allows it to grow too great and lead him into despair. His education serves him well, however, and he manages to talk himself out of such a state before he truly enters it:

“[h]owever, compelled by the cause of pressing sorrow, I humbly seek her compassion quick to heed, in order that she may graciously save my perishing soul by her intercession.”283 Theophilus has remembered the Virgin’s special role as intercessor for the most desperate of sinners, serving as “the Help, the Hope and the ready Consolation” of all penitents,284 and has thus kept himself from falling so deeply into his fearful state that he cannot ask for her help.

Theophilus rushes to a Marian chapel, and after forty days of strict penitential fasting and sleep-deprivation, he falls into an exhausted slumber. The Blessed Virgin

282 Ibid., pp. 269-271. Theo., 179-189: “Nam Christi genitrix celique potens dominatrix/ Flaminis atque sacri templum sine sorde coruscum,/ Hec eadem virgo partus post gaudia casta,/ Que retro conversis fuerat mitissima cunctis/ Atque sui dulcem numquam tardat pietatem,/ Sola mihi venie potis est medicamina ferre,/ Si pro me proprium dignatur poscere natum./ Sed, si pollutis illam rogitare labellis/ Coepero, brachanti nuper quam corde negavi,/ Me vereor flammis ceelo consumier actis,/ Ferre meum facinus quia non patitur grave mundus” (p 84). On the phrase “pollutis...labellis,” cf. Isaiah 6:5: “et dixi vae mihi quia tacui quia vir pollutus labis ego sum et in medio populi polluta labia habentis ego habito.” See also p. 208 below.

283 Ibid., p. 271. Theo., 190-192: “Attamen instantis causa cogente doloris/ Eiusdem celerem supplex quero pietatem,/ Quo clemens animam precibus solvat perituram” (p. 84).

deigns to visit him in a dream and, understanding the grave nature of his sin, makes sure her words strike more salutary terror into his heart.\textsuperscript{285}

O man, why dost thou keep vigil at the threshold of our temple, or why dost thou presume to hope \textit{[presumis sperare]} that my ready goodness can aid thee, who hast but lately with wicked heart denied my Son and me, His Mother? Tell me, pray, how could I look with my eyes into the countenance of my Divine Son, refulgent with celestial light, and in what manner would I presume \textit{[praesumo]} to stand before His dreadful Throne to seek pardon for thee? But all the faults, which perchance though hast perpetrated against me, I in kindness of heart, now forgive thee freely, because I love intensely all the race of those who worship Christ... But the strong force of my motherly affection constrains me to be rather enkindled with great indignation toward thee because thou hast dared \textit{[praesumpsisti]}, surrendering thyself to perdition, to despise by blasphemy my Sacred Son...\textsuperscript{286}

Her speech makes it clear that the vice of presumption was the ultimate cause of this penitent’s downfall. Mary’s words teach us something else about the nature of forgiveness, however, something that would intrigue even Hrotsvit’s most erudite readers: according to Hrotsvit, not only has Theophilus presumed in asking for forgiveness, but even the Virgin herself must presume when asking her Son for forgiveness on his behalf.

In his response to the Virgin’s righteous indignation, Theophilus’ education again comes to his aid:

\begin{quote}
O my Mistress, I know, and I grieve exceedingly because of this knowledge, that I have transgressed, captivated
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{285} \textit{Theo.}, 211: “Talibus et verbis terrebat corda paventis” (p. 85).
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid., pp. 273-275. \textit{Theo.}, 212-222, 227-230: “O vir, cur nostri vigilas ad limina templi/ Vel cur posse mei celerem temet pietatem/ Presumis sperare, meum qui denique natum/ Me matremque sui perverso corde negasti?/ Dic, rogo, quis oculus possim mis cernere prolis/ Divinę vultum celesti luce coruscum/ Quove modo solio presens astare tremendo/ Eius praesumo tibimet veniam rogitando?/ Ast omnes culpas in me fortasse patratas/ Affectu mentis tibi mox indulgeo gratis/ Omne genus nimium quia diligo chriticolarum.../ Materni sed vis fortis me cogit amoris/ Hinc magis erga te nimio fervescere zelo./ Quod praesumpsisti tradendus perditioni/ Blasphemando mei sanctum contemplnre natum...” (p. 85).
inordinately by a vain hope [spe...inani], and have committed a sin more heinous than all other sins by despising God Who was born of thee without stain. Therefore I am not worthy to seek the gift of pardon; but nevertheless many have given us an example of hope for salvation [salutis...sperande], who having fallen have merited pardon for their various crimes.  

He goes on to cite Biblical models of successful penance, such as the Ninevites and David. His last and best example is of course that of Peter, who had received the right to bind and loose sinners “because he had in a fitting manner expressed his true faith” (pro fidei rectę satis expressa ratione), only to deny Christ three times. Likewise had Theophilus been entrusted with authority over the flock of Christ, only to deny Him and His mother. “Encouraged therefore by these mighty examples and by many others,” Theophilus concludes, “I hoped [sperabam] that I might speedily win a like favor from Christ through thee.” True to her reputation, Mary’s gentle heart is moved by his eloquent defence and sincere contrition. She informs Theophilus that if he confesses the sin which has caused him so much pain, and reaffirms the truth of the virgin birth and the Incarnation, then “only after thou hast done this, will I venture [praesumo] to intercede for thee.” Hrotsvit again reminds us of her belief that even so exalted and honoured a saint as the Virgin Mary presumes when asking forgiveness on behalf of another. We will see later that Hrotsvit felt all mortals were to some extent presuming when asking for

---


290 Ibid. Theo., 280: “Et post haec tandem pro te praesumo rogare” (p. 87).
forgiveness, but that this kind of presumption was necessary in order to re-establish one’s good standing with the Lord.\textsuperscript{291}

After the Virgin agrees to help him, Theophilus’ precarious emotional state again vacillates back to fear: “…in what manner and with what right indeed, may I, wretched being that I am, with foul lips presume [\textit{praesumo}] to touch the Name of the Most High, so sacred, so venerable, so great?”\textsuperscript{292} Mary responds with a standard lesson for those fighting off despair: “[a]lthough thou art stained with exceedingly grievous sins, nevertheless, as I have admonished, do not spurn to confess to the Lord, because He was made man solely for our sakes, that he might afford a hope of winning pardon to such as were converted.”\textsuperscript{293} As we have seen from the previous quotations, since the beginning of Theophilus’ encounter with Mary, Hrotsvit has used some form of the noun \textit{spes} or the verb \textit{spero} six times.\textsuperscript{294} She thus ensures that the reader notes the change in the penitent’s hopes. Theophilus is no longer “captivated by a vain hope” (\textit{spe captus inani}) in his own abilities or in worldly pomp, but in his desire for forgiveness, he has finally placed his hope in the Lord. Yet it is the fledgling hope of the recently converted, hence the Virgin’s admonishment against despair.

After this remarkable exchange between saint and sinner concludes, Mary does indeed intercede for Theophilus. Three days later, she appears to him in a vision, informing him that the Lord has accepted his contrition and that he will not be damned if

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{291} See pp. 190-193.
\item \textsuperscript{293} Ibid. \textit{Theo.}, 292-295: “Quamvis sis gravibus viciis nimium maculatus,/ Attamen, ut monui, dominum non sperne fateri,/ Est quia factus homo nostri solummodo causa,/ Ut speram conversis venie praebet habende” (pp. 87-88). Cf. Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 36-37.
\end{itemize}
he remains faithful to Him. Theophilus’ reply again indicates the new, proper object of his hopes:

Assuredly will I observe the teachings of our sacred Faith, nor ever again after this time will I wickedly transgress through negligence any of thy commands, my tender Mistress, because after God I trust [spero] that thou alone dost bring that remedy, through which I shall not be delivered as food for bitter punishment. But it is not to be wondered at, that it is through thee I have been saved, through whom, God granting, it is clear that the entire world was freed from the deadly crime of the ancient mother. And who, imploring thee and seeking thee without a doubting hope [spe non dubiaque], has ever been forsaken or has gone away confounded?²⁹⁵

Theophilus next asks Mary to retrieve the charter detailing his satanic pact. He continues his penance for another three days, after which she secures the document and miraculously returns it to him. Theophilus then goes before his bishop and community during Sunday mass and publicly confesses his sin and subsequent redemption. The legend ends with his death after an illness of three days, and his burial in the very chapel where he was granted forgiveness.

Hrotsvit concludes Theophilus with a reminder of just how steeped in sin the title character had been before God’s grace filled him with contrition and fear of Judgement Day: “[t]his therefore was the end of that despairing [desperati] and sinful man, who yet learned to bewail his own transgressions and had striven to chastise himself amid worthy lamentings.”²⁹⁶ Before this gracious intervention, Theophilus had been a desperado, so

²⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 287-289. Theo., 356-365: “Certe servabo sacre fidei documenta/ Nec post haec ultra male transgredior neglegendo/ Quicquam de vestris, mea domina piissima, iussis./ Te quia post dominum solam conferre medelam/ Spero, quo poenis pabulum non tradar amaris./ Sed non est mirum per te me iam fore salvum,/ Per quam de veteris loetali crimine matris/ Omnen dante deo mundum patet esse solum/ Et quis te poscens spe non dubiaque requirens/ Desertus fuerat vel confusus remeabat?” (p. 90).
steeped in sin that he seemed beyond hope. Yet, as Hrotsvit’s narrative teaches, the presumptuous vicedominus needed to direct his hopes toward God and away from himself and the attractions of the world. The Lord’s gift of saving fear began this precarious process, but as we have seen, Theophilus’ own Christian training, along with the guidance of the Virgin Mary, helped him channel this fear in a healthy manner, letting it become a goad for fruitful penance and not a hindrance leading to despair. In Abraham, the third of Hrotsvit’s conversion narratives, his niece Mary will not have the benefit of such support. Her fear and contrition in the wake of sin will develop into a dangerous case of despair. The solution, according to Hrotsvit, will be the same kind of presumption just shown by her namesake.

The fifth legend, Basilius, mirrors the preceding work as far as the basic outline of its plot; the main character makes a pact with the devil, regrets his sin, and with the help of an intercessor, in this case the saintly Bishop Basil, he repents and is granted forgiveness. Closer study, however, shows that Basilius is not a thoughtless repetition of Theophilus, but rather a clever and intentional inversion of it. For example, Hrotsvit names the fourth legend after its protagonist (Lapsus et Conversio Theophili Vicedomni), a mature, widely-respected man of high rank who sells his soul after the loss of that rank. In contrast, Hrotsvit never provides the name of the main character of the fifth legend (Lapsus et Conversio Cuiusdam Servi), the sinner around whom all of the action is centered. The legend is commonly known as Basilius, though the intercessor does not

---

297 See Chapter One, p. 10.
298 See pp. 186-196 below.
299 Wailes, pp. 96-97.
participate in the action until the last third of the narrative. Hrotsvit usually refers to the protagonist simply as a “slave” or “youth” \((\textit{servus, iuvenis})\), thus emphasizing his comparative youth and lowly rank. Theophilus makes his diabolical pact for the sake of a status he had enjoyed for years and lost through his own folly. The young slave of \textit{Basilius}, however, does so in order to win the love and hand in marriage of his wealthy master’s daughter. The devil tempts Theophilus directly, doubtless seeing the potential to destroy many other lives by means of this educated and well-respected man’s restoration to power. Tormenting the poor young sinner of \textit{Basilius}, on the other hand, is only a means to an end, a way for Satan to interfere with a more prominent man’s vow to send his daughter to a convent. While Theophilus’ sin was spiritual in nature, easily hidden, the servant’s sin is certainly corporal in origin and, as we will see, would be the cause of public scandal. The Virgin Mary herself intercedes on behalf of Theophilus, but the main character of \textit{Basilius} must content himself with his earth-bound but saintly local bishop.

Hrotsvit even inverts certain elements of the structure of the second conversion legend. As mentioned earlier, \textit{Basilius} begins the second half of Book I, while \textit{Theophilus} concludes the first half; thus this first “double bill” forms the heart of Book I, Hrotsvit’s first narrative cycle. After \textit{Theophilus}, Hrotsvit includes an eight-line \textit{Benedictio ad mensam} and then heads \textit{Basilius} with a six-line rededication to Abbess Gerberga, a reprise of the twelve verses in her honour found just before \textit{Maria}. Here Hrotsvit succinctly states the moral of the tale to come: “How the wicked one merited

300 Basilius is briefly mentioned in lines 17-19 as being the bishop of Caesarea at the time when the events in the narrative took place, and does not appear again until line 170.
301 See Wailes, pp. 89-91; and Silber, “Hrotsvit and the Devil,” p. 188.
302 Silber, pp. 186-188.
303 See pp. 129-131 above.
loving forgiveness.” Not content with making her point just once, she gives a more extensive summary of Basilius’ spiritual significance at its outset:

He who wants to learn and by sure proof discern
God’s mercy and the Lord’s many and great rewards,
With humble heart and meek, these small verses should read.
Scorn he should not render at the writer’s weaker gender
Who these small lines had sung with a woman’s untutored tongue,
But, rather should he praise the Lord’s celestial grace
Who wants not that in due pain sinners their punishment gain,
But eternal life he grants to the sinner who repents.
This shall be proven here; thus, shall he rejoice in cheer
Whoever these verses reads and the present account heeds.

These lines not only foreshadow the central message of Basilius, but also overturn the precedent of Theophilus, in which the moral was placed at the end of the story. Hrotsvit also cannot resist the urge to echo her first preface, reminding the reader of her gender and the alleged weaknesses thereof. This idea would now seem even more baseless than when she first presented it there, using her famous wit to undercut her own assertions of inadequacy even as she made them.

For our purposes, the most significant inversion is that between the sins featured in each narrative; while the vice under scrutiny in Theophilus was presumption, Basilius illustrates the effects of despair, its vicious counterpart. This fact makes Hrotsvit’s Schaffenspause, as Kuhn called it, significant for more than codicological reasons. Hrotsvit intentionally put these two works on either side of this break in order to make the reader especially aware how they reflected and contrasted each other, not only in

---

304 I, Prologus II, 3: “Qualiter et veniam meruit sclerosus amandam” (p. 94).
305 Trans. Wilson, Florilegium, p. 21. All translations of Basilius are from the version included in Katharina Wilson’s Florilegium unless otherwise noted. Basilius, 7-16: “Qui velit exemplum veniae comprehendere certum/ Necnon larga dei pietatis munera magni,/ Pectore versiculos submissu perlegat istos/ Nec fragilem vilis sexum spernat mulieris,/ Que fragili modulos calamo cantaverat istos,/ Sed mage celestem Christi laudet pietatem,/ Qui non vult digna peccantes perdere poena,/ Sed plus perpetu conversos reddere vitce:/ Gaudens gaudebit; quod verum stare probabit,/ Quisquis praezentem perscrutatur rationem” (p. 94).
306 See n. 108 above.
terms of plot and characterization, but most importantly, in terms of moral significance. Each extreme, the excessive worldly hope and self-confidence of Theophilus, and the excessive lack of hope and self-degradation of Basilius’s slave boy, led to the same radical rejection of God. In both cases, however, Hrotsvit shows that the truly repentant sinner could merit forgiveness.

After introducing the tale’s central lesson, Hrotsvit then sets it in the time of Saint Basilius, archbishop of Caesarea from 370-379.307 In this city lives a wealthy and prominent man named Proterius. Having been blessed with only one child, a daughter, Proterius vows that she will spend her life as a virgin in the confines of a convent. Satan, seeking to subvert this vow, causes a slave (servus) of the rich man to fall madly in love with the girl; Hrotsvit specifies that he loves her dementer.308 The unfortunate young man feels that there is no hope of winning her heart honestly: “This miserable swain, by love’s arrow’s slain,/ pined and pined away, the more he burned in pain./ He knew himself unworthy [indignum] for such an exalted union;/ Thus, he dared not reveal his heart’s hurt and zeal [Nec audet nudare novum cordis cruciatum].”309 The protagonist suffers from the “despair of the present” that we encountered in Chapter One;310 he has set his hopes on a worldly good, i.e. a young noble woman’s love, instead of on Christ.

As Hrotsvit makes clear later in the narrative, the boy is a Christian like his master.311 With the help of a confessor, he could eventually overcome his diabolically-inspired hope and learn to put his hope in God. However, his belief in his own

---

308 Bas., 36.
309 Wilson, trans., p. 22. Bas., 37-40: “Qui nimis infelix spiculis perfossus amoris,/ Quo magis ardescit, tanto plus corde tabescit./ Indignum se coniugio meminit quia tanto/ Nec audet nudare novum cordis cruciatum” (p. 95).
311 Cf. Bas., 52, 58-59, 83.
unworthiness prevents him from sharing his pain with anyone, thus allowing his worldly
despair to fester.312 Hrotsvit’s wording is significant here; were the boy to “unclothe”
(nudare) the secret desires of his heart, he would be relieved of the desire to unclothe his
master’s daughter. Since all Christians are unworthy (indignum) of the gracious
forgiveness that is the fruit of penance, the boy should have dared (audet) to reveal his
pain despite his own feelings of unworthiness. Though he felt that his passion for the girl
was a torture (cruciatum), Christ underwent quite a different passion, a literal torture on
the cross, for the sake of all humanity, even slaves. Christ’s suffering has enabled the
protagonist to be freed from the suffering caused by his human flaws, were he only to
confess them. While Hrotsvit describes his pain in a sympathetic manner, she also
embeds in that very description a reminder that it was unnecessary and curable.

The desperate slave soon approaches a magician in hopes that his heart’s desire
could be granted through sorcery. The mage claims that while his own powers are not
adequate for the task, he can arrange for an audience with Satan: “Then he can quickly
act, and your desires grant/ If only nevermore Christ’s name you will adore.”313 Despite
its dire consequences, the slave quickly agrees to the magician’s proposal. As in the case
of Theophilus, the slave’s sin grows progressively worse: he first despairs of gaining a
worldly good, then of Christ’s power to help him. He will soon deny Christ altogether,
leading him to despair of the possibility of forgiveness, as we will see below.

The love-sick youth is led into the devil’s presence by his servants. When Satan
learns of what the boy wants, he issues a furious complaint:

312 On despair as an impediment to confession, see Chapter One, pp. 8-9; Murray, vol. II, pp. 377-378; and
Snyder, ibid., pp. 36-38.
313 Wilson, ibid. Bas., 50-52: “Qui princeps aeternarum constat tenebrarum,/ Ipse potest certe complere
tuum cito velle,/ Si post haec Christi nomen non vis venerari” (p. 96).
Never do you stay faithful to me, you Christians,
But as soon as I ordain your desire to obtain,
Then promptly you flee and to Christ take your plea.
Me you desire and scorn after the gifts I had borne,
And full trust you embrace in Christ’s mercy and grace,
Because He’s willing to grant to those who repent
His forgiveness sublime regardless of the crime.314

Hrotsvit must have enjoyed the irony of putting her redemptive message in the mouth of the “prince of the eternal shadows” himself. Despite his frustration, Satan agrees to grant the girl’s hand in marriage in exchange for a written note in which the servant denies Christ, holy baptism and commits his soul to damnation.315 Patricia Silber observes that there is also “some irony in the requirement of such a written contract since, according to the devil, Christians have a record of failing to keep their promises to him.”316 Lost in the throes of his present passion, however, the boy eagerly signs away his future; he hands over his soul “with a smiling heart” (ridenti pectore) and “greatly rejoicing over this damnable thing” (dampnando nimium gaudens super illo).317 Satan’s minions work quickly and effectively, and soon Proterius’ daughter, also never named, suffers from the same desperate love as her father’s servant. “Sweetest father mild,” she begs, “have mercy with your daughter/ And give me right over to the youth whom I love/ So I may not die in languishing desire!”318 Like her beloved, her youthful passion has caused her to direct her hope wrongly and she is convinced that she will die if she cannot attain its

314 Ibid., p. 23. Bas., 83-89: “Numquam christicole permansistis mihi fidi,/ Sed, mox ut vestrum complevi velle iocundum,/ Protinus ad vestrum fugistis denique Christum/ Me detestando penitus post munera tanta/ Credentes talis certe Christum pietatis,/ Ut veniam nulli vellet tardare petenti/ Reddere conversum mihimet nec post scelus ullum” (p. 97).
315 For an interesting discussion of the problematic legality of this pact, and of the other agreements made in this legend, see David Day, “The Iudex Aequus: Legality and Equity in Hrotsvit’s Basilius,” in Brown et al., eds., Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, pp. 29-39.
316 Silber, p. 187.
317 Bas., 97, 99.
318 Wilson, trans., p. 24. Bas., 107-109: “Iam miserere tuæ, genitor dulcissime, nate/ Et cuius meme iuveni, quem diligo, trade/ Ne moriar tristis languens per tedia cordis” (p. 98).
object: “If you delay to act and my wish not quickly grant,/ Then soon you shall repent
and your child’s death lament.”

Her father’s reaction to her demands gives the reader a number of clues about his
own spiritual flaws:

Alas, alas, what’s this sole hope of your father?
Tell me who caused this pain and turned your head with flatteries vain?
And who had done this wrong and deceived you with a honeyed tongue?
Have I not made a vow to give you an exalted bough
And pledged you with pride to be Christ’s heavenly bride?
With chaste heart forever, him alone you were to honor
And sing His praise and glory together with the celestial choir,
So when freed from death you may join the virginal band!
But now you burn in affection for a lascivious servant’s passion.
With voice soft and mild I beg you, my child,
Please, avoid such craze and stultitude so base.
Else you will bring us shame and all your ancestors defame.
But if you insist to retain this evil wish insane,
Then, sweet daughter, may you perish and in disgrace soon vanish.

While Proterius does show some concern about breaking his vow, his harshest words
pertain to the public shame and dishonor this scandalous union would bring to his house.

Wailes astutely notes that throughout the legend, Hrotsvit assumes the conventional
perspective, i.e. that of noble and powerful men like Proterius, who would also regard
this disparate union with the same horror and disgust just expressed. Wailes also warns
against believing that Hrotsvit shares this view. She toes the party line a bit too
zealously, knowing the perceptive reader will recognize the tongue-in-cheek tone of her

320 Wilson, ibid. Bas., 111-124: “Heu, heu, quid pateris vetuli spes unica patris?/ Dic, rogo, quis verbis te decepti male blandis,/ Vel quis blandiciis circumvenit simulatis?/ Nonne tibi patriam reddi cupienduo supernam/ Sponso caelesti Christo te denique vovi,/ Hunc casta solum coleres quo mente per eyum/ Illius et laudes cum caelicolis resonares/ Addita virgineis mortis post vincula turmis:/ Et tu lascivi fervescis amore famell/i/ At nunc submitta, soboles mea, voce rogabo,/ Finem stultici pergas ut reddere tante:/ Ne genus omne tuum male confundas generosum:/ Si tamen in coepto temptas durare maligno,/ Turpiter absque mora peries, dulcissima proles” (p. 98-99).
prefaces. For example, such a reader would be amused by the magician’s earlier claim that only Satan could be powerful enough to join a high-born girl and her servant.321

Proterius’ reference to his daughter as the “sole hope of [her] ancient father” (vetuli spes unica patris) also raises some questions about the spiritual motivation behind his vow. While he has pledged his daughter to a life of virginal celibacy and ascetic denial of the delights of the world, Hrotsvit makes a point of informing us that Proterius himself has been willing to make no such sacrifices. He is described as “a man of illustrious race…of noble fame; Honoured by young and old, he was, too, rich in gold.”322 Proterius seems to have made his vow not only for the sake of his daughter’s soul, but also for his own, a common enough practice in Hrotsvit’s day, and certainly not spiritually dangerous in and of itself.323 But as the end of his life approached, he may have invested too much hope in her expected oblation and not enough in his own repentance; she should not be his only hope (spes unica patris), since all Christians must put their hope first and foremost in Christ. When his daughter shows no signs of relenting, Proterius unwillingly arranges the wedding and gives the couple a generous dowry. Yet his final words to his newly married child are far from generous:

Daughter forlorn, of luckless parents born,
Once honor but now shame to the mother who bore you.
You brought foul disgrace to our ancestral race.
Go now and rejoice in your darling servant;
But later you shall grieve and due punishment receive
[Et post aeternis poenis maerens capieris].324

321 Wailes, pp. 89-91.
323 Indeed, Hrotsvit herself may have entered Gandersheim at a young age as a result of such a vow, as did Mary in the first legend. See Wilson, Ethics, p. 149.
Proterius is so disgusted with his daughter’s choice of husband that he not only despairs of her future happiness, but he even despairs of her salvation. Given the importance he placed on his now-broken vow, he may even be despairing of his own spiritual state. For Satan, Proterius’ house is indeed a house of cards, despite the Christianity of its members; simply by means of tempting one slave, he has set in motion a chain of events which has led three people into some form of despair.

