

Preface

An elephant in one's study is a nuisance. In mine there has been a faint elephant odour for years. I used to think that I adapt to it, but then again, I thought that perhaps it came from the books, and did I detect a faint smell coming from the laptop? I suspected that even my stack of USB sticks may be involved. Eventually, I realized that this odour is not just a matter of sanitation; some word series are prone to smell. Or is the scent in fact inherent to my perception of words and their relations?

Worryingly, while reading a translation of *Beowulf* in the garden shade, as I sometimes do, there is no smell at all. And then it happened. One day in August 2023 leaving my lounge to check some lines in a Klaeber edition in my study, the smell of an elephant's pooh cannot be brushed off the paper and certainly not from the 241 lines between the beginning of verse 991A and the end of verse 1232B. In fact, the odour sticks to the fabric underneath the words of the reverent lecturing *Beowulf* poet. And when his verses are scratched off, the 7th century smell of poo and pee is unmistakable. Yet little by little in enzymatic ways, the living cells of my imagination substitute the elephant's odour with the comforting fragrance of Early Medieval theatre, dumb show and dialogue: *Symbol Beowulfe* – A feast for Beowulf.

It is unlikely that this olfactory sensation from the past and the liberation of my invisible study elephant will eventually change the atmosphere of more than the odd cell of cultural history, but that is of little importance to the present case study.

Uppsala, April 2024

I. A multi-levelled text

Introduction

Research on Hrotsvit's 10th century Latin plays, as studied, for instance, by Katherina Wilson and on performance of Eddic texts studied, for instance, by Terry Gunnell, have proved that several Early Medieval texts may well have been staged and benefitted from it. Gunnell's material is Old Norse and his approach ethnological and performative, while Wilson's texts are Latin. Her approach is literary and historical.

In terms of methodology their studies complement each other, and case studies following in their footsteps combining their analytical approach argue that similar forms of performance, even scenic ones, could characterise texts from widely different cultural and literary Northwest European contexts¹.

Today, it is often argued that the multi-faceted character of dramatic performance, makes drama useful in any society. Carol Symes points to this and draws attention to a quote from the church father Augustine, who in his youth loved to perform the now lost monologue *Medea Flying* because it was a meaningful text to perform². As a part of his confessions Augustine made it a point that although he personally changed his spiritual and religious opinion even about performing classical drama, he used to perform it successfully and to his own personal satisfaction. Performing the text developed him. The seductive appeal was significant, albeit with hindsight morally dangerous.

In our day and age, we tend to understand performance as a complex psychologic phenomenon as well as the backbone of the mimetic play, that is, of performance as a genre in which mimes play roles.

Lost texts do not convince us, but Augustine's personal relation to dramatic performance does, and in addition, his anecdotal confession highlights a methodological problem typical of the study of Early Medieval drama: If we only have performable texts, but no descriptions of performances, we may not feel convinced that the play manuscript was indeed performed as a play.

Following among others Augustine, the Early Medieval Catholic Church based its negative attitude to performance on theological arguments put forward by church fathers in the 4th-5th century. Notwithstanding, c. 970 Bishop Æthelwold of Winchester described how performance

could manifest itself in church life. By means of precise instructions, he integrated the trope *Quem Quaeritis* – Whom do you seek, composed c. 930 CE. with a mimetic dialogue and a dramatic setting. In an Easter context this minimal play helped church goers to fathom Resurrection. It furthered their spiritual identity not least on its supposedly original scene, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem³.

In the 19th and 20th century, students of theatre history considered Æthelwold's text to be more than the revival on Catholic grounds of the kind of drama that started to disappear from the Roman world when Christianity became its official religion and the Church a major landholder. Instead, and owing to the bishop's instructions, this miniature play and mimetic dialogue became the deep roots of modern institutional theatre⁴.

After World War II many have asked themselves whether the Church employed an existing dramatic technique – or: Was drama reinvented by the bishop to further his good work? The latter was often taken for granted, but in 1963 Jack Ogilvy re-examined the descriptive evidence for *histriones* and *mimes*. He demonstrated that performing actors existed before Æthelwold. In addition, he noted that there were professional performers, not just performative behaviour, in the Early Middle Ages. His critique of the shortcomings of earlier research was very much to the point⁵.

Ogilvy quoted King Edgar (944-75 CE.), who like his tutor, the very Æthelwold of Winchester, saw problems in the conduct of clerical life. Depravity had gone so far 'that now the clerics' houses are an assembly place for actors'. The king pointed out that this is no secret, since 'the warriors cry, common people whisper, mimes sing and dance it on the markets'. These royal worries strongly suggest that the Church in the 970s chose not to condemn drama as a catholic nuisance. Instead, it wanted to control performance in order to benefit from drama.

In 10th century Northwest Europe even the highest social circles took an interest in mimetic plays, for instance, the Ottonians⁶. Given the general Benedictine morale turn of the tide in the late 10th century, this interest became problematic. That is why the second, early 11th century version of the Life of Queen Mathilda (of Ringelheim), saint and mother of the first Ottonian emperor Otto the Great, contrary to the silence of the first 10th century version said that:

Henceforth she wished [to hear] no one singing worldly songs, nor see anyone performing plays; rather, she insisted on listening to holy songs based upon the Gospels and other sacred scripture and greatly enjoyed it when the lives and passions of the saints were sung to her. (Gilsdorf 2004:111, see also 2004:15ff. & 19ff).

What the long-dead Mathilda wished was unimportant, compared to pointing out that in the Second Life rather than in the First Life, it was deemed befitting to indicate that she had changed her focus towards a performance that was somewhat closer to the model performance of *Quem Quaeritis*.

In 1984 Claudia Villa drew attention to an equally significant detail concerning the general theatrical interest of educated Latin-reading female Ottonians. She discussed a 10th century postscript on the last empty space of an old codex of Terence's more than one thousand years old plays:

Adelheit Hedwich Matthilt curiales adulescentulę unum par esse amicię — Adelheit, Hedwich, Matthilt, young women of the [Imperial] court being like one in friendship. Villa 1984:101, my translation.

After 951, when Otto the Great married Adelheid, the Ottonians – the imperial family – used all the names in this promise of allegiance as family markers. This means that among Ottonians even young girls – may be losing a little in translation from Saxon to Latin – perhaps from *ebanlīh sindun* to *unum par esse* instead of *sicut unum* – wrote Latin and studied Latin drama together. In practice they read aloud to each other for the benefit of uniting themselves intellectually by means of a play.

The above quotations indicate that not only did Queen Mathilda once used to see plays, her relatives whose education, like that of any upper-class girl, was of great importance to the queen, would seem to have benefitted from studying Terence together. Writing plays in the same vein as Terence was precisely what Hrotsvit did in the Gandersheim abbey besides educating upper-class girls like Adelheit, Hedwich and Matthilt.⁷

There is little doubt that in the late 10th century there was an entertaining, educational and performative interest in plays: On markets, in clerics' houses, in abbeys, among bishops and at court. Yet these sources, obviously, do not tell us whether the unique play manuscript presently in front of us was ever staged. That is why, even today, one must not be surprised when researchers who study a play by Hrotsvit, reach the hypercritical conclusion that although it is perfectly performable, it may not necessarily have been performed⁸.