As in the case of Theophilus, Christ in His mercy will not allow this dangerous situation to continue for long. Soon after her marriage, He causes the young bride to hear rumours of her husband’s diabolical pact. Christ’s choice to work through the girl is, of course, ideal; her desperate love is not so dire or alienating a sin as her father’s bitter scorn and dismissal of his own child, nor her husband’s denial of Christ. Initially, she comes dangerously close to despair of salvation upon hearing the terrible news:

When with her own ears she heard of his atrocious deeds,
The poor wife concluded that she had been deluded.
She began to tremble and with lifeless members
She fell to the floor; her hair anon she tore,
And she beat her breast with her fists without rest.
With bitter tears and sighs she addressed the skies;
“Those who do not heed when dear parents plead
Shall never be saved. This has been proven here.
Alas, alas, the light at birth why did I sight,
And why was I not enclosed in dark sepulchral vaults,
So, thus, I would have missed falling in death’s abyss!”

In the heroine’s fervent declaration of the dangers of disobeying one’s parents, we see another ironic touting of the conventional view. Though Hrotsvit would expect her

---

325 On the dangers of despairing of the salvation of others, see Chapter Two, pp. 80-81.
326 Wilson, p. 15. Bas., 148-158: “Quisquis praedulces non vult audire parentes,/ Numquam salvatur, quod hac ratione probatur./ Heu, heu, splendorem diei cur nata recepi?/ Vel cur continuo non sum concessa sepulcro,/ Infelix foveam caderem ne mortis in atram?” (p. 100).
audience to respect and obey the fourth commandment, she would hardly wish them to believe that whoever breaks this commandment “[s]hall never be saved.” Hrotsvit’s consistent emphasis on Christ’s boundless mercy to the sincerely contrite throughout the rest of our “double bill” allows us to discount these words as an expression of her own view on the matter. We will soon see the girl’s husband redeemed despite committing a far worse sin than defying one’s parents.

Hrotsvit does intend that the reader seriously consider the girl’s terror of her sin and its just punishment. The young wife’s lamenting words would put the audience in mind of the plight of Job, indicating that she is struggling with despair due to her extreme tristitia over her own wrongdoing and that of her husband. When her husband comes home she tests the truth of the rumours, asking him to accompany her to Mass the next morning. When he admits that he cannot and explains why, she does not allow her divinely-inspired tristitia to paralyze her, but takes immediate action. Hrotsvit again courts our scepticism when she asserts that the girl “did not abide, but put womanly weakness aside,/ And summoned manly strength to her prudent heart.” Considering that the men of her family were in worse spiritual shape than she was, the idea that she would need to become more masculine in order to combat their sins seems especially

---

327 See Wailes, p. 93, and p. 179 above.
328 For example, compare “Heu, heu, splendorem diei cur nata recepi?” (line 156) with “pereat dies in qua natus sum et nox in qua dictum est conceptus est homo” (Job 3:3).
ridiculous. Whatever her figurative gender, she hurries to present herself and her husband before Bishop Basilius and confesses to their crimes.  

When the bishop asks the young man if he would be willing to repent his sin and return to Christ, “[t]he servant said he yearned/ For his salvation greatly—yet he despaired of mercy:/ ‘I committed the crime, of free will I signed/ With my hand the letters that gave me to the fiend in fetters./ With my heart turned blind Christ’s name I denied.’” The bishop replies with Hrotsvit’s moral, the standard message against despair:

The man of God then said: “You don’t need to dread Your future, nor doubt [spes dempta] that divine grace shall abound, Because God’s only Son, the mildest judge of all, Has never turned away a repentant sinner; If you rue your sins, he will grant you help. Relinquish thus the depth of sin that brings only death, And flee to the safe haven of divine mercy and love. That haven grants its shores to all who approach.”

Since the boy had not turned to Christ for help in overcoming his obsessive love, he believed himself even more unworthy of His help after willingly signing away his Christianity. Basilius emphasizes the boundless nature of Christ’s grace and mercy in order to rekindle the boy’s hope for forgiveness. We should carefully note Hrotsvit’s word choice in the Latin: after Basilius says that hope of forgiveness is not lost to the boy (fingere noli… tibi sit venie penitus spes dempta petende), he describes Christ in the next

---

331 Cassian and Isidore would not have considered her tristitia to be the prolonged, dangerous kind that could develop into despair, but the beneficial type that helps the sinner feel contrition for her sins and confess them, which is what the young woman does as soon as she confirms the truth. See Chapter Two, p. 49-50, 58-59; and Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 3-6, esp. n. 8.


333 Ibid. Bas., 185-192: “Ad quem vir domini: ‘Curam tibi fingere noli,/ Ceu tibi sit venie penitus spes dempta petende./ Unicus ergo patris, iudex mitissimus orbis,/ Ad se conversum qui numquam respuit ullum,/ Si defles culpam, gaudet praestare medelam,/ Hinc iam mortiferum peccati linque profundum/ Necnon ad certum pietatis confuge portum,/ Ad se tendentes qui salvos suspicit omnes’” (p. 101).
line as “the only [Son] of the Father” (unicus...patris). These words evoke Proterius’ earlier title for his daughter, spes unica patris. Thus Hrotsvit contrasts Proterius’ selfish and failed offering of his only daughter to a convent for the sake of his own sins with God’s gracious and successful offering of His only Son to the world for the sake of the sins of all humanity.

Bishop Basilius takes charge of the boy’s repentance, enclosing him in a small cell so that he may bewail his grievous sins. Basilius observes the progress of the boy’s punishment at Biblically significant intervals; for example, during the first three days of his rehabilitation, a period of time mirroring Christ’s torment on the cross, the youth is beset by demons who beat and stone him in an effort to force his return to Satan’s service. As time passes, however, and the boy becomes more assured of his eventual salvation, these torments lessen. After forty days of enclosure, a reflection of Christ’s forty days of fasting in the desert, the penitent reports that he is hopeful that he will be forgiven: “I hope [spero] I shall be saved and through you redeemed/ Because, dreaming, at night I saw you in a fight/ With the savage snake battling for my sake./ I saw that the fiend retreated with divine force defeated.”

Also confident that his work is nearly done, Basilius orders that the husband be moved to his episcopal apartments for the night. The next morning, the bishop takes the boy to hear Mass in the nearby church. As they approach the church door, a demon springs out of hiding, declaring that the boy is rightfully his slave and as such should be given over to his custody. When Basilius refuses, the fiend threatens that his claim will be proven on Judgement Day, when he will produce the document by which the young man signed his soul over to Satan. In

334 Ibid., pp. 26-27. Bas., 219-222: “Spero quidem per te me salvari, pater alme,/ In somnis quia te vidi luctamen inire/ Pro me cum sevo necnon serpente maligno,/ Quem tu vicisti subito virtute superna” (p. 102).
response, Basilius and the community begin to pray, and soon the damming pact is miraculously dropped at the saintly bishop’s feet.

The narrative ends with the people praising the power and mercy of Christ, and with Hrotsvit’s invitation to the reader to do the same, since “He has kindly bequeathed us hope for grace and mercy.” Had our young protagonist possessed such hope in Christ’s grace at the beginning of Basilius, Hrotsvit implies, no worldly passion, diabolical or otherwise, could have persuaded the boy to deny Him. As we saw above, however, a fatal flaw in his thinking caused this all important hope to fail at the first appearance of tribulation: “He knew himself unworthy [indignum] of such an exalted union;/ Thus, he dared not reveal his heart’s hurt and zeal [Nec audet nudare novum cordis cruciatum].” As a Christian, the young man should have realized that though he was far more unworthy (indignum) of hope in Christ than he was of union with a rich man’s daughter, it had still been vouchsafed him by right of Christ’s torment on the cross (cruciatum). In asking for Christ’s help, his daring would have been far greater than that of asking for the hand of his master’s child, but also exponentially more rewarding.

Hrotsvit herself is a brilliant foil for the boy’s reluctance to “lay bare” (nec audet nudare) his desires to a confessor; her claim not to presume to “unshell” her work to the wise (nec alicui sapientium...presumi enucleare) was in truth a daring means of continuing her project of determined self-expression and thankful revelation to God.337

335 Ibid., p. 28. Bas., 262: “Qui nobis clemens talem venię tribuit spem” (p. 103).
336 See note 309.
337 I would like to thank my colleague John A. Geck for noting this connection in conversation.
“To Ask With Polluted Lips” II: Abraham and Pafnutius

One of the methods Hrotsvit employed both to distinguish and tie together her two “double bills” was to oppose the genders of the protagonists; while the main characters of the two legends just discussed are men, those featured in the central plays of Book II are women. Indeed, at first glance the reader might conclude that Hrotsvit’s overriding concern in writing these two plays was to illustrate the consequences of uncontrolled feminine sexuality. Both of the women portrayed are prostitutes who are reformed and reconciled to God by the end of the narrative. As we will see shortly, however, closer study has shown that Hrotsvit was just as eager to indict the male characters of Abraham and Pafnutius for their problematic reactions to the sexuality of the female protagonists. These arguments are not only of interest to students of medieval gender roles, but will also help us understand Hrotsvit’s depiction of the interplay between despair and presumption in the mind of the sinner on the brink of conversion.

Hrotsvit’s fourth play, here referred to as Abraham, opens with a dialogue between the title character, the saintly hermit Abraham, and his fellow recluse Effrem. Abraham expresses his worries over raising his orphaned niece Mary, who has been left in his charge at the tender age of seven. Anxious to preserve her virginity, Abraham decides to have the child immured, enclosed in a small cell adjacent to his own. As he informs Effrem, he believes this plan is “in concordance with God’s will.”

When convincing little Mary to consent to his scheme, he and Effrem explain the etymology of her name, stella maris (“star of the sea”). When she asks what this phrase means, she is told that the star of the sea “never sets but is the bright light-source/ that guides sailors on

---

338 Wilson, trans., p. 71. Ab., I, 1, 18: “divinę voluntati...concordari” (p. 195).
the path of the right course.” They thus urge her to follow the lofty example of her namesake, the Virgin Mary, promising that if she remains uncorrupted, she too could take her place among the stars after her death and be “embraced by [Christ] in the luminous wedding chamber of His mother.”  

Entranced by this image, the child agrees, and Abraham promises “to visit her often and through the window to instruct her in the Psalms and other pages of God’s law.”

In his recent work on Abraham, Wailes has argued that Hrotsvit and most of her contemporaries would have considered immurement inappropriate in the case of a child. That Abraham would decide to take such a drastic measure indicates his preoccupation with the girl’s carnal nature and its potential for corruption. The play’s first two scenes show, Wailes argues:

…two older, male ascetics who imagine no greater peril for a girl undertaking the religious life than the workings of lust; who decide that the whole object of her existence is to avoid sexual intercourse; who adopt the radical strategy of immurement as a way of physically separating her from male sexuality; and who justify their thinking by conjuring with the name “Maria,” using thought and language a child is helpless to follow.

While evidence for female inclusae in Germany exists as early as the ninth century, it remained a rare and extreme form of eremitism in Hrotsvit’s time, only permitted when the woman in question had a clear vocation for such a rigorous life and years of previous...

---

339 Ibid., p. 73. Ab., II, 3, 4-5: “Quia numquam occidit · sed navigantibus recti semitam itineris dirigit” (p. 198).
341 Wilson, trans., p. 74. Ab., 9-11: “per cuius fenestram psalterium · ceteraque divin legis paginas illam crebrius visitando instruam” (p. 199).
342 Wailes, p. 165.
monastic experience. Wailes also observes that Abraham himself is not so confined; though he lives in an anchoritic community, he enjoys a number of freedoms and connections with the outside world that he has denied his young ward. Abraham’s understanding of the meaning of Mary’s name is problematic as well; as Sperberg-McQueen notes, “[t]he name, as Abraham interprets it, signifies not motherhood or compassion or any of the other attributes that could be read from the legend of Mary, but only virginity.” It soon becomes apparent that Mary’s strict upbringing will not only fail to preserve her physical purity, but will leave her inadequately prepared to deal with spiritual challenges in an appropriately Christian manner.

The next scene begins with Abraham in great distress, describing to Effrem the seduction and flight of his young ward. We eventually learn that twenty years have passed and Mary has grown into womanhood living as an inclusa, though we see nothing of this time depicted in the play. The audience discovers from Abraham’s explanation that a young man disguised as a monk had been coming to visit Mary, supposedly to give her spiritual instruction. After winning her heart, he convinced her to jump from the window of her cell to consummate their love. After her seduction, Mary was overcome with remorse, showing all the classic signs of contrition. According to Abraham:

[When the wretched girl, so beguiled, / found herself lapsed and defiled, / she beat her breasts, / lacerated her face and her hands, / tore her clothes amid sighs, / pulled out her hair, and raised her voice in lamentations to the skies… She bewailed not to be what she was.]

---

343 Ibid., pp. 170-171.
344 Ibid., pp. 165-166.
345 Sperberg-McQueen, “Whose Body Is It?”, p. 57.
346 Wilson, trans., pp. 75-76. Abraham, III, 5, 20-22, 25-26: “At ubi ipsa infelix se corruptam sensit · pectus pulsavit · faciem manu laceravit · vestes scidit · capillos eruit · voces in altum eiulando dedit… Lamentabatur namque se quod fuerat non esse” (p. 200).
As Effrem notes soon after he learns of her downfall, “[i]f she had persevered in such great remorse, she would have been saved.” 347 As a young woman raised in a hermitage, Mary herself should have known that such grace was available to her, but instead, as Abraham informs us, “defeated by the immenseness of her grief, she was carried headlong into the lap of desperation [in foveam desperationis]…[a]nd because she despaired of ever attaining forgiveness, she chose to return to the world and to serve its vanities.” 348 By abandoning her penance and immersing herself in further sin, she has fallen prey to a tendency often noted by patristic writers and pithily summarised by Wilson’s translation: “She did not persevere for long/ but added worse to prior wrong.” 349

Hrotsvit provides us with a clue to the cause of Mary’s ignorance: Abraham must relate these events second-hand, since he himself was not aware of Mary’s plight until she had already run away. His lack of vigilance is revealed when Effrem wonders how the devil could have scored such a victory within the very confines of their hermitage. Abraham then admits that he had indeed received a supernatural warning: “For some days I was much troubled by the horror of a revelation,/ a vision,/ which, if my mind had not been careless, would have foretold me of her perdition.” 350 He misinterpreted this vision, and only after realizing that he had not heard Mary recite her usual prayers for the past two days did he think to check on her. “You remembered too late,” admonishes

347 Ibid., p. 76. Ab., III, 5, 5-6: “Si in tali compunctione perseveraret · salva fieret” (p. 201). See, for example, the words of Chrysostom, quoted and translated by Snyder: “[I]t is not so serious to have fallen as to stay in a fallen state” (“The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 2-3).

348 Ibid. Ab., III, 6, 11-13, 15-16: “Postquam enim hisce lamentis se punivit · nimietate victa doloris · praeceps ferebatur in foveam desperationis… Et quia veniam desperavit posse promereri · saeculum repetere · vanitatique elegit deservire” (p. 201). On the expression fovea desperationis and similar medieval images for despair, see Murray, vol. II, p. 383, n. 45; and Snyder, ibid., pp. 59-60.

349 Ibid. Ab., III, 6, 7-8: “Haut perseveravit · sed peiora prioribus apposuit” (p. 201). On the movement of sinners from incomplete remorse to immersion in worldly sin, see Snyder, ibid., pp. 7-9.

350 Ibid., p. 77. Ab., III, 22-24: “Interim fueram consternatus mente · ex ostensu visionis terrore · qua si mens non fuisset laeva · mihi praefigurabatur eius ruina” (p. 201).
Effrem, and Abraham answers, “I confess it,” acknowledging the role his neglect played in Mary’s seduction. As her guardian and spiritual advisor, it must have been Abraham who allowed this supposed monk to begin visiting Mary, and who likewise did not notice when this impostor began wooing Mary, though her cell was attached to his own dwelling. When he finally discovered her absence, he was forced to piece together the sequence of events from the reports of concerned neighbours.

We may also assume, as does Wailes, that Abraham was remiss in her spiritual education, since Mary did not remember one of the most basic tenets of Christian theology, God’s mercy for contrite sinners, just when she needed to be most mindful of it. The possible deficiencies of her education can be inferred by Abraham’s abovementioned description of how he would instruct her, pledging “to visit her often and through the window instruct her in the Psalms and other pages of God’s law.” These words suggest an emphasis on the Old Testament conception of God as fearful legislator and judge. He makes no mention of teaching her from the gospels or epistles of the New Testament, with their message of forgiveness for repentant sinners.

Though greatly upset by Mary’s downfall and his own culpability, Abraham does not dwell on his grief for long, but immediately devises a plan to recover his lost ward, so that “she may return after her awful shipwreck to the safe port of earlier tranquility.” The image of the shipwreck was frequently associated with despair in the Middle Ages. Hrotsvit’s use of it here also draws attention to Mary’s failure to emulate the...
Virgin as her mentors expected, since one who herself has suffered a shipwreck can hardly resemble the star of the sea, guiding sailors to safety. When discussing his plans, Abraham observes that he is “all the more eager to undertake this daring deed \([\textit{Eo magis ad audendum incitor}]\)” with Effrem’s approval, something Wailes posits was not exactly forthcoming when Abraham revealed his disastrous scheme to wall up his niece so many years ago.\(^{357}\) Effrem commends his latest audacious idea, however, since it will ideally result in saving Mary’s soul. Like the young wife in \textit{Basilius}, Abraham refuses to allow the realization of his past wrongdoing to overwhelm him, but takes action to correct his fault. As we will see shortly, his protégé Mary would have benefited from similar audacity.

After two years of searching, a friend of Abraham’s finally manages to locate Mary. During the conversation between these two friends, Hrotsvit foreshadows Mary’s conversion scene, in which the vices of despair and presumption will feature prominently, by having each character employ these terms in a more mundane sense. “Long have I waited,” Abraham declares, “and I even lost hope for \([\textit{desperavi}]\) your return.” His friend answers, “The reason I took so long was that I did not wish \([\textit{praesumpsi}]\) to agitate you with unconfirmed news; but as soon as I could investigate and the truth learn, I promptly hurried to return.”\(^{358}\) He has discovered Mary in a nearby tavern making her living as a prostitute, news which greatly pains Abraham. The hermit is determined to make amends for his previous negligence and save her from this life of sin, even if it he must deviate from his own strict ascetic discipline in order to do so. Abraham plans to

\(^{357}\) Ibid., p. 79. \textit{Ab.}, III, 17, 10. Wailes, pp. 168-170.

\(^{358}\) Ibid., p. 80. \textit{Ab.}, IV, 1, 4-2, 8: “\textit{ABRAHAM · Ave affabilis amice · diu te sustinui · sed nunc advenire desperavi · AMICUS · Ideo moram feci · quia te ambigu re sollicitari · non praesumpsii · at ubi veritatem investigavi · reditum maturavi}” (p. 205).
leave his secluded community and find Mary in her tavern. In order to gain admittance, he will masquerade as a potential lover, taking on the trappings of the world he once renounced. His aforementioned friend provides him with the clothes of a soldier and a good horse, and even gives him a hat to cover his tonsure. As he has already confided to Effrem, he will not even refuse meat and wine if it is offered to him, so as not to spoil his disguise.

Abraham finds Mary ostensibly happy and healthy with her new life, though for a moment she almost recognises her uncle and is overwhelmed by nostalgia and regret: “Woe is me, wretched woman! How I sank, how I fell into perdition’s pit!... Oh, I wish I could have died three years ago!/ Then I would not have sunk into such disgrace!” Afraid that his true identity will be discovered too soon, Abraham cheers Mary up with the help of the innkeeper. After enjoying rich food and drink, the two withdraw to the privacy of Mary’s bedchamber, where Abraham finally reveals himself and persuades her to repent her sinful life. Mary is again struck with guilt and fear, and when Abraham asks why she did not come to him and confess her initial sin right away, she responds: “I did not dare [non praesumpsit], polluted as I was, even to approach your sanctity.” In response, Abraham reminds her that only Christ has ever lived without sin, and that “[i]t is human to err but evil to persist in sin; he who fell suddenly is not the one to be blamed/–only he who fails to rise promptly again.” Mary, overcome by his admonitions, literally falls to the ground, crying “I am troubled by my grave offense;/ this

359 Ibid., p. 84. *Ab.*, VI, 3, 1-5, 10: “Ve mihi infelici · unde cecidi · et in quam perdicionis foveam corrui... O utinam fuissem ante biennium morte absumpta · ne ad tanta devenirem flagitia” (p. 209). I am unsure why Wilson chose to translate “ante biennium” as “three years ago.” Perhaps “before these last two years” would have better captured Mary’s meaning.

360 Ibid., p. 86. *Ab.*, VII, 5, 9-10: “tu sanctitati polluta proximare non praesumpsit” (p. 211).

361 Ibid. *Ab.*, VII, 6, 14-16: “Humanum est peccare · diabolicum est in peccatis durare · nec iure reprehenditur · qui subito cadit · sed qui cicius surgere neglegit” (p. 211). Cf. note 347 above.
is why I don’t dare to presume [nec…praesumo] to lift my eyes to Heaven or have the confidence/ to speak with you.”

Had Mary only been taught more diligently, she would know that such presumption is necessary to every Christian seeking pardon. No matter how great her sin, Christ’s sacrifice and the grace which inspired it are greater still, earning for every contrite sinner the right to plead for forgiveness.

Abraham then encourages Mary to put aside her fears, making it clear to Hrotsvit’s audience that the true cause of Mary’s undoing was not her surrender to lust, but to despair. His counsel would be familiar to those who had read patristic teachings on the subject:

Don’t lose faith, my daughter, but abandon the abyss of dejection [de abysso desperationis] and place your hope in God…Your sins are grave, I admit,/ but heavenly pity is greater than any sin we may commit. Therefore cast off your despair and beware of leaving unused this short time given to you for your penitence. Know that Divine Grace abounds even where the abomination of sins prevails…[C]ast off this dangerous and sinful despair, which we know to be a graver offense than all other sins. For whoever despairs, thinking that God would not come to the aid of sinners, that person sins irretrievably.

Mary finally admits that while she does not doubt God’s grace, she also does not believe that she can perform a penance in keeping with the enormity of her sin. Abraham solves

---

362 Ibid., p. 87. *Ab.,* VII, 9, 6-8: “Proprii conscientia reatus confundor · ideo nec oculos ad celum levare · nec sermonem tecum praesumo conserere” (p. 212).

363 Indeed, Hrotsvit uses some form of despero or desperatio five times in the space of the next sixteen lines (VII, 9-11, 11, 3).

364 Wilson, trans., pp. 87-88. *Ab.,* VII, 9, 9-11; 10, 14-18; 11, 22-3: “Noli diffidere filia · noli desperare · sed emerge de abysso desperationis · et fige in deo spem mentis”; “Peccata quidem tua sunt gravia · fateor · sed superna pietas maior est omni creatura · Unde tricas rumpe datumque poenitendi spaciolum · pigritando noli neglegere · quatinus superhabundet divina gratia · ubi superhabundavit facinorum abominatio”; “[D]epone perniciosam desperationem · quam omnibus commissis · non nescimus esse graviorem · Qui enim peccantibus deum miseri velle desperat · inremediabilter · peccat” (pp. 212-213). Cf. Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 1-5; Murray, vol. II, pp. 376-378.
her problem by making a selfless pledge: “I take your sins upon myself.”\textsuperscript{365} Her terror finally allayed, Mary agrees to return to the hermitage with Abraham and begin her term of penance under his supervision.

Mary has a brief relapse of fear, however, when confronted by the sight of her former cell. Abraham agrees that she should be housed in the small interior room of her old space so that she will be less exposed to temptation. Unlike the long enclosure of Mary’s childhood, Hrotsvit conveys that such a measure is now appropriate for the young sinner, since she must repent the last two years of vicious indulgence.\textsuperscript{366} In the play’s concluding scene, Abraham happily tells Effrem of the excellent progress of Mary’s penance: “She wears a hair-shirt and is weakened by the constant exercise of vigils and fastings, but still she forces her tender body to follow her soul’s mandate/ and observes the strictest rules, bearing penance’s weight.”\textsuperscript{367} This time, Effrem clearly agrees with Abraham’s plans.\textsuperscript{368} We also learn that her remorse is a positive example to others: “Whoever hears her lamentation is wounded in his heart by its force;/ whoever feels the pangs of her remorse/ himself feels remorse… She works with all her strength to become an example of conversion/ to those for whom she was the cause of perdition.”\textsuperscript{369} No longer vainly striving to emulate the Virgin Mary and “to equal the rays of the stars,” the unattainable goal that her mentors set for her from childhood, Mary has earned spiritual

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{365} Ibid., p. 88. \textit{Ab.}, VII, 12, 9: “In me sit iniquitas tua” (p. 213).
\item \textsuperscript{366} Wailes, pp. 171-172, 177.
\item \textsuperscript{367} Wilson, trans., p. 91. \textit{Ab.}, IX, 3, 6-8: “Nam induta cilicio continuaque vigiliarum et ieiunii exercitacione · macerata · artissimq legis observatione corpus tenerum animq cogit pati imperium” (p. 216).
\item \textsuperscript{368} Wailes, p. 171.
\item \textsuperscript{369} Wilson, trans., ibid. \textit{Ab.}, IX, 3, 11-13; 4, 15-16: “Quisquis eius lamenta intellegit · mente vulneratur · quisquis compunctionem sentit · et ipse compungitur… Elaborat pro viribus ut quibus causa fuit perditionis · fiat exemplum conversionis” (p. 216).
\end{itemize}
merit by following in the footsteps of Mary Magdalene, a saintly namesake famous for her fruitful and imitable penance.\footnote{Ibid., p. 73. *Ab.*, II, 4, 11-12: “[H]ominem aequari astrorum radiis” (p. 198). Sperberg-McQueen, “Whose Body Is It?”, p. 57.}

Abraham’s assumption of a new identity, that of the eager lover, should not surprise those familiar with Hrotsvit’s fondness for role-playing and related themes.\footnote{Cf. p. 91, n. 23 and pp. 97, 102, 114-116, 118-119, 122-123, 126.}

Moreover, Sandro Sticca persuasively argues that in his efforts to rescue Mary, Hrotsvit presents Abraham as a figuration of Christ.\footnote{Sticca, “Hrotswitha’s *Abraham* and Exegetical Tradition,” pp. 636-367. Wailes believes that making this connection “may be going somewhat too far” (p. 176), whereas Sperberg-McQueen notes that accepting such an analogy means that “[t]he playwright does not perceive the theological double standard involved in depicting a mortal and thus sinful man’s identifying with Christ in a play that enacts the very impossibility of a woman’s resembling Mary” (p. 60).}

Abraham’s assumption of the role of a worldly lover for the sake of Mary’s redemption mirrors Christ’s assumption of the flesh for the sake of freeing mankind from sin. Moreover, when Abraham assures Mary that he will take her sins upon himself, he also follows in the example of Christ, who took upon Himself the sins of the world. By playing these roles for the sake of Mary’s redemption, Abraham follows Paul’s admonition to “put off, according to former conversation, the old man, who is corrupted according to the desire of error, and be renewed in spirit of your mind, and put on the new man, who according to God is created in justice and holiness of truth.”\footnote{Eph. 4:22-24: “[D]eponere vos secundum pristinam conversationem veteranem hominem, qui corrumpitur secundum desideria erroris, renovamini autem spiritu mentis vestrae, et induite novum hominem, qui secundum Deum creatus est in iustitia et sanctitate veritatis.”}

Such a role change not only allows Abraham to save Mary, who, as we read a few verses earlier in Ephesians, “despairing [had] given [herself] up to lasciviousness, unto the working of all uncleanness, unto covetousness”;\footnote{Eph. 4:19: “[Q]ui desperantes semet ipsos tradiderunt inpudicitiae in operationem inmunditiae omnis in avaritia.”} by taking on this worldly identity, Abraham may also save himself, since by rescuing Mary and supervising her penance, he can atone for his previously negligent care of her.
At the beginning of the play, Abraham showed several errors in judgement which could be considered cases of spiritual presumption\(^{375}\): his decision to immure a child, his insistence that she strive to be as pure in body and spirit as the Virgin, his inadequate spiritual training of her, his acceptance of a duplicitous monk as a teacher for his young charge, and his incorrect interpretation of the vision sent to warn him of the threat posed by the new man in her life. In each case, his understanding of God’s will for Mary was flawed,\(^{376}\) and these mistakes cumulatively contributed to her seduction and subsequent life of sin. Upon realizing his errors, however, he does not allow himself to be consumed by guilt and self-recrimination, as does the despairing Mary, but works to rectify the situation. As the play ends, Abraham gives credit where credit is due for his success, observing that Christ “should be all the more praised for this gain,/ as there was no hope [\textit{desperabatur}] for her return to her former self again.”\(^{377}\) Abraham knew what his young ward had not, that Christ’s sacrifice represented hope for the repentant sinner. Mary would have benefited from the kind of positive presumption we saw displayed by her immaculate namesake in the legend of \textit{Theophilus}, namely, the presumption needed to ask for forgiveness.\(^{378}\)

Critics have traditionally regarded Hrotsvit’s next play, \textit{The Conversion of the Harlot Thais}, here referred to as \textit{Pafnutius}, as a less successful piece than its counterpart \textit{Abraham}. Its similarity in plot to \textit{Abraham} had caused scholars such as Karl Strecker, the early twentieth-century editor of Hrotsvit’s \textit{opera}, to dismiss it as merely “ein

\(^{375}\) On spiritual presumption, see pp. 105-106 above.

\(^{376}\) For example, see pp. 186-188 above.

\(^{377}\) Wilson, trans., p. 92. \textit{Ab.}, IX, 6, 26-27: “Unde in illa tanto iustius laudatur \cdot quanto ultra resipisci posse desperabatur” (p. 216).

\(^{378}\) See p. 170 above.
Abklatsch” of the previous piece. Subsequent work has revealed significant differences in the plot, characterization and tone of the two plays, the most apparent being the long philosophical dialogue in the first scene of Pafnutius. As noted above, the fifth and sixth plays of Book II, Conversio Thaidis meretricis and Passio sanctarum virginum Fidei, Spei et Karitatis, were written after the first four plays had been circulated and presumably received some feedback from Hrotsvit’s mentors. Most likely due to their comments, each of her later two plays includes a lengthy scene in which one character gives an advanced lesson on one of the liberal arts. In the case of Pafnutius, the play begins with a 184-line discussion of music drawn mainly from Boethius. This lesson, which comprised about one-fourth of the play’s length, was largely dismissed by early critics as unrelated to the ensuing dramatic action. More recent scholarship has refuted this view, establishing the connections between the musicological discourse which opens the play and the worldly events which illustrate the concepts defined therein. I would not, however, completely agree with Wailes in his assertion that Pafnutius “is more in the nature of a philosophical presentation in which the characters are valued as parts of an argument.” While exploring the various differences between Abraham and Pafnutius, we will see that despite the strongly philosophical elements of the latter, Hrotsvit was also just as interested in the humanity

379 Wailes, p. 268, n. 3.
380 Ibid., p. 182.
381 See pp. 117-119 above.
384 Chamberlain, ibid., pp. 319-320.
385 Chamberlain, pp. 319-343; Sticca, “Sacred Drama and Tragic Realism in Hrotswitha’s Paphnutius,” pp. 22-24; Wilson, Ethics, pp. 95-96; Wailes, pp. 182-183.
386 Wailes, p. 182.
of Thais as that of Mary. In the case of each piece, she sought to depict realistically the interaction of presumption and despair in the mind of the sinner.

Though *Pafnutius*, like *Abraham*, recounts the redemption of a prostitute, there is no familial connection or prior relationship between the sinner and her intercessor. The first scene introduces Pafnutius discussing a problem which has been troubling him with a group of his students. As noted above, he initially presents his concern in the form of a lesson on cosmology and music. He states that he is upset due to “the wrong perpetrated against our Maker.” When his students inquire further, he explains that the contrary elements of the macrocosm, i.e. the four elements of creation, can be made concordant through God’s will. At the microcosmic level, however, mankind can resist the Creator’s will, refusing to harmonize the contrary elements of body and soul. The concordance of body and soul creates a form of “human music” (*musica humana*), one of the three types of music cited by Boethius in his *Consolatio Philosophiae*. Chamberlain has noted that:

> Hrotsvit is conspicuously original in the Early Middle Ages, and especially in the tenth century, just for using Boethius’ broad figurative classification of music (*mundana*, *humana*, and *instrumentalis musica*). … Boethius’ classification of music was an aspect of quadrivial learning that could coalesce easily with the whole moral action of her play.

Eventually his students are overwhelmed by his advanced level of discourse, and Pafnutius comes to the worldly cause of his philosophical musings, introducing the subject of Thais. “No one is unaware of her sordid fame,” his students respond.

Although they, like Abraham, live in a secluded community, Pafnutius and his students are well aware of the infamous prostitute’s acquisitive and lecherous lifestyle. She poses

---

a marked contrast to Mary, who was so ashamed of her downfall that it took Abraham years to find her.

*Pafnutius* also places greater emphasis on the wider implications of Thais’ sins. As the hermit recounts:

> [S]he is not satisfied with leading only a few men to damnation/ but is ready to ensnare all men with the allurement of her beauty and drag them along with her to eternal perdition./ … And not only frivolous youths dissipate their families’ few possessions on her,/ but even respected men waste their costly treasures by lavishing gifts on her./ Thus they harm themselves. … These fools that come to her are blind in their hearts; they contend and quarrel and fight with each other./ … Then, when the fight has started, they fracture each other’s faces and noses with their fists; they attack each other with weapons and drench the threshold of the brothel with their blood gushing forth.390

Compare these several descriptions of civic chaos to the one comment spared for Mary’s lovers in the previous play: “She works with all her strength to become an example of conversion,/ to those for whom she was the cause of perdition.”391 Pafnutius is far more concerned that Thais’ sensual existence threatens not only her own soul, but the stability and spiritual welfare of her entire community. “This,” he explains, “is the injury to our Maker which I bewail.”392

Like his counterpart Abraham, Pafnutius resolves to impersonate a potential lover and shame Thais into abandoning her wicked life. In this case, however, Hrotsvit makes

---

390 Ibid., pp. 102-103. *Paf.*, I, 24, 25-27: “[N]on dignatur cum paucis ad interitum tendere · sed prompta est omnes lenociniiis suæ formæ illicere · secumque ad interitum trahere”; I, 25, 2-5: “Nec solum nugas vilitatem suæ familiaris rei dissipant illam colendo · sed etiam præpotentes viri pretioso varietatem suppellectilis possessum · non absque sui damno hanc ditando”; I, 26, 9-10: “Qui amentes dum cecco corde quis illam adeat contendunt · convitia congerunt”; I, 26, 12-14: “Deinde initio certamine nunc ora naresque pugnis frangendo · nunc armis vicissim eiciendo · decurentis illüviq sanguinis madefaciunt limina lupanaris” (pp. 225-226).

391 Ibid., p. 91. For the Latin, see note 369 above.

it clear that God’s will has been interpreted correctly from the beginning. As soon as he proposes this scheme to his students, they recognise its rightness, praying that “He who instilled the desire for this undertaking in you, may He make this worthy desire come true.” Divine grace has inspired Pafnutius with the solution to Thais’ pernicious influence, which is again underscored when he first enters the city. He is welcomed by a group of young men who readily admit that all the men in the area are in her thrall and cheerfully direct him to her house.

The supposed lover finds Thais at home and receptive to his overtures. When he asks if they could retire to a more private room, Thais replies that “[t]here is one so hidden, so secret, that no one besides me knows [its inmost recess], except for God.” Hrotsvit cleverly chose the phrase *eius penetral* (“its inmost recess”) to describe this room in order to put the observant reader in mind of her description of the temptation of Theophilus in Book I. There she stated that Satan had struck “the inmost heart [penetralia] of this just man.” The reader then learns about the inmost heart of Thais as Pafnutius seizes on her mention of God, asking her to explain her beliefs further. She replies that she believes in the one true God, that all things are known to Him, and that He is a just God: “I believe that He weighs the merits of each person justly in His scale [ipsius aequitatis lance] and that each according to his desserts receives reward or punishment from Him.” Significantly, Theophilus uses similar wording when

---

394 Ibid., p. 106. The brackets indicate my emendation of Wilson’s translation, since she renders *eius penetral* as simply “it.” Paf., III, 4, 7-8: “Est etenim aliud tam occultum · tam secretum · ut *eius penetral* nulli preter me nisi deo sit cognitum” (p. 229, my italics).
395 Cf. p. 164, n. 272 above.
discussing divine judgment: “weighed impartially” (*aequa lance libratam*).\(^{397}\) I believe this is another instance in which Hrotsvit wishes to connect the two pieces on presumption in the mind of the reader. Pafnutius is horrified that she both believes in God and is fully aware of the fearful consequences of her sinful lifestyle: “O Christ, how wondrous is the patience of Thy great mercy! Thou seest that some sin with full cognition,/ yet Thou delayest their deserved perdition.”\(^{398}\) Pafnutius’ exclamation is reminiscent of a comment he made during his earlier music lesson: “It is not the knowledge of knowable things which offends God, but the wrongdoing of the knower.”\(^{399}\) The knower in this case is Thais, who has presumed on God’s mercy by continuing to live in sin despite her knowledge of and belief in God.

When discussing *Theophilus* above, we saw how Augustine’s theory of two kinds of presumption in his *Enarrationes in Psalmos* had informed Hrotsvit’s understanding of her title character’s sin. Theophilus had presumed on his own ability to fulfill God’s law and did not give sufficient credit to God’s grace for his virtuous life.\(^{400}\) Thais, on the other hand, suffers from the second kind of presumption described by Augustine, the presumption on God’s mercy. For if the human mind were to dwell too much on its own weakness, he explains:

…it begins to think that God in his mercy forgives all sinners, provided only they believe that God sets them free, so that at the end his mercy is ready to ensure that no one among sinful believers shall perish. In other words, no one will be lost of those who promise themselves, “I can do

---

397 *Theo*. 175, my italics. According to Winterfeld, the only other occasion when Hrotsvit uses a form of the noun *lax*, *lancis* is in *Calimachus*, 9, 6, in another reference to God’s equitable judgement (p. 366). Interestingly, both despair and presumption play minor roles in this play, but it cannot be considered in this study due to lack of space.


400 See pp. 161-162 above.
anything, I can defile myself with any crimes or shameful deeds, I can sin as much as I like. God frees me in his mercy because I have believed in him.” Now if a person takes the view that no one in these circumstances will perish, he will be inclined by this evil notion to think he can sin with impunity. And then our just God, whose mercy and judgment are sung about in another Psalm [Ps. 100]—and it is not mercy alone, mind you, but mercy and judgment—finds this person self-deceived by presumption and abusing the divine mercy to his own destruction, and then God must necessarily condemn.401

Like the sinner portrayed by Augustine, Thais trusts too greatly in divine mercy, thinking that the simple fact of her belief will be enough to redeem her in the end, no matter how sinful a life she has led. Though she clearly knows that God punishes sinners, she has somehow neglected to apply this knowledge to her own situation. She has immersed herself in worldly pleasures and has thus managed to ignore the terrifying but inevitable consequences of her actions.

As in Abraham, Pafnutius’ confrontation of Thais leads to her conversion. However, Hrotsvit cleverly changes the structure of the scene in the latter play in order to illustrate the complementary nature of despair and presumption. In the conversion scene of Abraham, Mary is overcome with emotion after Abraham reveals himself, fainting to the ground. She had been so terrified of the consequences of her sin that even after two years of seeking oblivion in worldly pleasure, her fear and sorrow return with little prodding from her uncle. In the case of Pafnutius, Thais blithely states her belief in a just

401 Boulding, trans., Expositions of the Psalms, pp. 362-363. Enarrationes in Psalmos, Ps. XXXI, Enarr. II, 1, 13-26: “Si enim se infirmitati propriae omni ex parte donauerit, et in hanc cognitionem se inclinauerit, ut dicit, quia misericordia Dei omnibus peccatoribus, in quibuslibet peccatis perseuerantibus, tantum credentibus quia Deus liberat, Deus ignoscit, ita in fine parata est ut nemo pereat fidelium iniquorum; id est, nemo pereat eorum qui sibi dicunt: quiduis faciam, quibuslibet facinoribus et flagitiis inquinare, quantumlibet peccem, liberat me Deus misericordia sua, quia credidi in eum. Qui ergo dicit neminem perire talium, cogitatione mala inclinatur in impunitatem peccatorum; et Deus ille iustus, cui cantatur misericordia et iudicium, non sola misericordia, sed et iudicium, inuenit hominem male de se praesumentem, et ad interitum suum misericordia Dei abutentem, et nesse ce est ut damnet” (pp. 224-225).
God and His punishment for sinners to a man who has just solicited her services as a
prostitute. Here it is Pafnutius who is first overwhelmed by the enormity of Thais’ sin:

“Why do you tremble?” she asks him, “Why the change of color? Why all these
tears?”

Pafnutius’ response makes the underlying cause of Thais’ sinful lifestyle clear:

I shudder at your presumption [presumptionem], I bewail your sure perdition/ because you know all this so well, and yet you send many a man’s soul to Hell. … You deserve to be damned even more/ as you offended the Divine Majesty haughtily [praesumptiosius], knowing of Him before/ … Punishment awaits you in Hell if you continue to dwell in sin… O, how I wish you were pierced through all your flesh with pain/ so that you wouldn’t dare [presumeres] to give yourself to perilous lust again!

Hrotsvit wants her audience to understand that Thais’ avarice and lust are simply the symptoms of her presumption, a more serious sin that will be the true cause of her potential downfall if she does not repent.

While Mary had been plagued by too much fear and hence suffered from despair, Thais has until now conducted her life with the dangerous lack of fear indicative of presumption.

Pafnutius’ exhortations do begin to affect Thais, however, as her responses show:

“Woe is me, wretched woman! … Alas, alas, what do you do? What calamity do you sketch?/ Why do you threaten me, unfortunate wretch?/ … Your severe reproach’s dart/
pierces the inmost recesses [penetral] of my heart.”

According to Chamberlain, the reappearance of the word penetral was quite deliberate, since it allows Hrotsvit “to reveal the contrarietas, or dissonance, between Thais’ physical ‘penetral’ that serves lust and her spiritual ‘penetral’ that acknowledges God.”

Pafnutius’ fear and horror on her behalf have started to press home the implications of this great disparity. As she contemplates her wicked past in a new light, she begins to feel the first stirrings of contrition, describing herself as “filled entirely with the bitter pangs of sorrow and the new awareness of guilt, fear and pain” and “stained,/ with thousands and thousands of sins.”

Pafnutius, detecting the risk of his new charge sliding into despair, gives her the lesson needed to combat it: “No sin is so serious, no fault is so enormous, that it may not be atoned for by tears of penance, if the work is followed to completion [effectus sequetur operis].”

As we will see shortly, following through on her newfound contrition will initially be a challenge for Thais.

When Thais asks Pafnutius what she must do to begin her penance, his instructions are clear: “Show contempt for the world, and flee the company of your lascivious lovers’ crew./ … Withdraw yourself to a secret place,/ where you may reflect upon yourself and your former ways/ and lament the enormity of your sins.”

---


406 Chamberlain, p. 334. Cf. n. 394 above. According to Winterfeld’s Index verborum, some form of penetral only appears once outside of the three instances I have noted in Theophilus and Thais, that being in line 36 of the Primordia coenobii Gandeshemensis (p. 408).


408 Paf., III, 8, 18-20: “Nullum enim <tam> grave peccatum · nullum tam immene est delictum · quod nequeat expiari poenitentiae lacrimis · si effectus sequetur operis” (p. 230). This is my translation, as for some reason Wilson’s does not include this line. On Thais’ despair, cf. Sticca, “Sacred Drama and Tragic Realism,” p. 28.

response, she declares that “[i]f you have hopes that I will succeed,/ then I will begin with all due speed [non addo momentum morule].” 410 Pafnutius agrees that she will benefit from such dedication. In her very next line, however, Thais asks for “just a short time” (aliquantuli spatium tempusculi) to gather together all of her wealth. 411 Pafnutius advises her simply to leave it for others, the same advice that Abraham had given Mary in the previous play, since money earned through sinful means would not even be fit for charitable giving. 412 Thais assures him that she was not planning to take it for herself, to give it to friends, or to give it to the poor. She will burn all of her ill-gotten gains “[s]o that nothing is left of what I acquired through sin, wronging the world’s Maker [mundi factoris iniuria] thereby.” 413

Thais’ word choice, which references the cause of Pafnutius’ concern in the play’s first lines (pro iniuria factoris), 414 and her apparent eagerness to prove her newfound disdain for her former life, have caused most scholars to interpret her decision as a beneficial one, a positive first step on her journey to redemption. 415 For example, Sticca posits that the fire of her burning possessions cancels out the fires of passion that she had lit in the men of the city. 416 Pafnutius seems ambivalent about her plan, however, marvelling at the drastic change in her nature: “O how you have changed from your prior condition/ when you burned with illicit passions/ and were inflamed with

410 Ibid. Paf., III, 9, 3-4: “Si hoc speras proficere · non addo momentum morule” (p. 231).
411 Paf., III, 10, 6.
412 Ab., VII, 14, 16-23.
414 Paf., I, 1, 14.
415 Chamberlain, pp. 335-336; Sticca, pp. 30-31; Thompson, p. 119; Wailes, pp. 184-185. Chamberlain’s interpretation is based largely on his reading of the musical terminology used in these scenes.
416 Sticca, ibid.
greed for possessions! Her impulse is certainly not in keeping with his recommendations for her reform, that she flee the world and her lovers’ company. As a new convert her intentions are good, but her habits have not yet been retrained, and even in her desire to abandon her worldly goods and her admirers, she is drawn inexorably back to them.

Pafnutius senses the danger here; this worldly distraction is not the *effectus operis* which he had discussed with her just moments ago, the successful carrying out of fruitful penance. When she tells him that she is leaving to carry out her plan (*quē cogitavi opere complebo*), he tells her to go in peace and return quickly. Peace seems to be the last thing on Thais’ mind, however; finding a public space, she piles all of her wealth in front of an audience of her lovers and sets it alight, causing great shock and consternation. When she rebuffs their pleas for an explanation and turns to leave, they try to stop her by tearing at her robe. This brazen display and the discord it has caused hardly strikes one as the ideal inauguration of a life of penance, but is more reminiscent of the same scandal and chaos that has surrounded Thais for years. Upon her return, Pafnutius again expresses his worry: “You took so long to arrive here that I was tortured by grave fear that you might have become involved once again in worldly things.” In her study of how Hrotsvit converted her hagiographical source into drama, Elisabeth Pinto-Mathieu points out that Pafnutius’ worry about Thais returning to her former ways was not present in the original saint’s life Hrotsvit used. She posits that Hrotsvit added

---

418 Cf. *Paf.*, III, 8, 20-21; and p. 204 above.
419 *Paf.*, V, 1, 14-16: “Quia moram in veniendo fecisti coartabar nimiris · verendo te iterum implicitam esse secularibus negociīs” (p. 233).
this element to create dramatic tension.\textsuperscript{420} I believe that Hrotsvit also problematized the burning scene in order to remind the reader of the nature of Thais’ sin. She has been presuming on God’s mercy, thus ignoring her need to repent and wallowing in sin. This showy renunciation has only delayed the start of her true penance and indicates a lingering concern with worldly goods and fame. Though Thais assures Pafnutius that she is now ready to submit to his direction, perhaps she mistakenly believes that the bulk of her repentance is now done. We will see below that she does not yet understand how difficult her new life of atonement will be for her.

Beginning her life of repentance in earnest, Thais follows Pafnutius to a local convent. They are surprised by the abbess coming to greet them, having already been apprised of their arrival. Thais comments that their coming was announced by “[s]ome rumor, bound by no hindrance, and in speed without a rival.”\textsuperscript{421} Pafnutius has decided that Thais will be immured and orders work to begin on a special enclosure. He explains the rationale for this treatment to the abbess: “[B]ecause the sickness of both body and soul must be cured by a medicine of contraries, it follows that she must be sequestered from the tumult of the world,/ immured in a small cell, so that she may contemplate her sins undisturbed.”\textsuperscript{422} He is impatient for her cell to be completed, as her fame has preceded her, and while it has suffered from no hindrance, her time of penance has. He even confides in the abbess that he is weary of any further delay because of his worries


\textsuperscript{421} Wilson, trans., p. 112. \textit{Paf.} VI, 2, 14: “Fama quæ nulla stringitur mora” (p. 234).

\textsuperscript{422} Ibid., p. 113. \textit{Paf.}, VII, 5, 20-24: “Quia enim egritudo animarum :: aequæ ut corporum :: contrariis curanda est medelis :: consequens est :: ut ōc hæc a solita :: secularium inquietudine sequestrata :: sola in angusta retrudatur cellula :: quo liberius possit discutere sui crimina” (p. 235).
that she may be seduced by visitors.\footnote{Paf., VII, 8, 8-9: “Tedet me magis morarum · quia timeo illam corrumpi visitatione hominum” (p. 236).} He clearly believes that his charge is still in a vulnerable state, that while her spirit is willing, her flesh is weak, and that her luxurious habits will drag her back into her former life if they are not broken right away.

With this goal in mind, Pafnutius determines that Thais’ enclosure will be far removed from the glamour and comfort she has known; in response to the abbess’ concerns about the harsh conditions he plans, he observes that “such a grave offense certainly requires a strong remedy’s cure.”\footnote{Ibid. Paf., VII, 7, 5-6: “[N]am grave delictum forte desiderat semper remedium” (p. 236).} Pafnutius insists that the repentant Thais must live in her own filth, ordering that the one tiny opening of her cell be used only to pass her small amounts of food, but forbidding that it be used to remove her urine and excrement. When Thais is confronted by the reality of her new existence, she understandably balks, shocked by the darkness and austerity of her cell and dreading the stench of her coming incarceration. As he explains, “[i]t is only right that you expiate the evil sweetness of alluring delight/ by enduring this terrible smell.”\footnote{Ibid., p. 115. Paf., VII, 12, l. 9-10: “Convenit ut male blandientis dulcedinem delectationis luas molestia nimii foetoris” (p. 237).} When she expresses her wish that there be at least one clean place in her cell where she might invoke the divine name, Pafnutius scolds her, finding her presumptuous still: “[H]ow can you have such great confidence that you would presume to utter the name of the unpolluted Divinity with your polluted lips?”\footnote{Ibid. Paf., VII, 13, 21-22: “Et unde tibi tanta fiducia · ut pollutis labis praesumas proferre nomen inpollutè divinitatis?” (p. 327). Cf. pp. 168 and 171 above.} She must pray with her tears and her heavy heart, saying only “Thou who created me,/ have mercy upon me!”\footnote{Ibid. Paf., VII, 14, 2-3: “Qui me plasmasti · miserere mei” (p. 238).} After entrusting his charge to the care of the abbess and promising to pray for her, Pafnutius is now ready to return to his own retreat.
Katharina Wilson observes that Hrotsvit has been criticized for “the miraculously swift conversions in her plays.”\textsuperscript{428} She suggests that due to Hrotsvit’s overriding interest in showing the power of divine grace, “[p]sychological verisimilitude is certainly not her primary concern when she demonstrates heavenly aid to the repentant sinner.”\textsuperscript{429} Wailes believes this to be especially true of \textit{Pafnutius}, writing that it is:

\dots[n]o wonder [that] later tastes have given esthetic judgement in favor of \textit{Abraham}, with its relative ‘realism’ and more accessible psychology, for Thais and the perturbations she causes have a dimensionality beyond familiar human life. This is not a miscalculation by Hrotsvit, but a consequence of her plan to write a drama illustrating universal truths, for Thais represents the principal of discord just as Pafnutius represents that of harmony.\textsuperscript{430}

While I agree that Thais and Pafnutius do serve these representative functions in the play, Hrotsvit’s version of the Thais legend was not simply a dramatization of the opening scene’s philosophical concepts.\textsuperscript{431} She also sought to paint a realistic portrait of a passionate and determined woman who must learn that conversion only begins with a sudden flash of grace and a movement of the heart. Hrotsvit’s additions to her source, including the ambiguous presentation of the burning scene, the presence of the agonized lovers as its audience, Pafnutius’ fear that the new convert will return to the world,\textsuperscript{432} and Thais’ reluctance to confine herself, all evoke an individual struggling with the continuing work of her conversion and penance. That she would initially favour a showy

\textsuperscript{428} Wilson, \textit{Ethics}, p. 67.
\textsuperscript{429} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{430} Wailes, p. 183.
\textsuperscript{431} Wailes does make a point of stating later that Hrotsvit “has not left the heroine without any human aspects whatsoever, for the play is not an allegory (p. 184).
\textsuperscript{432} Pinto-Mathieu, p. 181, 184.
catharsis over the long, internal battle of enclosure demonstrates once again that her principal sin was presumption.

In the play’s penultimate scene, Pafnutius comes to visit Thais after she has endured three years of her harsh penance. A vision has revealed that Thais is forgiven, and the hermit reports the good news to his long-suffering prisoner. He finds her a changed woman, now humble and convinced of the fitness of her punishment. When he asks how she has spent her time of atonement, she replies:

…in my conscience I enumerated my manifold sins and wickedness and gathered them as in a bundle [*fasciculum*] of crime. Then I continuously went over them in my mind, so that just as the nauseating smell here never left my nostrils, so the fear of Hell never departed from my heart’s eyes.433

The mental fagot [*fasciculum*] of Thais’ sins poses a marked contrast to the actual funeral pyre [*rogus*] that she had built of her worldly goods just after her conversion.434 While that pyre demonstrated her wish to die to sin, it was also yet another illustration of the consequences of her still-present sinful habits on herself and the world around her. The fact that she burned all of her treasures in public, in front of the very men who had beggared themselves to give her such wealth, only caused more of the turmoil and unchecked passion for which she was already known. As the men of the city admitted to Pafnutius, “[s]he is our fire,”435 and hence the fire Thais lit in the public square was certainly not the remedy of contraries which Pafnutius knew was necessary for her redemption. Her mental bundle of kindling, on the other hand, instilled the fear of Hell

---

433 Ibid., pp. 120-121. *Paf.*, XII, 3, 26-3: “[N]umerositatem meorum scelerum intra conscientiam quasi in fasciculum collegi · et pertractando mente semper inspexi · quo sicut naribus numquam molestia foetoris · ita formido gehennę non absesse visibus cordis” (pp. 242-243).

434 *Paf.*, IV, 2, 7-8: “O Thais · Thais · quid sibi vult rogus quem construís · cur preciosarum varietatem · divitiarum iuxta rogum congeris?” (p. 232).

needed to counteract her presumption. Just as she had once avariciously counted her earnings, now she mournfully counts her faults, always mindful of their just punishment.

When Pafnutius informs this contrite and fearful woman that she is now ready to be released from her confinement, she does not believe him, and he assures her that “[i]t is time for you to be less fearful/ and to begin to have hope and be cheerful.”436 She has conquered her former excessive hope by her constant focus on her sins and the fearful pains of Hell, and may now begin to hope for heaven once more. Though she feels herself thoroughly unworthy of such redemption, her mentor reminds her with words reminiscent of Paul that if human merit could earn such a gift of God, it would not be called grace.437 Pafnutius leads her out of her cell and the play ends with her happy passing fifteen days later.

Helene Homeyer noted that Pafnutius is the longest of Hrotsvit’s plays, despite the fact that her hagiographic source was the shortest.438 As we saw above, Hrotsvit made a number of changes and additions to the work, most obviously the long musicological discourse of the opening scene. The most apparent change for our purposes, however, is the work’s moral focus. In his classic dissertation on the Thaïs legend, Oswald Kuehne studied not only several Latin versions of the legend, including the one from which Hrotsvit worked,439 but the Greek and Syriac versions as well.440 None of these works make any mention of the sin of presumption; indeed, a prologue added to Hrotsvit’s source by one manuscript compiler extols the story as a lesson against

---

438 Homeyer, p. 322.
439 See *Vita Sanctae Thaïsis meretricis, auctore incerto*, in PL, vol. 73, col. 661-662.
despair. Moshe Lazar’s study of Theophilus legends has also shown that despair was the theme traditionally treated in these works. Hrotsvit appropriated the concluding morals of these familiar stories for her own purposes, thus creating two detailed portraits of presumptuous sinners to present alongside her two works on despair. In doing so, she depicted the standard Augustinian understanding of despair and presumption in four distinct but interrelated narratives. Each “double bill” was given pride of place at the centre of Books I and II, as though to demonstrate better the precarious balance that Christians must find between hope and fear in order to avoid either vice. She makes it clear throughout that grace plays an essential role in maintaining this balance.

Yet in the midst of Hrotsvit’s studies of presumption and despair as vices, she also included a number of cases in which presumption was a positive force, one which the contrite sinner needed in order to re-establish a connection with the divine. The newly fallen Mary should have “presumed” to ask her mentor for help in repenting her sin. Instead she was consumed by her despair and faced a harder road to redemption once she was finally rescued. As we discovered in Theophilus, even the Blessed Virgin must presume when she asks her Son to have mercy on repentant sinners. Many such positive, even holy, acts of presumption occur throughout Hrotsvit’s works, not only in the four dedicated to presumption and despair. Though they cannot be discussed at length in this chapter, a brief mention of the more obvious examples will serve to demonstrate just how fond Hrotsvit was of this concept.

---

441 Kuehne, pp. 31-32.
In *Pelagius*, the oppressed Christians of Cordova in Muslim Spain are ordered not to presume to blaspheme their pagan leaders’ golden idols on pain of death.\(^{443}\) The virtuous title character does just that later in the legend and is thus martyred. In *Dulcitius*, Hirena is accused of “a presumption of verbosity” when she eloquently refuses to worship the pagan gods.\(^{444}\) After the miraculous resurrections in *Calimachus*, Drusiana’s joyful husband wonders “[w]ho would have presumed to hope” that such a happy resolution would occur.\(^{445}\) In the last play, *Sapientia*, the virtuous mother of three holy maidens is accused of “insolent presumption” by the tyrannical emperor.\(^{446}\) He will soon execute them for their rejection of idolatry, thus ensuring their martyrdom. In the *Primordia coenobii Gandeshemensis*, the saintly Ottonian ancestress Oda is interrupted at prayer. She wonders who would presume to do such a thing, only to discover that none other than John the Baptist has so presumed.\(^{447}\) Perhaps the best example occurs in *Gallicanus*, the first play of Book I. The emperor’s devout daughter warns him not to despair, but reassures him that “no place for sorrow is left to those presuming on God’s pity.”\(^{448}\) Hrotsvit clearly enjoyed presenting her holy protagonists as presumptuous, thus throwing the traditional understanding of the term into question.

\(^{443}\) *Pelagius*, 56-60: “Ne quis praefate civis præsumeret urbis/ Ultra blasphemere diis auro fabricatis,/ Quos princeps coleret, sceptrum quicumque teneret,/ Seu caput exacto cicius subiungere ferro/ Et sententiolam loeti perferre supremam” (p. 65).

\(^{444}\) *Dulcitius*, I, 8, 15-16: “Huius presumptio verbositatis · tollenda est supplitis” (p. 166).

\(^{445}\) *Calimachus*, IX, 20, 22: “[Q]uis prosumeret sperare” (p. 189).

\(^{446}\) *Sapientia*, V, 3, 13-14: “Cur dignaris cum hac contumace verba miscere · quæ te insolenti fatigat praesumptione?” (p. 254).

\(^{447}\) *Primordia*, 40-41: “Quis foret ille, suum qui conturbare secretum/ Praesumpsisset in hac hora precibus satis apta” (p. 308).

Conclusion

As modern scholarship has become better acquainted with the works of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, the challenges and rewards they offer the cautious reader have become more apparent. We must remember Dronke and Wilson’s warning to read Hrotsvit with care, always mindful of her penchant for presenting a significant concept from a number of perspectives, some of which are downright contradictory. She thus problematizes her treatment of the idea in question, forcing her readers to look beyond the most obvious interpretations and to evaluate her word choices not in isolation, but with reference to her entire œuvre. For example, Hrotsvit’s frequent references to her own presumption in her prefatory material should put the critical reader on alert. When discussing her role as an author, she depicts herself as anxious to anticipate and deny any charges of presumption that may be leveled against her by more discerning or highly-placed readers.

At first glance, the often confessional tone of her prefaces provided Hrotsvit with a method of diffusing potential critics. She could not be accused of presumption for writing while the opening words of her works either defended against or confessed to that very flaw. As was the case with her supposed “feminine fragility,” however, her meaning should not be so simply understood. Other scholars have long noted that her prefaces give us valuable insight into Hrotsvit’s understanding of her writing as an essentially spiritual exercise. While the main objective of the whole exercise was to praise God, Hrotsvit also presents her works as a defiant confession of her intention to write despite the disapproval she might face as a result. Hrotsvit clearly felt called to write, a vocatio that must have caused her considerable spiritual anguish and perhaps even spiritual despair. In her second preface, she ultimately determined that she would
presume to continue her writing, a presumption supported by the approval of her first readers.

Here Hrotsvit suggested that presumption could be a positive force, a force that one finds at work throughout her narratives. Though in stories such as *Theophilus* and *Pafnutius*, she presented the standard patristic view of presumption as a negative impediment to confession, she also depicted the kind of presumption necessary for a despairing character like the harlot Mary, who needed to presume in order to overcome her despair and ask for forgiveness. In *Theophilus*, even the Virgin Mary described herself as presuming when she prevailed upon her Son to have mercy for a contrite sinner, providing a useful contrast to the sinful presumption of the title character. In her depiction of the close interrelation between vicious despair and presumption, Hrotsvit showed that this positive kind of presumption was an invaluable way of warding the converting sinner against despair. All humans, even the Virgin, presume when asking for forgiveness, since they must rely on God’s grace in order to be saved.

Though the term is not used in her first work, *Maria*, Hrotsvit’s portrayal of the Virgin confident in her calling, defiantly obeying an authority much greater than those of Jewish society, also makes the reader consider presumption as a positive quality. While those Jews who will not accept her Son as the Messiah will condemn themselves to the despair of unbelief, Mary represents the ideal proto-Christian, secure in her presumption on God’s grace. We are safe in assuming that Hrotsvit could draw upon her own life experiences, and those of her sisters, when describing young Mary’s clashes with authority. Mary’s insistence on remaining a virgin despite the social pressure to marry, and her conviction that she was called to do so, was certainly familiar to the residents of
Gandersheim. Hrotsvit’s desire to write and her beliefs about its origin likely met with similar skepticism. This struggle clearly left an indelible impression on our rava avis and determined how she presumed to sing.
Chapter Four
Leaving the Selva Oscura: Despair in Dante’s Inferno

Introduction

While Hrotsvit and her creative output would remain little known for centuries after her death, the magnum opus of our next author, Dante Alighieri, enjoyed almost immediate and lasting popularity. Dante’s Commedia, perhaps one of the most famous poems ever written, survives in nearly eight hundred manuscripts, a number exceeded only by the Bible.¹ Dante composed the Inferno, the first and most renowned of the poem’s three cantiche, sometime between 1306 and 1309.² Manuscripts of the Inferno were circulating by the second half of 1314, and those of Purgatorio about a year later. They were eagerly read and acclaimed by both Dante’s fellow poets and more discerning scholars; by the end of the fourteenth century a dozen commentaries of the Commedia had been produced.³ John Ahern argues that the general public also knew and appreciated the poem by at least the mid-fourteenth century, finding evidence of it being sung and recited aloud, sometimes before a large audience.⁴

Though he would not share her obscurity, Dante did share Hrotsvit’s penchant for self-examination in his writing, especially through role-playing. Critics and

¹ These manuscripts are currently listed by the Società Dantesca Italiana on their website, “Dante Online.” See http://www.danteonline.it/english/codici_indice.htm (accessed 18 February, 2009).
commentators often warn readers new to Dante that he relates to his readers in two
 guises, distinct \textit{personae} which should not be conflated by those seeking an ideal
 interpretation of the text.\textsuperscript{5}  He speaks to us most directly as Dante the Poet, the all-
 knowing, though certainly not all-disclosing, narrator of an extraordinary tale.  The Poet
 asks us to believe that Divine Providence has recently granted him a unique privilege,
graciously affording him passage through the three realms of the afterlife while still
 living.  Having returned to earth, he now recounts his experience by describing the
 journey of Dante the Wayfarer, a version of his former self around whom the action of
 the poem is centred.  Though he is not named until the end of \textit{Purgatorio} (XXX, 55),
 Dante provides abundant clues to his identity throughout the first two \textit{cantiche}, allowing
 the careful reader to conclude that the author intended the narrator and protagonist to
 represent himself at two very different places in time and knowledge.  In the opening
 lines of the \textit{Commedia}, Dante presents his Wayfarer as an anonymous traveller lost in a
dark wood.  As the poem progresses, Dante the Wayfarer gains an increasing
 understanding of his situation and of himself, gradually transforming into Dante the
 Poet.\textsuperscript{6}  Each of these guises is so believably rendered that the reader is sometimes hard
 pressed to remember that they are just that, \textit{personae} created by the historical Dante
 Alighieri; as Lino Pertile puts it, “[t]he character Dante, the narrator Dante and the
 historical Dante are all intertwined and overlapping, but we cannot assume that they are

\textsuperscript{5} One of the first scholars to emphasize this distinction was Leo Spitzer in “A Note on the Poetic and
 Empirical ‘I’ in Medieval Authors,” \textit{Traditio} 4 (1946): 414-422.  For more recent reiterations, see the
 commentaries of Anthony K. Cassell, “\textit{Inferno} I,” \textit{Lectura Dantis Americana} (Philadelphia: University of
 Pennsylvania Press, 1989), pp. 10 and 130, n. 4; Mark Musa, trans., \textit{Dante Alighieri’s Divine Comedy}, vol.
 2: \textit{Inferno}, Commentary (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1996), p. 3; and Robert Hollander,
 \textit{The Inferno}, trans. Robert and Jean Hollander, commentary Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books,

\textsuperscript{6} Throughout this chapter, references to these two \textit{personae} may be abbreviated to simply the Poet or the
 Wayfarer.  The latter may also be designated as the Pilgrim.
identical. Nor are they three discrete entities. Dante’s identity in the poem is ultimately an irresolvable ambiguity, an interlacing the poet fully exploits.”

The fictive nature of the events described in the poem is more obvious. Led by a series of divinely-appointed guides, the Wayfarer journeys through the depths of Hell, scales the heights of Mount Purgatory, and finally ascends to Paradise. Along the way he learns the nature of sin, penance and blessedness, cleansing his own sins so that he may ultimately be granted an ineffable vision of the triune God. Surely such an extraordinary voyage was not granted to a poet-politician of early fourteenth-century Florence. As Dante the Wayfarer attests in the poem’s second canto, “I am not Aeneas, nor am I Paul.” Yet so convincingly realistic was the experience of Dante the Wayfarer, and the narration of Dante the Poet, that readers are often tempted to accept the poem’s truth claims despite their better judgement. As William Franke writes:

From its origins and ever since, discussion of the Divine Comedy has been haunted by the supposition or the claim, whether it is affirmed or denied, that this poem is somehow more than a poem, more than an imaginative fiction; readers of all persuasions have had to reckon with the insinuation that it is a true account of an actual historical journey, an elevatio ad coelum, whether in the body or out of the body one knows not, God knows, to echo the passage from 2 Corinthians 12:2-4 about Paul being rapt into the third heaven that Dante himself echoes in the proem to the Paradiso.9

---

8 Inf. II, 32: “Io non Enèa, io non Paulo sono” (pp. 26-27). As Hollander notes, however, Dante had lofty expectations of how his work would be received. “What the protagonist says is not what his author thinks: Dante is to be understood as both the ‘new Aeneas’ and the ‘new Paul’” (Commentary, p. 38) All Italian text and English translations of the Commedia are taken from the Hollander’s verse translations. For the Inferno, see note 5 above. These are based on the standard critical edition by Giorgio Petrocchi, La Commedia secondo l’antica vulgata, 1st ed. (Milano: Mondadori, 1966-1967).
Dante earnestly recounts his fantastical pilgrimage as the literal truth, causing some of his earliest commentators to explain to their audiences that his voyage was at most a revelation or vision occurring in the mind, not an actual journey made in the flesh.\(^\text{10}\) All readers would likely agree, however, that Dante did intend his poem to convey a number of higher truths from the Christian perspective, truths about his own spiritual condition, that of mankind as a whole, and the nature of the divine.

Hence the author’s clever decision to cast himself as the protagonist allows him to examine not only those issues that concerned the historical Dante Alighieri, but also those that affected sinful humanity as a whole. Most critics agree that the Wayfarer is not only a version of Dante himself, but also represents Everyman, his journey providing an accessible example of conversion for all readers to follow.\(^\text{11}\) The poem’s first lines establish the character’s two functions: “Midway through the journey of our life/ I came to myself in a dark wood…”\(^\text{12}\) The initial use of the first person plural indicates the universal application of the Pilgrim’s experience, while the subsequent use of the first person singular shows its more personal significance. As we learn elsewhere in the poem, Dante’s alleged journey took place in the spring of 1300, when he was thirty-five years old. Hence he was midway through the journey of his life, assuming that he would live the biblically allotted seventy years (Ps. 89:10).\(^\text{13}\) Throughout the rest of the poem,

---

\(^{10}\) Franke, p. 262.


\(^{12}\) Inf I, 1-2: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovali per una selva oscura” (pp. 2-3, my italics).

\(^{13}\) See Cassell, pp. 2-3. Hollander (p. 12) and Cassell (pp. 7-8) also cite Isaiah 38:10: “in dimidio dierum meorum vadam ad portas inferi.” These are the words of Hezekiah, who was sick “usque ad mortem” (Is 38:1). Snyder notes that sickness and death are common images for despair. See “The Paradox of Despair,” pp. 60-61.
Dante often depicts his past self struggling with problems particular to his own life, such as the political situation of Florence or his sinful pride. However, the poem’s lasting popularity clearly demonstrates that it offers meaning to all of its readers. Dante’s moving account of the Wayfarer’s pilgrimage through the Christian afterlife encourages his readers to undertake their own salvific journey; they too may take up Dante’s poem sometime in the middle of their lives and explore all manner of sins in the *Inferno*, learn to repent them in *Purgatorio*, and attempt to take in the glories of *Paradiso*.

These two levels of meaning, the personal and the universal, can be clearly detected in Dante’s treatment of despair in the *Commedia*. What biographical evidence we have strongly suggests that Dante struggled with despair in the years after his exile from Florence in March of 1302. As Giuseppe Mazzotta writes of these years:

> …[they] cannot be understood without understanding the bleak clarity exile brought to his vision. He knew despair and almost certainly he contemplated suicide. But because everything was now lost, nothing was lost… Dante soon discovered, or simply accepted, that the exile [his fellow expatriates] all bewailed as a tragic fatality need not be construed as a hopeless, unalterable condition. In the depths of his despair he saw the futility and falseness of despair… For Dante, on the contrary…hopelessness is illusory because it denies the reality and the possibilities of the future, and exile becomes the providential condition wherein he recognizes the necessity to transcend the particularisms of local history. The way out of the darkness of partial and relative viewpoints…is a universal standpoint.14

As was the case for other types of human failings, Dante drew from this personal experience with despair in order to depict it accurately and poignantly in his *Commedia*.

His poem is far more than a simple biography, however; any fellow Christian may

---

accompany Dante and Virgil on their famous journey and learn truths that can apply to
his own spiritual development. Dante wanted his readers to understand that despair could
be either a final submission to sin, or, as he found in his own life, the point from which, with God’s help, one could turn away from sin.

In this chapter, I will discuss Dante’s treatment of despair as found in his *Inferno.*

One could argue that this entire *cantica* is a study of despair; Dante makes it clear
throughout the poem that Hell is the realm of eternal despair. The shades encountered here exist in absolute despair, having lost any hope of God’s mercy.15 As Virgil, the
Wayfarer’s first divinely chosen guide, explains in Canto I, Dante cannot leave the dark
wood without first being led through the Inferno, “an eternal place/ where you shall hear
despairing cries/ and see those ancient shades in pain/ as they bewail their second
death.”16 As the famous inscription on the gates of Hell announces in Canto III, those
who enter must abandon all hope.17 Even the souls of the virtuous pagans and
unbaptized babies in Limbo, though they suffer no torments, are condemned “without
hope [to] live in longing.”18

I have chosen to focus my study on the four episodes of the *Inferno* in which
Dante deals most explicitly with despair. As noted above, in the opening lines of Canto I
the Wayfarer comes to himself in a dark wood, lost and terrified. His subsequent efforts to find his way out of this predicament are often interpreted as an ignorant sinner’s

---

16 *Inf.* I, 114-117: “loco eterno;/ ove udirai le disperate strida,/ vedrai li antichi spiriti dolenti,/ ch’a la
seconda morte ciascun grida” (pp. 8-9).
17 *Inf.* III, 9: “Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch’intrate” (pp. 46-47).
18 *Inf.* IV, 42: “[S]anza speme vivemo in disio” (pp. 68-69).
struggle against spiritual despair. The Pilgrim and his guide will later encounter a tense but short-lived delay at the Gates of Dis in Cantos VIII and IX. Many commentators believe the threatened appearance of Medusa in this scene to be a veiled reference to the threat that spiritual despair still poses to the Wayfarer. In Canto XIII the Pilgrim finds the shades of those who lost their own fight against despair. They are punished for their violence against themselves, since they destroyed themselves either by committing suicide or by wasting their worldly goods. Virgil describes such souls as “lamenting when [they] should rejoice” during their time on earth, making it clear that they are now being punished not only for their self-destructive acts, but also for the sinful mindset that led to them. The first cantica ends when the Pilgrim and his guide finally confront Lucifer. As King of Hell, Lucifer is the embodiment of despair. Trapped at the centre of the universe, and thus farthest from the Empyrean, Lucifer has become the inversion of his former grandeur, hideous, speechless and impotent, weeping from his six eyes while his three mouths gnaw on history’s greatest sinners.

Throughout his poem, Dante makes it clear that no sinner can escape the selva oscura of spiritual despair without the help of God’s grace. As I will discuss below, in all four of the episodes just cited, the Wayfarer is confronted by various representations of spiritual despair. During the first two scenes, those of Cantos I and IX, the Pilgrim is himself suffering from some degree of despair, and is thus caught in situations that pose a danger not only to his physical well-being, but to his soul as well. In each case, though

---

21 Inf. XI, 43-45: “[E] piange là dov’ esser de’ giocondo” (pp. 206-207).
22 Inf. XXXIV, 53-54: “Con sei occhi piangéa, e per tre menti’ gocciava ’l pianto e sanguinosa bava” (pp. 628-629).
his fear and doubt threaten to overwhelm him, he is rescued by the intervention of divine grace. In Canto XIII the Pilgrim witnesses the self-destructive results of unchecked despair and reacts with inappropriate sympathy to those punished there. As his privileged journey continues, however, he acquires more knowledge of sin and becomes less susceptible to its temptations. At the end of the cantica, Virgil and Dante will use Lucifer’s body to climb out of the Inferno, thus rendering the fearful King of Hell into an object of mockery. Using this image, Dante shows his readers the ultimate futility of despair, but also demonstrates how it can be used as a starting point for conversion.

**Canto I: *per una selva oscura***

Unlike the second two cantiche of Dante’s great poem, which each have thirty-three cantos, *Inferno* contains thirty-four. This difference has led some dantisti to view Canto I of *Inferno* as a prologue for the entire Commedia, while citing Canto II as the prologue of the first cantica. As noted above, the canto’s opening tercets introduce two versions of the author: first the main character, Dante the Pilgrim, a traveler lost in a dark wood; second the narrator, Dante the Poet, who records this adventure at a later time. We can perceive these two identities by closely reading the poem’s first three tercets:

```
Midway in the journey of our life
I came to myself in a dark wood,
for the straight way was lost.
```

---

23 Scholars have also argued that Cantos I and II together serve as a prologue to both the cantica and the poem as a whole, noting that *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* also begin with two prologue cantos. See Hollander, p. 34; Cassell, “*Inferno* I,” p. 1 and p. 130 n. 2; Singleton, *Inferno*, vol. 2: Commentary, p. 23; Alberto Chiari, *Il preludio dell’Inferno* (Torino: Società editrice internazionale, 1966), p. 5.
Ah, how hard it is to tell
the nature of that wood, savage, dense and harsh—
the very thought of it renews my fear!

It is so bitter death is hardly more so.
But to set forth the good I found
I will recount the other things I saw.24

When the narrator discusses something in the past tense (e.g. I came to myself), he is referring to events affecting his former self, Dante the Pilgrim, while those things stated in the present tense pertain to his current self, Dante the Poet (e.g. how hard it is to tell).

Here at the beginning of the work, the Poet immediately seeks to impress the reader with the horror of his past dilemma; it was so frightening that the process of bringing it to mind and setting it to verse causes his fear to return. He resolves to continue, however, because he wishes to convey “the good” he found. If the reader chooses to accept the literal truth of the poem, then the Commedia’s very existence would prove that Dante the Pilgrim eventually found a way to escape his predicament. His further assertion, that he found some good in this dark wood which he wishes to pass on to his audience, hints that his means of escape was not merely fortuitous, but also edifying. As the canto progresses, we will discover more about this good.25

The setting of the Inferno’s first two cantos, introduced to us above as “a dark wood,” is characterized by its nightmarish amorphism and unreality. In later lines the Poet also refers to it as “the valley” or “the pass.”26 He never specifies its location or even confirms that it is indeed a physical space and not a construct of the Pilgrim’s mind.

24 Inf. I, 1-9: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita/ mi ritrovi per una selva oscura,/ ché la diritta via era smarrita./ Ahi quanto a dir qual era è cosa dura/ esta selva selvaggia e aspra e forte/ che nel pensier rinova la paura!/ Tant’è amara che poco è più morte;/ ma per trattar del ben ch’i’ vi trovai,/ dirò de l’altre cose ch’i’ v’ho scorte” (pp. 2-3).
25 For further discussion of this line and its implications in light of the rest of the poem, see Cassell, pp. 120-125.
26 Inf. I, 14: “quella valle”; I, 26: “lo passo” (pp. 2-3).
His elusiveness on this point poses a notable contrast to the rest of the poem, in which the Pilgrim’s position can always be understood in specific geographical or cosmological terms. For example, he might be in the seventh circle of Hell, deep inside the earth; on the fourth terrace of Mount Purgatory, in the Southern Hemisphere; or in the Heaven of the Sun, the fourth planetary sphere of Paradise. The only thing that the reader can conclude for certain about the location of this wood is its vicinity to the Gate of Hell. Denise Heilbronn-Gaines has noted that though the Poet asserts the literal truth of his recounted experience, the dreamlike quality of these opening lines encourages the audience to develop allegorical interpretations of the Wayfarer’s situation, a reading strategy that would benefit them throughout the rest of the poem.27 We have already observed the long tradition of reading the Pilgrim as not only Dante Alighieri, but as an Everyman figure, a representation of humanity as a whole.28 His journey has long been equated with the pilgrimage of the Christian through this life on earth; his initial progress through the dark wood is said to symbolize the Pilgrim’s sinful state and consequent estrangement from God.29

Dante’s description of the dark wood also contains a number of common medieval images of despair. In these early tercets the Wayfarer was sleepy and lost, both conditions being metaphors for despair used by patristic writers.30 The Poet cannot even properly recall how he first came to this wood, since “[he] was so full of sleep/ when [he] forsook the one true way.”31 His lack of memory implies that his immersion in sin had

28 See pp. 220-221 above.
29 Hollander, p. 13; Musa, pp. 3-4; Cassell, pp. 14-18.
31 Inf. I, 11-12: “tant’era pien di sonno a quel punto/ che la verace via abbandonai” (pp. 2-3).
been long-standing, an unconscious absorption with worldly things and the spiritual dangers thereof.\textsuperscript{32} Given the symbolism already discussed, the “one true way” likely signifies more than the best path through the wood, but also refers to a life lived in accordance with God’s will. The darkness of the wood is another idea associated with despair.\textsuperscript{33} These ominous images of despair foreshadow the threats that were soon to be faced by the Wayfarer, threats which, due to his spiritual condition, he was badly prepared to face.

The two references to death found in these early lines not only evoked despair to the medieval audience,\textsuperscript{34} but also showed that no matter the seeming unreality of the wood, the Wayfarer felt that his life was in jeopardy there. Our allegorical conjectures indicate that due to his sinful state, his immortal soul was likewise in danger of damnation. As quoted above, the Poet reports in line 7 that “[i]t is so bitter death is hardly more so.”\textsuperscript{35} Hollander explains that the antecedent of “it,” the implicit subject of the verb è (is), could be either the dark wood itself or the difficult act of recounting his experience in that wood, later described as “the pass no mortal being ever left alive.”\textsuperscript{36} Clearly the Pilgrim was convinced that his life was threatened, as the Poet claims that the terror caused by his past predicament still affects him: “the very thought of it renews my fear!”\textsuperscript{37} In fact, the word paura appears in the canto five times before Virgil makes his entrance. One critic even dubbed Canto I of \textit{Inferno} “[i]l canto della paura.”\textsuperscript{38}

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{32} Heilbronn-Gaines, “\textit{Inferno} I,” pp. 290-291.
  \item\textsuperscript{33} Snyder, p. 61.
  \item\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., pp. 60-61.
  \item\textsuperscript{35} \textit{Inf.} I, 7: “Tant’ è amara che poco è più morte” (pp. 2-3).
  \item\textsuperscript{36} \textit{Inf.} I, 26-27: “lo passo/ che non lasciò già mai persona viva” (pp. 2-3). On the interpretation, see Hollander, p. 13.
  \item\textsuperscript{37} \textit{Inf.} I, 6: “[C]he nel pensier rinova la paura!” (pp. 2-3).
  \item\textsuperscript{38} Cassell, “\textit{Inferno} I,” p. 30, n. 34.
\end{itemize}
We suspect that the pilgrim’s fearful condition was divinely instigated when the Poet tells us that his heart was *compunto* with fear, an adjective evoking the idea of *compunctio*, or the pricking of a guilty conscience, for the reader. If the Pilgrim were to remain in this terrified state, however, he would run the risk of being consumed by his fear and falling prey to despair. The last two chapters have documented the importance that medieval thinkers ascribed to the equilibrium of hope and fear in the mind of the Christian. We have seen sinners such as Isidore’s Homo and Hrotsvit’s Theophilus struggle to maintain the proper balance of hope and fear, and thus avoid the contingent risks of despair and presumption, in their efforts to repent. The concept was considered no less important in Dante’s day; Bernard of Clairvaux, the twelfth-century mystic whom Dante chose to be the pilgrim’s guide to the Empyrean, also refers to this salvific balance in his *Commentary on the Song of Songs*. Mercy and justice are the two feet of Christ, and their respective footprints are hope and fear. In the opening lines of the *Commedia*, our protagonist was certainly feeling the footprint of salubrious fear after having spent the night lost and alone in a dark wood. Dante goes on to demonstrate how the sinner’s disposition can swing precipitously between these two extremes when seeking to reform himself without the aid of divine grace.

Having come at last to the base of a hill, the protagonist was reassured by the rays of the dawning sun he saw at its summit. Scholars usually associate this summit with a positive goal; as Robert Hollander explains it, “[t]he *colle* (hill) is generally interpreted as

---

39 *Inf.* I, 15: “…che m’avea di paura il cor compunto” (pp. 2-3). See Cassell, pp. 30-33.
40 See Chapter Two, pp. 66-68 and Chapter Three, pp. 167-171.
41 See Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones in Cantica Canticorum* VI, 6-8, in *PL* vol. 183 (Paris: Garnier, 1854), 805B-806B: “Felix mens, cui semel Dominus Jesus utrumque infixerit pedem! A duobus signis cognoscite eam quae huismodi est, quae secum necesse est referat divinis impressa vestigiis. Ispa sunt timor et spes; ille judicium, ista misericordiae repraesentans imaginem.”
signifying the good life attainable by humankind under its own powers; some, however, believe it has a higher and spiritual meaning, involving salvation."42 Here the Poet describes his feelings of relief after such a long and terrible night:

And as one who, with laboring breath, has escaped from the deep to the shore turns and looks back at the perilous waters,

So my mind, still in flight, turned back to look once more upon the pass no mortal being ever left alive.

After I rested my weary flesh a while, I took my way again along the desert slope, my firm foot always lower than the other.43

The reader is again alerted to the threat of despair when, before starting his climb up the hill, the Pilgrim turned and looked back, as we read earlier, upon “lo passo che non lasciò già mai persona viva.”44 Here he is described as a swimmer or sailor who has just barely avoided drowning or shipwreck, two other common metaphors for despair.45

Verse 30, with its odd reference to the Pilgrim’s “firm foot,” has long caused disagreement among modern critics. The problem merits some attention in this study, since the nature and outcome of the Wayfarer’s ascent up the hill has important consequences for understanding Dante’s treatment of despair throughout the *Inferno*. In two studies first published in 1959 and 1966 respectively, John Freccero presented an extensive tropological gloss for this verse which relied on Aristotelian science, Ne-

---

42 See Hollander, p. 14; cf. Musa, p. 5; Grimes, “The Sunlit Hill of Inferno I,” who argues against the identification of this *colle* with the Mount of Purgatory; and Singleton, *Inferno*, vol. 2: Commentary, pp. 6-7, who argues that it is the Scriptural *mons Domini*.
43 *Inf*. I, 22-30: “E come quei che con lena affannata,/ uscito fuor del pelago a la riva,/ si volge a l’acqua perigliosa e guata,/ così l’animo mio, ch’ancor fuggiva,/ si volse a retro a rimirar lo passo/ che non lasciò già mai persona viva./ Poi ch’èi posato un poco il corpo lasso,/ ripresi via per la piaggia diserta,/ si che ’l piè fermo sempre era ’l più basso” (pp. 2-5).
44 *Inf*. I, 26-27 (p. 2).
Platonic themes, patristic exegesis and scholastic philosophy. He first shows that according to Aristotelian physiology, the “firm foot” was in fact the left foot. Patristic and scholastic writers would later associate this firm left foot with the will, while the right foot represented the intellect. Hence the protagonist’s feet symbolized the two powers of his soul, the *affectus* and *intellectus*. The Pilgrim is unable to take proper advantage of his affective power, however, since his will still bears the wound of original sin. Relying too heavily on the power of his intellect, and without the aid of sanctifying grace to heal his wounded will, the Wayfarer limps as he makes his futile journey up the hill, his firm foot always the lower.

In the decades since it was first posited, Freccero’s argument has gained its advocates, such as Charles S. Singleton, who in 1970 claimed that Freccero had given “[t]his famously obscure verse…its sufficient gloss,” and elaborators, such as Anthony K. Cassell. Cassell would further explore the theme of failed ascent found in Freccero’s “seminal article” with greater reference to Dante’s own sin of pride as revealed in *Purgatorio* XIII and in light of Augustine and Bernard of Clairvaux’s thought on the biblical *pes superbiae*. As the *Commedia* progresses and the Pilgrim’s sins are cleansed, the Poet describes his feet as increasingly positive and efficacious for the attainment of his ultimate goal.

---


Naturally, Freccero’s work also has its critics, including Robert Hollander, Enrico De Negri and Ruggio Stephanini. De Negri has reservations about Freccero’s view of the protagonist as homo claudus, the limping man of patristic exegesis, since this hypothetical limp is not mentioned again in the rest of the *Inferno*. Stephanini has developed a solution that permits both a literal and moral interpretation, suggesting that the Pilgrim turns left in order to ascend the hill diagonally, just as he and Virgil will later travel leftward and downward throughout the majority of the *Inferno*. With the valley of the dark wood to his left and the slope of the hill to the right, the Pilgrim’s left foot would always be lower, while the leftward turn of this failed ascent would prefigure his later arduous journey to the centre of Hell. Most modern commentators now agree that however this controversial verse is understood, it should be read both literally and figuratively.\(^{51}\)

Readers familiar with Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*, discussed in the second chapter of this study, may be thinking of a set of feet other than the Pilgrim’s, i.e. the feet mentioned in Isidore’s etymologies of hope and despair. To quote Isidore’s explanation again:

Hope (*spes*) is so called because it is a foot for someone going forward, as if it were *est pes* ("there is a foot"). Desperation (*desperatio*) is its contrary, for in that term the ‘foot is lacking’ (*deest…pes*), and there is no ability to go forward, because as long as someone loves sin, he does not hope for future glory.\(^{52}\)

---


\(^{51}\) Hollander, *Commentary*, p. 15; Musa, pp. 7-8.

\(^{52}\) See Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, trans., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 173. For a more thorough discussion of this passage, including a quotation of the original Latin, see Chapter Two, pp. 28-29.
It should be noted that an alternative translation for the phrase *deest pes* is “the foot fails,” which would certainly be the case if the Wayfarer was indeed the *homo claudus*. When composing these etymologies, Isidore was likely inspired by the same classical and patristic tradition of “the feet of the soul” which John Freccero applied to verse 30.

While I am not arguing that these etymologies supply the definitive solution to the problem of Dante’s firm foot, I believe that they can support existing arguments advocating the significance of forward progress, or the lack thereof, in the *Inferno*, especially in this section of the first canto. Christopher Kleinhenz has recently noted that:

…[i]n the *Inferno* there is a lot of motion, a lot of “procession,” but this movement—except in the case of Dante and Virgil—leads nowhere and stands as an ironic representation of “progress.” The only souls for whom movement truly counts are Dante and Virgil, and in truth, only Dante benefits, for Virgil must eventually return to his place in the immutable infernal order, to Limbo, after he has completed his mission of guiding the Pilgrim.

We will soon see that like the damned souls of *Inferno*, the Pilgrim experienced this same futility of motion in his effort to climb the hill. Beset alternately by hope and fear, he will not be able to make any true progress out of his situation in Canto I until he is assisted by an agent of divine grace.

Limping or not, the Pilgrim began his ascent convinced that he had narrowly escaped death. His relief was short-lived, however, as he was soon confronted by a

53 I discussed this possibility in a paper which was awarded the Charles Hall Grandgent Prize for 2007 by the Dante Society of America. The paper was entitled “‘The Foot Fails’: Isidore’s Etymology of Despair and the Opening Canto of the Divine Comedy.”

leopardess who impeded his way several times and forced him back down the hill.

Despite this setback, he was again encouraged by the morning sun:

It was the hour of morning,
when the sun mounts with those stars
that shone with it when God’s own love
first set in motion those fair things,
so that, despite that beast with gaudy fur,
I could still hope (sperar) for good, encouraged
by the hour of the day and the sweet season,
only to be struck by fear (paura)
When I beheld a lion in my way.

He seemed about to pounce—
his head held high and furious with hunger—
so that the air appeared to tremble at him.

And then a she-wolf who, all hide and bones,
seemed charged with all the appetites
that have made many live in wretchedness
so weighed my spirits down with terror (paura),
which welled up at the sight of her,
that I lost hope (speranza) of making the ascent.55

This quotation demonstrates Dante’s clever structuring of the tercets describing the
Wayfarer’s failed climb, placing the words themselves (paura and sperar/speranza) near
each other in order to draw attention to the Pilgrim’s rapid fluctuation between hope and
fear. Commentators often associate the three beasts he encountered with various
categories of sin.56 However they are interpreted, their presence, especially that of the
she-wolf, destroyed the Wayfarer’s newfound hope. These beasts drove him back down

55 Inf. I, 37-54: “Temp’era dal principio del mattino,/ e ’l sol montava ’n su con quella stelle/ ch’eran con
lui quando l’amor divino/ mosse di prima quelle cose belle;/ sì ch’a bene sperar m’era cagione/ di quella
fiera a la gaetta pelle/ l’ora del tempo e la dolce stagione;/ ma non sì che paura non mi desse/ la vista che
m’apparve d’un leone./ Questi parea che contra me venisse/ con la test’alta e con rabbiosa fame;/ sì che
parea che l’aere ne tremesse./ Ed una lupa, che di tutte brame/ sembiava carca ne la sua magrezza,/ e molte
genti fè già viver grame,/ questa mi porse tanto di gravezza/ ch’io perdei la speranza de l’altezza” (pp. 4-5, my emphasis).
56 Hollander, pp. 16-17; Musa, pp. 8-9; Cassell, “Inferno I,” pp. 45-76.
the hill “to where the sun is silent,” i.e. where he could not be reached by the inspiring hope he had experienced when he started his climb. Freccero considered this line a reference to the middle distance between the slope and the valley of the dark wood, associated by him with Augustine’s *regio dissimilitudinis*. To describe his crushing disappointment, Dante uses the image of a gambler or merchant who has lost his stake. Alexander Murray has shown that the former occupation was also linked to the sin of despair in the mind of the medieval reader.

We have learned about the dangers of excessive or misdirected hope in earlier chapters; Freccero and Cassell both argue that this aborted ascent represents the Pilgrim’s prideful presumption. Like the virtuous pagan philosophers of whom he was so fond, the Wayfarer’s attempt to climb the hill represents his mistaken belief that he could reform himself and escape the dark wood of his sins by relying solely on his own virtue. As his protagonist’s failure showed, however, Dante demonstrates that the unrepentant sinner who presumes to overcome his flaws by himself will inevitably be reclaimed by them. As Freccero concluded:

The best for which man on his own can hope is to ward off those three beasts for the time being, and avoid being pushed back into actual sin. Without guidance, all men must despair of reaching the summit, but some can hold their ground at least a little while. That ground, the middle ground between sin and true Christian virtue, is a deserted slope because few men have made it their land. Only Virgil and the other virtuous pagans were familiar with the moral landscape, so to speak, and if we wished to go beyond the text in a way which would not have offended

---

57 *Inf.* I, 60: “là dove ’l sol tace” (pp. 6-7).
59 *Inf.* I, 55-57: “E qual è quei che volontieri acquisita,/ e giugne ’l tempo che perder lo face,/ che ’n tutti suoi pensier piange e s’attrista” (pp. 4-5).
the poet, we might say that this middle area is analogous to Limbo… [I]t was in a kind of limbo that they struggled to live, where man does not wander blindly as in a forest, but rather hobbles painfully in the light.62

Thus the Wayfarer’s independent effort to improve his situation inevitably ended in despair. As we will soon see, however, Divine Providence did not abandon him, but chose this darkest moment to offer help.

As he fell back, “fleeing to a lower place,” the Pilgrim caught sight of a dim figure coming toward him “in the wide silence.”63 The Pilgrim then broke his own silence, and that of the poem as a whole, to ask this figure for help.64 This figure was of course that of Virgil, and his sudden arrival and promise of guidance offered Dante a way out of his desperate predicament, though it lay along no ordinary path. We learn in Canto II that Virgil was charged with this mission by Beatrice, a complex and powerful figure in Dante’s writing, who in this context is often identified with divine grace.65 She and two other “blessed ladies,” St. Lucia and the Virgin herself, were moved to pity by the Pilgrim’s plight.66 The sight of Virgil is “offered” to Dante’s eyes; thus Heaven ensured that divine grace was offered to the sinner in his time of greatest need.67 The Pilgrim’s cry, “Miserere di me,” comprises the first spoken words of the Commedia; it references Psalm 50, one of the seven penitential psalms: “Have mercy on me, O God, according to

---

63 Inf. I, 61, 63: “…in basso loco,” “…chi per lungo silenzio parea fioco” (pp. 6-7).
64 For a more detailed study of the role of silence and speech in this canto, see Heilbronn-Gaines, pp. 287-294.
66 Inf. II, 124: “tre donne benedette” (pp. 32-33).
67 Inf. I, 62: “[D]’inanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto… (pp. 6-7, my italics). Heilbronn-Gaines, pp. 288-289. Hollander points out that line 62 is also a reference to an appearance made by the goddess Venus to her son Aeneas in Aeneid II, 589-590, while line 65 is reminiscent of the words of Aeneas to Venus in Aeneid I, 327-330. Dante often makes such “double citations,” one pagan and one Christian (p. 18). See also Musa’s assertion that “the verb gridare [is] an often-used term for an exclamation of mortal desperation” (p. 16).
Thy great mercy.”68 In the ensuing conversation, Virgil reveals his identity and ultimately offers to guide Dante out of the dark wood. This interaction between the Pilgrim and Virgil in Canto I represents the essential catalyst of the penitential process that would unfold so beautifully in the subsequent two cantice. It would not have taken place if the Pilgrim had not failed so completely in his efforts to escape under his own power. As Cassell concludes, “[i]n retrospect we understand that the Wayfarer had to fail in order to succeed. In this way we must understand the words of verse 8: ‘il ben che vi trovai.’”69 By acknowledging and accepting the offered grace of God, the sinner could partake in that grace and start the work necessary to overcome his sinful past, moving away from his fear and despair and toward hope and justification. This movement would be the ultimate trajectory of the Pilgrim’s subsequent journey through Hell and Purgatory.

Canto VIII-IX: doubt and despair at the Gates of Dis

After arriving at the doleful Gates of Hell and mysteriously crossing the Acheron, Dante the Pilgrim and his escort go on to travel through the initial five circles of the Inferno. First they enter Limbo (Canto IV), the circle from which Virgil was called by Beatrice, and to which he will return for eternity when his duties as guide have ended. His description of this episode in Canto II gives us an early clue as to the nature of his punishment: “I was among the ones who are suspended [sospesi] when a lady called me,

---

68 *Inf.* I, 65: “‘Miserere di me,’ gridai a lui” (pp. 6-7). Ps. 50: “Miserere mei Deus secundum magnam misericordiam tuam.” See Heilbronn-Gaines, p. 294. Heilbronn-Gaines also points out that this line was meant to evoke not only the psalm, but the Psalmist, widely believed in the Middle Ages to have been King David. David was frequently cited as an example of a great sinner who did not despair in the midst of his remorse (pp. 292-293). See also Snyder, “The Paradox of Despair,” p. 37.

so blessèd and so fair/ that I implored her to command me.” In Limbo the Pilgrim will learn more about those who were likewise “suspended.” Here he finds the shades of unbaptized babies, as well as those who lived and died before Christ but did not worship God properly. Perhaps because he also dwells in this circle, Virgil is quick to point out that these souls did not sin, and thus suffer no torments. They had, however, lacked some level of intuitive faith in life and are thus condemned to live “without hope…in longing,” always aware of the bliss of the saved in Paradise, but forever barred from enjoying it. The Pilgrim is greatly affected by their situation: “[w]hen I understood, great sadness seized my heart,/ for then I knew that beings of great worth/ were here suspended [sospesi] in this Limbo.”

Dante scholars have long noted the need to judge the protagonist’s reactions to the condition of the damned with care. Though the Pilgrim will often be moved to pity by their contrapasso, the audience must remember that his sympathy is misplaced and implies disagreement with the perfect justice of God. In her aforementioned visit to Virgil in Canto II, Beatrice displays the reaction appropriate to the saved, since she neither pities the damned nor fears their punishment. As she explains to Virgil: “[w]e should fear those things alone/ which have the power to harm./ Nothing else is frightening./ I am made such by God’s grace/ that your affliction does not touch,/ nor can

---

70 Inf. II, 52-54: “Io era tra color che son sospesi,/ e donna mi chiamò beata e bella,/ tal che di comandare io la richiesi” (pp. 26-27).
71 Inf. IV, 34-38.
72 Inf. IV, 42: “sanza speme vivemo in disio” (pp. 68-69).
73 Inf. IV, 43-45: “Gran duol mi prese al cor quando lo ’ntesi,/ però che gente di molto valore/ conobbi che ’n quel limbo eran sospesi” (pp. 68-69).
74 Hollander, p. 35, 112; Musa, p. 52, 79, 85; Baldassaro, “Read It and (Don’t) Weep,” pp. 257-264; “Everyman as Sinner,” p. 69. “Sympathy for the damned, in the Inferno, is nearly always and nearly certainly the sign of a wavering moral disposition” (Hollander, p. 112).
these fires assail me.”75 The Pilgrim of the Inferno does not yet enjoy such gracious protection, since he has yet to undergo the process of repentance and absolution in Purgatorio. He still exists in a state of sin and his judgement is consequently flawed. He frequently pities the damned and fears their punishments, perhaps sensing his own potential to be similarly condemned if he continues to live wrongly.

As an unconverted Everyman figure, the Wayfarer is not only plagued by inappropriate pity and fear, but often falls prey to the very sins he sees being punished.76 For example, he expresses doubt on two occasions in Canto IV, thus mimicking the lack of faith for which the shades around him were condemned. As they begin their descent into Limbo, the Pilgrim notices that his guide has gone pale. Dante seeks reassurance, forgetting that their mission was divinely ordained: “How shall I come if you’re afraid,/ you, who give me comfort when I falter [dubbiare]?”77 Virgil explains that his pallor is not due to fear, but pity for the suffering of the souls of Limbo, a pity which clearly applied to his own situation as well.78 Dante likely subscribed to the medieval belief that Virgil’s Fourth Eclogue was a messianic prophecy, making his failure of belief all the more ironic and tragic.79 After learning the fate of the limbicoli, the Pilgrim is overwhelmed by his own pity, which causes him to be beset by uncertainty again: “‘Tell me, master, tell me, sir,’ I began,/ seeking assurance in the faith/ that conquers every doubt,/ ‘did ever anyone, either by his own/ or by another’s merit, go forth from here/ and

75 Inf. II, 88-93: “Temer si dee di sole quelle cose/ c’hanno potenza di fare altrui male:/ de l’altrre no, ché non son paurose:/ l’son fatta da Dio, sua mercé, tale:/ che la vostra miseria non mi tange,/ né fiamma d’esto ’ncendio non m’assale” (pp. 30-31). Hollander, p. 41.
77 Inf. IV, 17-18: “Come verró, se tu paventi/ che suoli al mio dubbiare esser conforto?” (pp. 66-67).
78 Hollander, p. 79; Musa, p. 49.
rise to blessedness?" Hollander argues that here Dante does not wish to confirm that Hell was harrowed by Christ, but only seeks to specify who He took with Him. I am more inclined to agree with Musa, who believes that this question does indeed betray some doubt on the part of the Wayfarer:

The repetitions of this initial line, and its hesitant tone, serve to underscore the Pilgrim’s nervousness and self-consciousness. His question nonetheless reveals that, overcome by the enormity of what he has learned of Limbo, he momentarily doubts the true faith as taught by God’s Church, seeking additional proof by means of Virgil’s eyewitness account. His anguish over the apparent injustice of the punishment of the souls in Limbo leads him to doubt God’s mercy and goodness so that he begins to wonder whether any souls were ever saved from Hell by Christ at all. In this respect, he participates in the sin of the souls in Limbo, becoming, like them, unchurched and faithless—even if only temporarily. … He does not want to give away too much to Virgil or ask his question too directly, but he is also near desperation, asking to reassure himself that both Virgil and his Christian faith are trustworthy.

We should remember that medieval people believed that despair could arise from such deficiencies of faith, and thus Dante is to some degree imitating the doubtful despair of the souls of Limbo.

The Wayfarer’s first impression of this mournful circle was auditory; the Poet reports that “as far as I could tell by listening,/ [there] was no lamentation other than the sighs [sospiri]/ that kept the air forever trembling.” Musa notes the onomatopoeic

---

80 Inf. IV, 46-51: “‘Dimmi, maestro mio, dimmi, segnore,’/ comincia’io per volere esser certo/ di quella fede che vince ogne errore:/ ‘uscicci mai alcuno, o per suo merto/ o per altrui, che poi fosse beato?’” (pp. 68-69).
81 Pp. 80-81.
82 Musa, p. 52, 53.
83 Chapter One, p. 10.
84 Inf. IV, 25-27: “Quivi, secondo che per ascoltare,/ non avea pianto mai che di sospiri/ che l’aura eterna facevan tremare” (pp. 66-67).
quality of the word *sospiri*; indeed Dante evokes the sighs of Limbo throughout the canto by using similar sounding words, such as *sospigne* (22) and *sospesi* (45). Hollander notes that “Dante has, in five passages in earlier works, made sighs (*sospiri*) the result of feeling anguish (*angoscia*)—as they are here (v. 26).” The damned of *Inferno* are also described as making *sospiri* on eight other occasions; they are distinguished here in Limbo, however, as the only evidence of punishment. As Virgil describes the Harrowing to Dante, naming some of the Old Testament patriarchs that Christ took with Him to Paradise, they are passing through “a wood of thronging spirits.” Again, the sound of the line itself brings to mind a crowd of sighing shades: “la selva, dico, di spiriti spessi.” This “forest” of shades recalls the *selva oscura* in which the Pilgrim first appears and anticipates that of Canto XIII, the wood of the suicides, both places where he is troubled by doubt.

As we will soon see, Dante uses a similar choice of homophonic words not only to convey the quiet desperation of the souls of Limbo, but whenever the Wayfarer is beset by doubt and fear. For example, in Canto III, after reading the lines inscribed over the

---

85 Musa, p. 51.
86 Another interesting use of *sospiri* and homophonic words occurs at the end of Canto V, in which the reference to sighs is more abstract but is also associated with a sinner experiencing doubt in life. During his famous exchange with Francesca, Dante asks her whether “in that season of sweet sighs (*d’i dolci sospiri*)/ how and by what signs did Love/ acquaint you with your hesitant desire [*i dubbiosi disiri*]” (118-120, pp. 98-99). Note the translator’s capitalization of the word “Love”; Hollander observes that despite the confessional quality of his question, “Dante is behaving more like a priest in the so-called ‘religion of Love’ than a Christian confessor” (p. 109). Such a pagan notion would make Francesca and Paolo’s desire *dubbiosi* indeed. A few tercets later Francesca recounts that just before she and Paolo gave in to their desire, they were alone and “sanza alcun sospetto” (129). Their lack of doubt in the “religion of Love” led them to stray from Christian faith, to their imminent peril. In the next line, she reports that their eyes met many times (*li occhi ci sospinse*) while reading. Dante seems to be using such onomatopoeia both to evoke the sweet sighs of their love and to anticipate the anguished sighs of their resultant damnation.
87 Hollander, *Commentary*, p. 79.
88 *Inf.* III, 22; VII, 118; IX, 126; X, 88; XIX, 65; XXIII, 13; XXIV, 117; and XXX, 72.
89 *Inf.* IV, 66.
90 Musa, p. 54. See pp. 250-252 below.
Gate of Hell, Dante informs Virgil that “for me their meaning is hard.” Critics generally believe that this line does not indicate the Wayfarer’s confusion with the inscription’s meaning so much as his fear at its implications. While it informs the damned that they should “abandon all hope” ([*lasciate ogne speranza*]), Virgil advises his charge to “banish all distrust” ([*lasciare ogne sospetto*]). Unlike all the other entities in Hell, the Pilgrim alone has grounds for hope. His journey there is divinely ordained and will be of immediate spiritual benefit to him if he can set aside his fear and apply his reason to his experiences. He has yet to learn this important lesson, however; soon after Virgil’s admonishment, the Pilgrim hears the horrifying sounds that emerge from the pit of the Inferno, chief among them being the *sospiri* of the damned, and weeps in sympathy. We will find these same words being employed at the Gate of Dis, where the beliefs of both the Pilgrim and his guide will be sorely tested.

As Virgil will later explain, the first and most populous section of Hell is comprised of those damned for sins of incontinence: the lustful (Canto V), the gluttonous (Canto VI), the avaricious and prodigals (Canto VII) and the angry and sullen (Canto VIII). The four circles found within the walls of Dis, the “city” at the heart of the Inferno, contain sinners condemned for heresy, violence, simple fraud and treachery. Unlike their incontinent brethren, such sinners acted with malicious intent and thus suffer more severe punishments. When attempting to enter Dis in Cantos VIII and IX, both Dante and Virgil are plagued by doubt in the divine assistance which has been promised

---

91 *Inf.* III, 12: “il senso lor m’è duro” (pp. 46-47).
92 Hollander, p. 57; Musa, p. 34.
93 *Inf.* IV, 14.
94 *Inf.* IV, 22.
95 *Inf.* XI, 16-90. Hollander, pp. xxi, 16-17, 212-215; Musa, pp. 8-9, 157-165.
for their journey, thus mimicking the lack of faith which condemned the heretics of the city’s first circle.

After crossing the River Styx, Virgil and Dante approach the city’s iron walls, which critics have associated with the hardened wills of the sinful shades within them.96 These walls are manned by more than a thousand rebel angels, who challenge the travellers arriving at the gate. The fallen angels taunt and threaten the pair with the malice that defines Lower Hell, claiming to be offended that a living soul has entered and passed through the realm of the dead, i.e. the eternally damned.97 When Virgil attempts to negotiate with them privately, they concede that he may enter, but insist that he leave the Pilgrim to retrace his path back through Hell on his own. Dante the Poet chose this moment to address his audience directly for the first time in the Commedia, expressing the Pilgrim’s great fear at this turn of events: “[r]eader, how could I not lose heart/ at the sound of these accursèd words [parole],/ for I thought [credetti] I would never make it back.”98 The Poet’s word usage is significant, reminding the careful reader of Canto II, where Virgil recounted the words (parole) with which Beatrice called him from Limbo to guide Dante. Indeed, Canto II is often known to critics as the “canto della parola,” since this word appears there five times.99 By doubting the words of Beatrice and Virgil, which confirmed the divinely-ordained nature of his journey, and believing instead those of the rebel angels, the Pilgrim suffers from a serious error in faith. He also anticipates and mimics the sin he will find in Canto X, which describes the circle of the heretics;

96 Hollander, p. 161.
97 Musa, p. 118.
98 Inf. VIII, 94-96: “Pensa, lettor, se io mi sconfortai/ nel suon de le parole maladette,/ ché non credette ritornarci mai” (pp. 154-155). On Dante’s addresses to the reader, see Hollander, p. 162.
99 Hollander, p. 39.
these shades were also guilty of not properly believing the *parole* of Heaven, in this case the Scriptures.

When faced with the first serious opposition they have encountered since setting out with Virgil, the Pilgrim panics. “Do not leave [*lasciar*] me…helpless now!” he cries to Virgil, obviously having forgotten the lesson he learned when confronted by the formidable gates of Hell in Canto III, that while the damned should [*lasciate ogne speranza* (“abandon all hope”), Dante needed to *lasciare ogne sospetto* (“abandon all doubt”).\(^{100}\) Virgil reminds his charge that he should “[h]ave no fear. None can prevent our passage,/ so great a power granted it to us./ …Comfort your weary spirit/ and feed it with good hope./ I will not forsake [*lascero*] you in the nether world.”\(^{101}\) Dante remains doubtful, however, worrying that his “gentle father” has abandoned him while again trying to negotiate with the angels.\(^{102}\) Considering the nature of the Pilgrim’s predicament, and his improper and extreme reaction to it, his feelings of paternal abandonment seem to apply not only to Virgil, but to God Himself.

Even Virgil will have trouble taking his own advice, however, when the angels rush back inside and slam the gates shut. He begins to show signs of doubt as well, walking back to his charge with halting steps, downcast eyes and sighing to himself (*dicea ne’ sospiri: ‘Chi m’ha negate le dolenti case!’*).\(^{103}\) He rallies for Dante’s sake, however, explaining that the rebel angels have tried and failed to exercise such invalid authority before: “This insolence of theirs is nothing new:/ they showed it once before, at another gate./ It still stands open without lock or bolt./ Over it you saw the deadly

---

\(^{100}\) *Inf.* VIII, 100: “[N]on mi lasciar…cosi disfatto” (pp. 154-155); *Inf.* III, 9, 14 (my translations).

\(^{101}\) *Inf.* VIII, 104-108: “‘Non temer; ché ’l nostro passo/ non ci può tòrre alcun: da tal n’è dato./ …e lo spirito lasso/ conforta e ciba di speranza buona,/ ch’i’non ti lascero nel mondo basso’” (pp. 154-155).

\(^{102}\) *Inf.* VIII, 109-110: “[Q]uivi m’abbandona/ lo dolce padre” (pp. 154-155).

\(^{103}\) *Inf.* VIII, 118-120 (pp. 156-157).
Virgil’s oblique reference to Christ’s harrowing again puts the reader in mind of Cantos III and IV, where Dante was plagued with fear and doubt even though he saw the broken Gates of Hell and heard Virgil’s eyewitness account of the event. Canto VIII ends with Virgil assuring the Pilgrim that someone is even now descending through the Inferno who will be able to open the Gates of Dis for them. As Canto IX begins, however, Virgil’s doubt becomes more apparent:

The pallor cowardice painted on my face
when I saw my leader turning back
made him hasten to compose his features.

He stopped, like a man intent on listening,
for the eye could not probe far
through that dim air and murky fog.

“Yet we must win this fight,” he began,
“or else….Such help was promised us [s’offerse].
How long it seems to me till someone comes!”

I clearly saw that he had covered up
his first words with the others that came after,
words [parole] so different in meaning.

Still, I was filled with fear [paura] by what he said.
Perhaps I understood his broken phrase [parola tronca]
to hold worse meaning that it did.105

Clearly Virgil’s confidence has been shaken. While infernal henchmen have challenged the pair before, Virgil was able to render them powerless in some fashion, most often by simply informing them of his mission’s divine mandate.106

104 Inf. VIII, 124-127: “Questa lor tracotanza non è nova; ché già l’usaro a men segreta porta,/ la qual sanza serrame ancor si trova./ Sovr’essa vedestù la scritta morta” (pp. 156-157).
105 Inf. IX, 1-15: “Quel color che viltà di fuor mi pinse/ veggendo il duca mio tornare in volta,/ più tosto dentro il suo novo ristrinse./  Attento si fermò com’ uom ch’ascolta;/ ché l’occhio nol potea menare a lunga/ per l’aere nero e per la nebbia folta./  ‘Pur a noi converrà vincere la punga,’/ cominciò el, ‘se non…Tal ne s’offerse./  Oh quanto tarda a me ch’altri qui giunga!’/  L’vidì ben si com’ei ricoperse/ lo cominciar con l’altro che poi venne,/ che fur parole a le prime diverse;/ ma nondimen paura il suo dir dienne,/ perch’io traeva la parola tronca/ forse a peggior sentenza che non tenne” (pp. 166-167). Cf. the appearance of Virgil in Canto I, 62: “dinanzi a li occhi mi si fu offerto.” See n. 67 above.
Virgil’s present failure and resultant anxiety only magnifies that of his charge. The close proximity of *paura* and *parola* in these tercets evokes Cantos I and II, where the Wayfarer was first overwhelmed by the fearful prospect of his proposed journey through the afterlife, and was first comforted by the knowledge of its celestial endorsement. Despite the help promised to him and Virgil’s successful guidance thus far, this challenge at the Gates of Dis has rendered Dante just as doubtful and afraid as he was when his trek through Hell began. The Pilgrim then asks Virgil if anyone from Limbo has ever been so far into the Inferno before, an indirect way of questioning his guide’s abilities. Virgil responds that shortly after his death he was compelled by the sorceress Erichtho to fetch a soul from the lowest circle of Hell. “Well do I know the way—so have no fear,” Virgil concludes.¹⁰⁷

This answer, though meant to convince Dante of his competence, also reveals an emergent failure on Virgil’s part, the nature of which becomes clear in the next few tercets. The waiting pair are now surprised by the sudden appearance of the three Furies atop the gate’s tower. Virgil identifies the trio and gives each her proper name before falling into a horrified silence.¹⁰⁸ Musa notes that these mythological avengers are “antitheses of the three heavenly ladies (Mary, Lucia and Beatrice) who form the chain of grace in Canto II; they are, therefore, another infernal distortion of the Trinity.”¹⁰⁹ As they let forth awful shrieks (*gridavan*),¹¹⁰ tearing at their flesh and striking their breasts, Dante crowds close to Virgil *per sospetto*, translated by Hollander as “[i]n fear,” though

---

¹⁰⁷ *Inf*. IX, 30: “[B]en so ’l cammin; però ti fa sicuro” (pp. 168-169). On the interpretive problems of this tale of Virgil and Erichtho, which Dante doubtlessly invented, see Hollander, pp. 176-178; Musa, pp. 125-126.
¹⁰⁸ Musa, p. 129.
¹¹⁰ *Inf*. IX, 50: “gridavan si alto” (pp. 168-169). Cf. n. 67, p. 235, for the association of the verb *gridare* with desperation.
it could be more literally understood as “in doubt” or “in distrust.”¹¹¹ The Furies then threaten to unleash another mythological monster: “‘Let Medusa come and we’ll turn him to stone,’/ they cried.”¹¹² Virgil panics and tells the Pilgrim to turn around and close his eyes, claiming that “if the Gorgon head appears and should you see it,/ all chance for your return above is lost.”¹¹³ As he says this Virgil turns Dante himself, covering the Wayfarer’s eyes with his own hands. Gone is his previous confidence in the impotence of Hell’s minions and the power of God’s will.

In the wake of his discussion of Erichtho, the appearance of the Furies, and the threat of Medusa, Virgil has forgotten his posthumous understanding of the difference between Christian truth and pagan falsehood:

…[b]y illustrating his sincere belief in the power of the pagan Medusa to turn the Pilgrim to stone, the Latin poet implicitly displays his doubt in the arrival of the heavenly messenger (an arrival he appeared so sure of at the end of Canto VIII). In short, Virgil is now totally submissive to pagan laws… After the Gate of Dis was shut in his face by the rebellious angels, Virgil, though he was distressed and confused, showed no such signs of defeatism. It is only now, after an abrupt shift to pagan time, that he breaks down. In essence, Virgil is re-enacting the “sin” for which he is eternally punished in Limbo: the failure to believe in his own prophecy of the coming of the Messiah.¹¹⁴

Virgil also mimics the faithlessness of the heretics just within the wall, succumbing to the sin that surrounds him just as the Pilgrim has done in previous circles.

¹¹¹ *Inf.* IX, 51: “[C]h’i’mi strinsi al poeta per sospetto” (pp. 168-169).
¹¹³ *Inf.* IX, 56-57: “se ’l Gorgón si mostra e tu ’l vedessi,/ nulla sarebbe di tornar mai suso” (pp. 168-169).
¹¹⁴ Musa, p. 130.
Here the Poet again addresses the reader: “O you who have sound intellects,/ consider the teaching that is hidden/ behind the veil of these strange verses.”\textsuperscript{115} Dante’s call for insightful interpretation has engendered much debate among commentators, who cannot even agree concerning the verses to which he refers.\textsuperscript{116} Hollander suggests that Dante wanted to call attention to the fact that the Pilgrim’s eyes are shielded by both his own and Virgil’s hands: “perhaps what it suggests is that stoic restraint is not enough to keep a sinner from dangerous temptation (i.e. Dante, had she appeared, would have looked upon Medusa and been turned to stone).”\textsuperscript{117} As we will see shortly, gracious intervention will save him from this fate. Many scholars, most extensively Margaret Nossel Mansfield, assert that Medusa’s petrifying gaze represents the risk of Dante succumbing to the static, impenitent despair that surrounds him in Hell.\textsuperscript{118} In light of the dangerous escalation of doubt suffered by both the protagonist and Virgil, this risk should not surprise us. Were Dante to be turned to stone as threatened, he would be unable to complete his edifying pilgrimage through Hell and on to Purgatory. He would remain in the Inferno among the damned, an outcome which one could argue he has merited given his lack of faith. Kleinhenz has shown that such physical stasis becomes increasingly prevalent as one descends through the lower circles and approaches the eternally despairing Lucifer, trapped in ice at the centre of his doleful kingdom.\textsuperscript{119}

We must remember, however, the nature of the Wayfarer’s voyage and of the One Who granted it. The same gracious Power that saved the beleaguered protagonist from

\textsuperscript{115} \textit{Inf. IX}, 61-63: “O voi ch’avete li ’ntelletti sani,/ mirate la dottrina che s’asconde/ sotto ’l velame de li versi strani” (pp. 170-171).
\textsuperscript{116} Hollander, p. 179; Musa, pp. 130-132.
\textsuperscript{117} Hollander, ibid.
\textsuperscript{119} Kleinhenz, \textit{Movement and Meaning}, p. 11.
the dark forest will hardly allow him to be trapped forever in the midst of Hell, even if he has in some way earned such punishment. Virgil, terrified by the sight of the legendary figures of his life on earth, has forgotten that like the other denizens of Hell, Medusa would only have the power which God allowed her. Before the Gorgon even has the chance to show herself, heavenly help arrives. Alerted by a great crashing sound, Virgil realizes that the promised aid is coming and removes his hands from the Pilgrim’s eyes, apparently now remembering that Medusa is as harmless as the other monsters they have encountered. He then instructs his charge to peer through the murky air at their approaching rescuer. The Poet tells us little specific about this figure, only that when he crosses the River Styx “he [does] not touch the water with his feet,” that “[i]t was clear that he was sent [messo] from Heaven,” is “full of high disdain,” and carries a wand, with which he easily opens the Gates of Dis. Hollander explains that even though this messo bears some resemblance to Mercury, he is most likely an angel given his Heavenly origin and the fact that Virgil directs the Wayfarer to remain silent and bow in his presence. “It seems highly likely that Dante here gives us an archangel Michael ‘dressed up’ as Mercury, a fused identity that is not problematic in any way, given Dante’s practice of combining pagan and Christian materials.” After briefly admonishing the rebel angels for their futile efforts to resist the divine will, the messo departs as suddenly as he arrived, eager to leave the misery of the Inferno behind and move on to other tasks.

---

120 *Inf.* IX, 81: “passava Stige con le piante asciutte”; 85: “Ben m’accorsi ch’elli era da ciel messo”; 88: “pien di disdegno”; 89-90: “Venne a la porta e con una verghetta/ l’aperse, che non v’ebbe alcun ritegno” (pp. 170-173).
121 Hollander, p. 180.
Though the angel spared no time to address the travellers, they set out to enter the city feeling “emboldened by his holy words” (le parole santi),\textsuperscript{122} a marked contrast to the doubt associated with Virgil’s earlier parola tronca.\textsuperscript{123} Within the walls the pair see a wide plain covered with Roman-style sarcophagi, each filled with the shades of various sects of heretics. When describing the punishment of the heretics and the Pilgrim’s conversations with them, Dante again uses the same homophonic words he chose earlier in the cantica to indicate doubt; we are told that the covers of the sarcophagi are sospesi and that Dante can hear their sighs of sorrow (sospiri dolenti).\textsuperscript{124} Virgil explains to his charge that the sepulchres are “far more laden than you think” (molto più che non credi son le tombe cariche),\textsuperscript{125} a figure of speech which allows the Poet to reintroduce the issue of belief. By depicting the circle of the heretics so soon after the protagonist’s own crisis of faith at the Gates of Dis, the author can demonstrate one possible if extreme outcome of such disbelief.

The exploration of this circle continues in the following canto; here the Pilgrim will talk with the shades of Farinata degli Uberti and Cavalcante de’ Cavalcanti, the former of whom will also be described as sighing (sospirando).\textsuperscript{126} In order to converse with Dante, the sinners must rise from their graves in what scholars have identified as an infernal distortion of the salvific resurrection of Christ, especially ironic considering that these heretics did not believe in His resurrection in life.\textsuperscript{127} The Poet later reports that he believes that (credo che) Cavalcante rose onto his knees to speak with the Wayfarer, the

\textsuperscript{122}\textit{Inf. IX}, 105: “sicuri appresso le parole sante” (pp. 172-173).
\textsuperscript{123}\textit{Inf. IX}, 14.
\textsuperscript{124}\textit{Inf. IX}, 121, 126. The last usage of a form of the adjective sospeso in the Inferno occurs in Canto XXVIII, 61, when Mohammed is referred to as having his foot suspended: “[p]oi che l’un piè per girsene sospese” (p. 518). Here again we find the theme of misplaced or mistaken faith.
\textsuperscript{125}\textit{Inf. IX}, 129.
\textsuperscript{126}\textit{Inf. X}, 88.
\textsuperscript{127}Hollander, pp. 194-196.
prayerful pose also ironic for a damned heretic.\textsuperscript{128} Peering over the edge of the tomb he shares with Farinata, Cavalcante hopes to see his son Guido accompanying the Pilgrim, but “his hesitant hopes were crushed” (\textit{’l sospecciar fu tutto spento}).\textsuperscript{129} A few lines later he wrongly assumes that the Pilgrim has referred to Guido as dead and falls back into his sepulchre in despair. Cavalcante thus repeats the misapprehension for which he was condemned, mistakenly believing that his son was dead instead of alive, just as he had once disbelieved the resurrection of the Lord’s Son. Had he pinned as much hope on God’s Son in life as he has on his own son in death, he would not now be consigned to the Inferno. The Pilgrim, after his own near escape from doubt and despair at the Gate of Dis, has begun to learn this valuable lesson, one that none of the damned of the Inferno ever managed to learn while alive. In Canto XIII, he will see another potential fate for those who do not put their trust in divine providence.

\textbf{Canto XIII: \textit{insieme parole e sangue}}

Later in the course of their journey through Hell, Virgil and the Pilgrim will learn the ultimate fate of the desperate suicide’s soul. In Canto XIII, they continue their passage through the seventh circle of the Inferno, in which the violent are punished. Here the travelers come across a dense, trackless wood. This forest is even more threatening than the dark wood in which the poem began; the Poet describes it as having “[n]o green leaves, but those of dusky hue—/ not a straight branch, but knotted and contorted—/ no

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{128} \textit{Inf.} X, 54.
\item \textsuperscript{129} \textit{Inf.} X, 57.
\end{itemize}
fruit of any kind, but poisonous thorns.” He employed similar images of confusion, darkness and sterility in the *Inferno*’s opening lines, hinting that this harsh wood contains the realization of the terrible potential of the nebulous *selva oscura*. Musa observes the prevalence of negation in the canto’s opening lines:

> [E]ach of the [first] three tercets begins with ‘non,’ and each of the three verses of the second tercet [quoted above] is an antithetical statement beginning with this negation. Hence, the landscape of the wood is described entirely in terms of what it is ‘not.’ This device anticipates the negation inherent in the sin of suicide and subtly suggests the atmosphere in which the action of this canto will move: mistrust, confusion, incredulity.

No ordinary birds sing in these trees, which instead resound with the raucous cries of Harpies, legendary creatures with the bodies of carrion-eating birds and the faces of women. Early commentators associated the Harpies with the despair of the shades condemned here, which their self-inflicted death did not allow them to escape.

As in the scene at the Gate of Dis, the Poet emphasizes the role that faith, or the lack thereof, plays in the Pilgrim’s reaction to this dismal forest. Virgil advises him to look carefully, since he would see things that “in my telling, would seem to strip my words of truth” (*torrien fede al mio sermone*). While Dante can hear human cries all

---

130 *Inf.* XIII, 4-6: “Non fronda verde, ma di color fosco;/ non rami schietti, ma nodosi e ’nvolti;/ non pomi v’eran, ma stecchi con tòsco.” (pp. 238-239).
132 Musa, p. 180.
133 See William A. Stephany, “Dante’s Harpies: ‘tristo annunzio di futuro danno’,” *Italica* 62:1 (Spring, 1985): 24-33, esp. p. 25. Stephany’s article focuses on the Harpies’ role in Book III of the *Aeneid*, which Dante references in v. 10-12 of this canto: “Here the filthy Harpies nest,/ who drove the Trojans from the Strophades/ with doleful prophesies of woe to come” (p. 239). He likens the situation of the Trojans to that of Dante, who has just heard Farinata’s prediction of his coming exile in Canto X, 79-81. Unlike the suicides of this canto, neither the Trojans nor Dante will ultimately allow their fear of the future to drive them to despair.
around him, he cannot see who could be making them and becomes confused (*tutto smarrito*).

The Poet then presents us with an alliterative riddle of a line, hammering home the importance of belief for those wishing to interpret this canto: “I think he thought that I thought [*Cred’ïo ch’ei credette ch’io credesse*/ all these voices in among the branches/ came from people hiding there.”

Musa points out that:

[t]his convoluted line not only reflects the Pilgrim’s bewildered state (24), it also imitates the mood and structure of the canto in general. The triple repetition of the verb *credere* (itself a verb expressing doubt) refers to three different voices: Dante the Poet (*Cred’ïo*); Virgil (*ch’ei credette*); and Dante the Pilgrim (*ch’io credesse*); it effectively illustrates the action of a divided mind.

Such perplexity and doubt befits a canto dedicated to suicide. Dante’s decision to describe the Pilgrim as *smarrito* also connotes more than simple confusion. The adjective is used in the first two cantos of the *Inferno* to evoke his state of ignorance and sin in the dark wood. In Canto V, the word indicates that he has been overwhelmed by inappropriate feelings of pity for the damned; in Canto X, Virgil notices that he is *smarrito* in the wake of Farinata’s dark predictions for his future.

As in these other cases, the Poet employs the word here to signal the Pilgrim’s moral disorientation, and some commentators feel that this particular usage suggests that he was suicidal in the *selva oscura*.

Seeing his uncertainty, Virgil then instructs the Wayfarer to break a twig from one of the trees. After he does so, the wounded branch itself cries out (*gridò*) in protest:

---

137 *Inf.* XIII, 25-27: “Cred’ïo ch’ei credette ch’io credesse/ che tante voci uscisser, tra quei bronchi,/ da gente che per noi si nascondesse” (pp. 238-239). Hollander refers to verse 25 as “[p]erhaps the most self-consciously *literary* line in a canto filled with *literariness*” (p. 250).
138 Musa, p. 182.
139 *Inf.* I, 3; II, 64.
140 *Inf.* V, 72; X, 125. Cf. n. 133 above.
“Why do you break me?...Why do you tear me? Have you no pity in you?”\textsuperscript{142} Dante watches in horror as the tree continues to bleed and speak from its wound:

As from a green log, burning at one end,  
that blisters and hisses at the other  
with the rush of sap and air,  
so from the broken splinter oozed blood and words [insieme parole e sangue] together, and I let drop the twig and stood like one afraid.\textsuperscript{143}

Virgil apologizes to the wounded tree, which the protagonist and the audience now understand is a shade. He explains that his charge had to see this bizarre contrapasso for himself: “[c]ould he have believed [creder] it otherwise…what he had seen only in my verses, he would not have raised his hand against you. But your plight, being incredible [incredibile], made me goad him to this deed that weighs on me.”\textsuperscript{144} Those familiar with the \textit{Aeneid} would know that here Virgil refers to Book III, 22-48, where the Latin poet recounted a similar scene. Wishing to build a new Trojan city on the shore of Thrace, Aeneas unknowingly pulls up bushes covering the grave of the murdered Polydorus. Blood flows from the branches and the voice of Polydorus rises from the earth, telling his story of betrayal.\textsuperscript{145}

As noted above, Dante’s use of credere (to believe) and related words such as fede (faith) and incredibile (unbelievable) indicates that the reader should pay close

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Inf.} XIII, 33, 35-36: “[E] ’l tronco suo gridò: ‘Perché me schiante?’”; “‘Perché me scerpi?/ non hai tu spirto di pietade alcuno?’” (pp. 240-241).
\item\textsuperscript{143} \textit{Inf.} XIII, 40-45: “Come d’un stizzo verde ch’arso sia/ da l’un de’ capi, che da l’altro geme/ e cigola per vento che va via,/ si de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme/ parole e sangue; ond’io lasciai la cima/ cadere, e stetti come l’uom che teme” (pp. 240-241).
\item\textsuperscript{144} \textit{Inf.} XIII, 46, 48-51: “‘S’elli avesse potuto creder prima…ciò c’ha veduto pur con la mia rima,/ non avrebbe in te la man distesa;/ ma la cosa incredibile mi fece/ indurlo ad ovra ch’a me stesso pesa” (pp. 240-241).
\item\textsuperscript{145} Hollander, p. 251; Musa, pp. 185-186.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
attention to messages concerning faith and doubt in this canto. Why does Virgil insist that his ward will not believe the account of the Aeneid alone, that he must injure the tree-shade and hear its bloody testimony for himself? Has the Pilgrim not already experienced any number of otherwise “incredible” things in the Inferno? Musa observes that by first instructing the Pilgrim to break a branch, then shifting the blame to his ward, Virgil is in a sense betraying him, a breech of faith which, as we will see below, would certainly be appropriate to this canto. I would suggest that Dante carefully constructed this episode to create an infernal parody of the narrative of salvation and the issues of faith that it raises. An important key to interpreting this scene is contained in the parable of The Rich Man and Lazarus (Lk 16:19-31), in which Christ foreshadows not only His own resurrection, but also the doubt which will continue to plague humanity afterward.

The story contrasts an unnamed rich man, who leads a self-indulgent life, with Lazarus, a poor but righteous man who would lay at the rich man’s gate, covered with sores. Though Lazarus longs for scraps from the rich man’s table, he is always ignored. Both men eventually die, and while Lazarus is carried to Heaven by angels, the rich man is sent to Hell. Looking up from his place of torment, he can see Lazarus in Heaven at the bosom of Abraham. The rich man pleads with Abraham to send Lazarus down to quench his thirst while he burns. When Abraham explains that this is impossible, the rich man asks:

> “Then, father, I beseech thee that thou wouldst send him to my father’s house, for I have five brethren, that he may testify unto them, lest they also come into this place of torments.’ And Abraham said to him: ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them hear them.’ But he said: ‘No, father Abraham: but if one went to them from the dead,

146 Musa, pp. 189-190; Looney, “Believing the Poet,” pp. 42-43.  
147 Musa, p. 186.
they will do penance.’ And he said to him: ‘If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they believe, if one rise again from the dead.’”  

Before Christ’s ministry, humanity’s only account of God’s Law and the coming Messiah was “Moses and the prophets,” i.e. the Old Testament. When first told, this parable must have seemed a simple cautionary tale urging the hearer to repent and obey the Law in the present life.

It would take on a chilling new meaning, however, after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, when Christ Himself returned from the dead to give humanity further proof of God’s power and His promise of redemption and eternal life. Christ’s prophecy was proven right; in the case of many Jews and Gentiles, “neither will they believe, if one rise again from the dead.” The Resurrection remained incredibile. Looney identifies an even more appropriate Biblical source for this scene, an analogy used by Paul in Romans, Chapter 11. Here Paul describes the Christian faithful as being like a new branch grafted onto the trunk of a wild olive tree, while the Jews who had not converted were like branches that God had broken off of that tree. Paul advises Christians not to assume that Jews could not come to believe in Christ, and thus be grafted back on, or that they themselves would not fall into sin and thus be broken off by God as well (Rom 11:17-24).

Similar to the rich man in the parable, who knew that his brothers would not be convinced to repent solely by the ancient testimony of the Jewish Scriptures, Virgil was sure that Dante would not trust the tale of bleeding bushes found in his poem. Perhaps the pagan guide identified with the Jews of Biblical times, feeling that the Wayfarer

---

149 Looney, pp. 45-46.
would need more proof in order to believe. The bloody speech of the wounded tree-shade, *insieme parole e sangue*, is a negative reflection of Christ’s legacy to all of His followers in the wake of His crucifixion, the building-blocks of faith: the Word, in the form of the New Testament, and His blood, i.e. his redeeming self-sacrifice. Despite these signs, many Jews and Gentiles would remain unconvinced, unable to cultivate the Christian understanding of faith as a virtue that operates without, or even in spite of proof. As Paul wrote, such faith must remain steadfast in the face of earthly tribulation:

> [f]or which cause we faint not, but though our outward man is corrupted, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For that which is at present momentary and light of our tribulation worketh for us above measure, exceedingly an eternal weight of glory. While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporal: but the things which are not seen, are eternal… For we walk by faith and not by sight.\(^{150}\)

The suicidal souls of this wood are likewise guilty of a failure in faith. Fixing their hopes on worldly things instead of Christ, they suffered the inevitable setbacks dealt by fortune during their lifetimes.\(^{151}\) Instead of persevering through their troubles, they became overwhelmed by despair, rejecting not only God’s promise of redemption and life in the world to come, but even His gift of life in this world. Instead of dying for the sake of others, the suicides killed themselves to escape their own pain, without regard for how their deaths would affect others.\(^{152}\) While the words and blood from the tree of the Cross brought eternal life, we will see below that the words and blood of the suicidal tree-souls consigned here only attest to faithlessness, despair and death.

---

\(^{150}\) 2 Cor 4:16-18, 5:7.  
\(^{151}\) On the connection between faith and hope, see Chapter One, p. 8.  
\(^{152}\) Sheehan, “Control of Feeling,” p. 197. The social and legal ramifications of suicide are dealt with extensively by Murray, *Suicide*, vol. II.
After apologizing to the wounded shade, Virgil invites him to tell the Pilgrim who he once was. Enticed by the promise of a better reputation in the world above, the soul complies, telling his story with a rhetorical skill in keeping with the station he once held in life. Though he is never named, Dante’s educated audience would have had little trouble determining from his speech that this tree was once Pier delle Vigne, chancellor of Frederick II of Sicily and Naples. The shade elegantly professes that “[s]o faithful (fede) was I to that glorious office/ that first I lost my sleep and then my life.” He then describes his fall from grace, claiming that envious rivals at court turned the emperor against him. Protesting his innocence, Pier declares that “not once did I break faith (fede) with my true lord.” Pier did indeed lose the emperor’s favour in 1249, when he was arrested for treachery, blinded and sentenced to death. Before the sentence was carried out, however, Pier took his own life, thus breaking faith with Christ, his proper Lord.

Whether he was actually guilty of the charge of treachery remains unclear, but plentiful evidence exists showing his habitual abuse of his office for his own material gain. In his discussion of the historical Pier, Anthony K. Cassell argues that Dante the Poet was doubtless aware of “the darker sides of the story,” i.e. that at least some of the accusations against Pier were likely true, and that Dante expected his audience to discern this as well. Cassell shows that though Dante reproduced the chancellor’s legendary eloquence, he also used traditional iconography to present him as a latter-day Judas, the

---

153 Hollander, p. 251; Musa, pp. 183-184.
155 *Inf.* XIII, 74-75: “già mai non ruppi fede/ al mio segnor, che fu d’onor si degno” (pp. 242-243).
156 Looney, p. 39.
158 Cassell, “Pier della Vigna’s Metamorphosis,” p. 44.
quintessential desperate suicide, thus signalling Pier’s avarice and treachery to the reader. 159

The Wayfarer, however, is greatly moved by Pier’s oration, finding himself unable to speak afterward. He asks his guide to “[p]lease question him/ about the things you think (credi) I need to know./ For I cannot, such pity fills my heart.” 160 The Wayfarer’s pity provides further evidence that he was himself suicidal in the selva oscura, thus emphasizing just how dangerous his situation had been, both physically and spiritually. 161 As in previous cantos, his pity has robbed him of the opportunity to understand better the nature of Pier’s sin and the perfection of God’s justice. He is completely under the spell of his own feelings and the chancellor’s rhetoric, thus missing important clues to the tree-shade’s guilt. 162 Though it will do nothing to improve his dire contrapasso, Pier remains greatly concerned with his reputation in the world above, a demonstration of irrational vanity. He thoroughly enjoys the opportunity to plead his case with these newcomers, prefacing it with obsequious courtesies and going on to portray himself as a hapless victim of political intrigue. He glosses over the enormity of his sin, dedicating only one tercet of his famous eight-tercet long speech to his reasons for killing himself: “[m]y mind, in scornful temper,/ hoping [credendo] by dying to escape from scorn,/ made me, though just, against myself unjust.” 163 Musa comments on Pier’s clever wordplay, arguing that “[t]he concept is meant to deceive the listener, to veil

---

159 Cassell, ibid., pp. 50-64.
160 Inf. XIII, 82-84: “Domandal tu ancora/ qì quel che credi ch’a me satisfaccia;/ ch’ì’ non potrei, tanta pietà m’accora” (pp. 242-243). On the pathos of Pier’s speech, see Sheehan, p. 199.
161 Hollander, p. 253; Musa, p. 187.
162 Musa feels that the Wayfarer’s moral discernment is improving. He argues that the protagonist pities Pier not because he thinks that the suicide’s punishment is unjust, but because the shade, like Dante himself, was the victim of political scheming (p. 188).
163 Inf. XIII, 70-72: “L’animo mio, per disdegnoso gusto,/ credendo col morir fuggir disdegn./ ingiusto fece me contra me giusto” (pp. 242-243).
the moral prostitution in the act. Thinking to justify himself in the eyes of the emperor, he sold his life for the price of his soul."\textsuperscript{164} In both the world above and below, Pier values his reputation for loyalty to his temporal lord above the loyalty he owes to God. Like all condemned to the Inferno, Pier shows no true remorse for his sin, forever trapped in the same toxic mindset that caused him to take his own life.\textsuperscript{165}

Since his charge is overcome, Virgil asks Pier to explain how the souls of this segment of Hell are bound inside of trees and if they will ever be freed. The shade responds that after Minos sends the suicidal soul to the seventh circle, “[i]t falls into the forest, in a spot not chosen,/ but flung by fortune, helter-skelter,/ it fastens like a seed./ It spreads into a shoot, then a wild thicket./ The Harpies, feeding on its leaves,/ give pain and to that pain a mouth.”\textsuperscript{166} Due to their lack of stabilizing faith in God, these souls ceded control of their lives to the vicissitudes of fortune. It is only appropriate, then, that they have no control over where they are “planted.”\textsuperscript{167} Their growth from saplings to mature trees imitates the gradual but eventually all-consuming growth of despair in their souls.\textsuperscript{168} Their tree-forms are immobile, however, literally rooted in the soil of the dismal wood, the physical passivity of their contrapasso mirroring their spiritual passivity in life. They are unable to escape or fend off the attacks of the Harpies.\textsuperscript{169} Because in life they chose to express their pain by wounding themselves, now their

\textsuperscript{164} Musa, pp. 187-188. Cf. Sheehan, pp. 201-202: “[t]he state of his soul, not the state of his reputation, should be his concern. But he had long since broken faith with his soul, and settled for honors and power merely secular. The soul was sacrificed, and he had done it himself. This part of Piero’s speech…serves ultimately to reveal what he was in life: a spiritual suicide. He is for eternity what he was in life” (p. 202).

\textsuperscript{165} Musa, p. 188.

\textsuperscript{166} Inf. XIII, 97-102: “Cade in la selva, e non l’è parte scelta;/ ma là dove fortuna la balestra,/ quivi germoglia come gran di spelta;/ Surge in vermena e in pianta silvestra;/ l’Arpie, pascendo poi de le sue foglie,/ fanno dolore, e al dolor fenestra” (pp. 244-245).

\textsuperscript{167} Musa, p. 190.

\textsuperscript{168} Sheehan, p. 196.

\textsuperscript{169} Ibid., pp. 196-198.
wounds are the only means by which they may express their agony. Judgment Day will only intensify their torments; the bodies that the suicides had cast aside so violently will be hung from their branches, a mute testament to their final act and another association of the suicides with the image of Judas.

The suicides share their wood with another kind of sinner, the spendthrifts, who crash suddenly onto the scene while Dante and Virgil are “still fixed upon the tree,/ thinking (credendo) it had more to tell us.” These naked and torn souls are forever running from the pursuit of black hunting hounds. Those who fall behind are viciously torn apart by the dogs, and the suicides’ limbs often suffer more damage in the process. Though the tree-shades remain unnamed throughout the canto, emphasizing the solitary and lonely nature of their sin, the two spendthrifts seen here call out to each other by name, allowing the audience to easily identify them. The early commentary tradition associated the hounds with creditors, lenders with whom these destructively prodigal souls had broken faith. The overspending of these sinners betokened a far more serious spiritual flaw than the prodigals of Canto VII; they have been placed lower down in Hell because of their wilful determination to destroy the possessions God granted them, i.e. to commit “material suicide.”

As the canto closes, we meet one more suicide, this one in the form of a small bush in which a spendthrift had tried to hide from the hounds. The anonymous soul cries out in pain from the many wounds he thus acquires. When Virgil asks him who he was, he identifies himself simply as a Florentine, predicting dire consequences for his city

---

170 *Inf.* XIII, 109-110: “ancora al tronco attesi,/ credendo ch’altro ne volesse dire” (pp. 244-245).
171 Sheehan, p. 196.
172 Looney, p. 49.
173 Hollander, p. 254; Musa, p. 191.
because it has stopped honouring Mars in favour of John the Baptist. His dark, superstitious musings provide one final example of inappropriate belief. Only in the last line of his speech, also the jarring last line of the canto, does he tell us that “I made my house into my gallows,” but we are left with no clue as to why. Some scholars believe that Dante intended this unnamed Florentine to represent the city itself, especially since in the Italian, the suicide refers to his “houses”: “le mie case.” Debate continues as to whether this little bush symbolizes the danger that civic strife posed to the future of Florence or the increased occurrence of suicide within its walls. Whatever its more abstract significance, the sudden pronouncement of this line at the canto’s conclusion creates an appropriately jarring end to a canto dedicated to the negative extremities of human motivation.

In his own analysis of Canto XIII, Alexander Murray states with surprise that the canto “says absolutely nothing of despair, the disposition to which suicide was almost universally attributed by Dante’s educated contemporaries.” In a footnote, he goes on to mention that “its commentators went straight to the word desperare with its derivatives to denote the inhabitants and their deed.” I would posit that Dante did not need to use the word “despair” in Canto XIII in order to ensure that its presence was keenly felt by the reader; the commentators’ almost compulsive need to apply the word proves that he was successful in this regard. The dark, sterile atmosphere of the wood, the contagious

---

174 Inf. XIII, 151: “Io fei gibetto a me de le mie case” (pp. 248-249).
175 Musa notes that this plural usage could indicate that the suicide was from a well-to-do family that owned more than one house. “If so, this biographical fact does not necessarily contradict the symbolic significance of the Florentine as a representative of the city. Rather, it contributes added layers of meaning” (p. 194).
178 Ibid., p. 301, n. 36.
pain and self-delusion of its inhabitants, the references to Judas and the other plentiful evidence of broken faith, all signified violent, impenitent despair.

**Canto XXXIV: “Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni”**

The wood of the suicides, though it demonstrates despair’s most drastic result, is certainly not the last example of despair the Pilgrim found in the *Inferno*. At the end of the *cantica* he arrives at Cocytus, the river forming a frozen lake at the bottom of Hell. Here he encounters its monstrous King, Lucifer himself, trapped from the waist down in the icy heart of his own realm. In the canto’s first line, Virgil announces their approach with a perverted version of a Latin hymn of the True Cross: “*Vexilla regis prodeunt inferni,*” “the banners of the King of Hell advance.”\(^{179}\) The irony is keen, since the *vexilla* of the king cannot “advance” at all. The Pilgrim feels a wind, which he at first attributes to what looks like a great windmill in the distance. He will discover that in fact it results from Lucifer’s six great wings, which eternally flap as though to aid his escape. All that this motion accomplishes, however, is the creation of the great wind that freezes him in place. Lucifer’s plight is the culmination of the stasis and futile motion that has become increasingly prevalent as the travelers descended through Lower Hell.\(^{180}\)

As they draw closer, Virgil warns his charge that here “you must arm yourself with fortitude.”\(^{181}\) When he finally confronts the huge but helpless form, Dante himself becomes frozen in horrified fascination. He enters an ambiguous state in which, as he explains, “I did not die, nor did I stay alive./ Imagine, if you have the wit,/ what I

---

179 *Inf.* XXXIV, 1 (pp. 626-627). Hollander, p. 636.
181 *Inf.* XXXIV, 21: “convien che di forza t’armi” (pp. 626-627).
became, deprived of both."\(^{182}\) He is, in a sense, participating in the fate of Lucifer and the sinners of Cocytus, experiencing the living death that is eternal despair.\(^{183}\) Thus Dante has come full circle, witnessing the ultimate result of the despair he felt at the start of his bizarre pilgrimage. Were it not for the presence of his divinely-appointed guide, Dante might have remained forever trapped in his contemplation of the face of despair.

Virgil rouses Dante from his terrified stupor by naming the three sinners forever caught in Lucifer’s three mouths: Brutus and Cassius, who plotted the downfall of Julius Caesar, and of course, Judas Iscariot. He then summarily states: “\^[b]ut night is rising in the sky. It is time for us to leave, for we have seen it all.\(^{184}\) Virgil effected their escape from the Inferno, appropriately enough, by using the body of Lucifer as a ladder, carrying Dante on his back as he climbed down the King of Hell’s hairy flank. Only by confronting and using despair, and only with the help of divine guidance, could the Pilgrim then pass on to the realm of Purgatory. The souls they will meet there, though also tormented according to their past sins, have hope to comfort them.

**Conclusion**

As the existence of the *Commedia* itself shows, the despair of the Pilgrim did not result in his suicide. Dante made it clear, however, that the risk had been there; as Virgil

\(^{182}\) *Inf.* XXXIV, 25-27: “Io non mori’ e non rimasi vivo;/ pense oggimai per te, s’hai fior d’ingegno,/ qual io divieni, d’uno e d’altro privo” (pp. 626-627).

\(^{183}\) Hollander, while mourning the lack of scholarly attention to this passage, gives his preferred reading of this passage: that this moment represents the Pilgrim’s death to sin (pp. 637-638). Baldassaro considers this the last instance of the Pilgrim’s mimesis of the sinners of Hell. See his “Dante’s Hardened Heart: The Cocytus Cantos,” in *Lectura Dantis Newberryana, Volume II. Lectures presented at the Newberry Library, Chicago, Illinois, 1985-1987*, ed. Paolo Cherchi and Antonio C. Mastrobuono (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990), pp. 3-20, here pp. 16-18. Freccero refers to this process as “the death of the self” (“Dante’s Prologue Scene,” p. 3).

\(^{184}\) *Inf.* XXXIV, 68-69: “Ma la notte risurge, e oramai/ è da partir, ché tutto avem veduto” (pp. 630-631).
will remark to Cato in Canto I of *Purgatorio*, “[t]his man has not yet seen his final sunset,/ but through his folly was so close to it/ his time was almost at an end.”\(^{185}\) Instead of ending his life, however, the Pilgrim’s despair in the *selva oscura* marked the beginning of his long path to conversion. As the Poet explained, “but to set forth *the good* I found/ I will recount the other things I saw.”\(^{186}\) Dante provided a depiction of his own very real and dangerous spiritual crisis, one that was at once personal and universal. His audience could easily identify with his plight, and hence easily learn from the rest of his tale, of how he asked for help and was rescued by grace. The forward progress of his subsequent pilgrimage, ensured by the presence of his divinely-mandated guide, prevented him from being mired in the spiritual stasis that was the lot of the eternally desperate.

The image of Lucifer trapped in his icy prison mirrors the state of his entire realm, existing in the stagnation of eternal despair. Despite the divine aid provided, as long as the Pilgrim was in Hell, he ran the risk of being contaminated by his surroundings and being again overcome by the doubt and despair that plagued him at the start of the poem. Perilous as this journey was, its necessity was undeniable. Before he could begin to repent his own sins, Dante first had to understand the nature of sin by confronting the ranks of the damned. As he traveled through the *Inferno*, he encountered countless souls still caught in the grips of the particular sin that had caused their downfall. The damned often succeeded in drawing Dante, and even Virgil, down to their level, causing the Pilgrim and his guide to participate in their sins. Only by seeing the consequences of

\(^{185}\) *Purg.* I, 58-60: “Questi non vide mai l’ultima sera;/ ma per la sua follia le fu si presso,/ che molto poco tempo a volger era” (pp. 8-9).

these sins, and by discovering his own potential to commit them, could Dante start the
arduous process of purging them from his soul. Were it not for his initial despair,
however, Dante might never have realized the value of asking for and receiving help
when his own abilities had failed him.
Two centuries before Isidore wrote his *Synonyma*, Augustine of Hippo concluded the autobiographical portion of his *Confessions*. In its nine books, Augustine presented the events of his life as a remarkably intimate confessional narrative, focusing especially on his struggles to avoid sin and understand the nature of the divine. Indeed, the work is addressed to God and each book begins as a prayer. The narrative culminates in Augustine’s famous account of his conversion to Christianity, and he finally ends his life story by recounting his mother Monica’s death and his own grief over her loss. He recalls that though he was saddened to be parted from her, he took comfort in his belief that she had been granted salvation. Augustine begins the tenth book by contemplating his motives for sharing his spiritual trials and triumphs in such detail:

> When the confession of my past evil deeds is read and listened to—those evil deeds which you have forgiven and covered over to make me glad in yourself, transforming my soul by faith and your sacrament—that recital arouses the hearer’s heart, forbidding it to slump into despair and say, “I can’t.” Let it rather keep watch for your loving mercy and your gentle grace, through which every weak soul that knows its own weakness grows strong.¹

Augustine knew that relating his own experience as a sinner seeking pardon for past wrongdoing, as well as the grace to resist sin in the future, could serve to inspire his fellow Christians in their own fight against despair.

Augustine’s method of comforting his fellow Christians would inspire many admirers and imitators in the centuries after his death. In this dissertation, I have studied the work of only three: Isidore of Seville, the Spanish bishop who helped build the newly catholic Visigothic kingdom; Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, a German canoness who flourished at the height of the Ottonian Empire; and Dante Alighieri, a failed politician and celebrated poet born into the vibrant but tumultuous life of late medieval Florence. Despite the innumerable differences in their circumstances and perspective, all three of these authors followed Augustine’s lead by sharing some aspect of their own spiritual challenges with their readers. Though none of their works qualifies as autobiography, I believe that all three managed to draw on their personal struggles against despair for the edification of their audience.

When I first considered studying Isidore’s thought on despair, I assumed that I would find a basic definition of theological despair in the *Etymologies*, but little else of interest. I decided that this would provide an excellent starting point for further investigation of other authors, little imagining that I would encounter a source as intimate and compelling as is the *Synonyma*. Recent scholarship has emphasized the creativity and originality Isidore employed in preserving Latin culture and adapting it for the purposes of training an emerging generation of clerics. As my analysis of his work has shown, Isidore felt these clerics needed to be well acquainted with the problem of theological despair and how to combat it. Discussing the *Etymologies* did prove to be an ideal way to begin a study of the medieval concept of theological despair, as well as to demonstrate the other common medieval uses of the verb *despero* and its derivatives. Isidore’s evocative image of desperation as a failing foot would teach generations of
Christians, including Dante Alighieri, of the threat that theological despair posed to spiritual progress.

Isidore further elaborated the dangers of despair, and supplied remedies for it, throughout his liturgical, exegetical and theological works. Surely his most effective blow in the battle against theological despair was his *Synonyma*, a template for confession and virtuous living masquerading as a pedantic scholastic exercise. Influenced by Augustine’s *Soliloquiae*, but also inspired by his own anxious struggle against sin, Isidore’s peculiar dialogue would provide a structure for contemplative and penitential devotions throughout the Middle Ages. Also to be widely read were his *Sententiae*, a brilliantly organized compilation of basic theological learning that would transmit many of Augustine or Gregory’s teachings on despair to later medieval readers. Here also, Isidore expressed his own concerns about the state of his soul, reassuring his readers that even bishops work out their salvation “with fear and trembling” (Phil 2:12).

Only in the last twenty years have scholars such as Jacques Fontaine, Pierre Cazier and Jacques Elfassi begun to recognize the lasting and widespread popularity of Isidore’s *Synonyma* and *Sententiae*, and future work will likely uncover any number of later authors who drew from Isidore’s *opera*.

Little read in the Middle Ages, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly interest in the past quarter century. As a woman writing in a time when female authorship was rare, Hrotsvit was clearly aware of her own peculiarity and addressed it in the prefaces to her legends, plays and histories. These disclosures have allowed me to examine how Hrotsvit understood herself not only as a female writer, but as a Christian writer. When discussing herself as an *auctor*, Hrotsvit anticipates and
cleverly deflects any objections that readers might raise on account of her gender by casting herself in the role of the nervous beginner. She refers to her own stylistic and technical flaws and requests that her first readers, such as her abbess, to whom her earliest works are dedicated, offer guidance and correction. By depicting herself as a writer so painfully aware of her own shortcomings, she ensured that she could hardly be further criticised without a blatant lack of charity, especially by those charged with her spiritual well-being.

Hrotsvit also played the role of a confessing sinner in her prefaces, admitting that she began writing without the express permission of her abbess. Of particular interest in this study of theological despair was Hrotsvit’s frequent use of the verb praesumo and derived terms. Medieval thinkers believed presumption to be the vicious counterpart of despair, an overabundance of spiritual hope as opposed to a deficit. At first glance, Hrotsvit seems to be using the term in a negative fashion, characterizing her decision to write without prior approval and despite her inexperience. When read more carefully, however, and with reference to her narratives, her admissions to presumptuous disobedience can also be interpreted as proud declarations of her resolution to make use of her literary talent to praise and thank the One who granted it to her.

Closer study of her treatment of presumption and despair in her narratives sheds light not only on her understanding of her own literary activity and its spiritual consequences, but also on her view of how all contrite sinners should relate to God. Her first legend, Maria, depicts the Virgin Mary as defying the uncomprehending Jewish authorities, and disobeying her temporal leaders in order to obey God’s will. Mary’s determination to live a virginal and proto-monastic life in the Temple prior to her
marriage must have served as inspiration for Hrotsvit’s sisters. Mary’s steadfast
obedience to God’s will in the face of temporal censure can also be interpreted as a
justification of Hrotsvit’s own belief in her calling to write with or without the approval
of her earthly superiors. Her legend also predicted the dire fate of those who doubted the
divinity of Christ, forever desperate due to their lack of a way to reconcile themselves to
God.

The proper balance between despair and presumption is the primary theme of the
four works, two legends and two plays, that Hrotsvit placed in the centre of each of her
two narrative cycles. Each work tells the story of a sinner who, either due to their
presumption or their despair, had abandoned themselves to wickedness and eschewed
repentance. Luckily an intercessor is able to convert these inveterate sinners and guide
them as they undergo penance. Each protagonist is converted in the course of a pivotal
conversation with the intercessor, during which the vulnerable sinner often vacillates
between fear of divine justice for their many sins and hope that they might be forgiven.
Ultimately the intercessor teaches the protagonist to find the proper balance between
hope and fear, and thus to avoid both despair and presumption in their efforts to obtain
pardon. Furthermore, in two of these tales, as well as elsewhere in her narratives,
Hrotsvit portrays presumption in a positive light, showing that all humans, even one so
blessed as the Virgin Mary, must presume when asking God for forgiveness.

This positive connotation of presumption must influence our understanding of
Hrotsvit’s prefaces, revealing her references to her own presumption to be proud
statements of her authorial, as well as spiritual, intent. Despite the possible disapproval
of her worldly superiors, and the despair her disobedience may have caused, Hrotsvit
presumed to write in order to obey what she believed to be God’s will for her. Were she ultimately to discover that her belief was mistaken, I believe that she would just as boldly presume in asking His forgiveness, just as she taught her audience.

In 1302, Dante Alighieri’s political ambitions collapsed and he was exiled from the city of his birth. Most dantisti believe that in the subsequent years, the poet learned to overcome his despair of such worldly hopes and the attendant risk of suicide. Sometime after 1306, he began work on his great *Commedia*, in which, like Isidore and Hrosvit, he shows his readers how to overcome despair and place their hope in Christ. Like our previous two authors, Dante drew on his own spiritual crisis when teaching his readers how to fight off despair. Indeed, Dante went one ambitious step further, presenting the edifying fiction that he had crafted from his life experiences as a life experience, recounting the tale of his fantastic voyage to the afterlife with the same earnest credibility that one would expect from a text like Augustine’s *Confessions*.

Not surprisingly, Dante deals with despair most closely in his first *cantica*, the *Inferno*, which the reader soon discovers is the realm of those souls damned to eternal despair. In the work’s first canto, Dante the Pilgrim is rescued from his desperate plight in the dark wood, and that of his own soul, by the intervention of divine grace, which arrives in the form of Virgil. The shade of the great poet leads the Pilgrim out of the wood and into Hell, where he will observe the nature of sin by conversing with condemned sinners. In death, as they had in life, these desperate souls will repeatedly place their hopes in worldly things and turn away from the hope that is Christ. In Cantos VIII and IX, the Wayfarer’s despair again threatens to overwhelm him. Despite the divine endorsement of their journey, Dante and his guide are stopped at the Gates of Dis
by rebellious angels who threaten to trap them in Hell forever. In the midst of this crisis, both Virgil and the Pilgrim come to doubt God’s support for their mission, doubts which are put to rest in spectacular fashion when an angelic messenger descends to the Gates and easily opens them for the travellers. The Pilgrim’s lack of faith here shows that he has not yet learned to put his trust and hope in divine grace in his own struggle against sin.

In Canto XIII, the Wayfarer will discover the fate of those souls who never learned to place faith or hope in divine help during their lives. Here he finds the shades of the suicides, those sinners who did not turn to God when their worldly hopes failed them, but instead turned against their own bodies in their desperation. They have been condemned to take the form of lifeless, twisted trees, spurring forth blood and words only when their branches are broken. They are an infernal testament to Christ’s self-sacrifice, since they refused to participate in its joyous consequences during their time on earth. Finally, in Canto XXXIV, Dante encounters the hideous, helpless form of Lucifer, the once beautiful and powerful angel who now suffers eternally for his pointless rebellion against God. Lucifer is trapped in the frozen lake at the centre of his own dismal kingdom, an enormous but impotent monster forever chewing on the forms of history’s greatest sinners. At Virgil’s prompting, Dante the Pilgrim is startled from the shocked stupor that this sight has inspired, and the pair uses Lucifer’s hairy legs to climb out of Hell. Hence Dante demonstrates to his readers that despair can also be a starting point for conversion. With the aid of grace, the despairing sinner can recognize the futility of his own despair and start the long climb out of the pit.
Most modern studies of the medieval concept of theological despair tend to emphasize its association with suicide. The student of this topic would do well to remember that medieval thinkers typically cited two biblical figures who despaired: Judas, who committed suicide, and Cain, who did not.² Alexander Murray’s latest work on medieval suicide, which also includes the most recent and detailed study of medieval despair, gives the reader the impression that all desperate people in the Middle Ages were tempted by the example of Judas. Little attention has been afforded to those who, due to their despair, punished themselves in a manner similar to God’s punishment of Cain, living their lives in a state of spiritual wandering and alienation from God. This study has closely investigated the work of three authors who not only managed to escape the threat of such self-condemnation in their own lives, but drew from that experience in order to help their readers avoid such a fate as well. As these writers reminded their audience, if even the most hardened sinners were to repent their past wrongdoing and put their trust in God’s boundless mercy, their sins would become “sicut scintilla ignis in medio maris.”

² I would like to thank my colleague John A. Geck, who mentioned this dichotomy in conversation.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:


**Secondary Sources:**


Head, Thomas, “Hrotsvit’s Primordia and the Historical Traditions of Monastic Communities,” in Wilson, ed., Rara avis, pp. 143-164.


Hillgarth, Jocelyn N., “Isidore of Seville, St.,” in Dictionary of the Middle Ages, ed. in chief Joseph R. Strayer (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1985), vol. 6, pp. 563-566.


Newhauser, Richard, ed. *In the Garden of Evil: the vices and culture in the Middle Ages.* Toronto: PIMS, 2005.


Ribémont, Bernard and Jacques Elfassi, eds., *La réception d’Isidore de Séville durant le Moyen Âge tardif* (XIIe-XVe s.) in *Cahiers de recherches médiévales* 16 (2008).


Talbot, Robert, “Hrotsvit’s Dramas: Is There a Roman in These Texts?” in Brown et. al., eds., Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, pp. 147-159.


