WHO WAS HROTSVIT?

Nearly everything we know about Hrotsvit of Gandersheim’s life, education, and intentions as a writer must be gleaned from one manuscript, Munich, Bavarian State Library Clm 14485 (the Munich manuscript), in which she names herself seven times. Produced around 980, the Munich manuscript contains all but one of Hrotsvit’s surviving works: ten verse narratives, six plays, a poem depicting scenes from the apocalypse, and several prayers in verse, all contextualized by a series of prefaces, dedicatory poems, and an “Epistle to learned patrons” addressed to unnamed recipients who had read Hrotsvit’s work and encouraged her. Missing from the Munich manuscript is the Primordia, a verse narrative about the founding of the imperial abbey at Gandersheim. Although it may originally have been part of the Munich manuscript, it only survives in two post-medieval manuscripts. Hrotsvit not only names herself in her surviving writings but also translates her name into Latin, calling herself “Clamor Validus Gandeshemensis” (the “Mighty Voice of Gandersheim”) in the Preface to the Plays. Katharina Wilson sees in Hrotsvit’s naming herself thus “a programmatic statement of her authorial intent, aligning herself with John the Baptist (vox clamantis), the patron of Gandersheim Abbey.” Walter Berschin notes that the Latin form of her name invites a comparison to Hebrews 5:7, “cum clamore valido et lacrimis offerens et exauditus pro sua reverentia.” In the Douay-Rheims translation, the full verse is “Who [Christ] in the days of his flesh, with a strong cry and tears, offering up prayers and supplications to him that was able to save him from death, was heard for his reverence.” Thus contemporary scholars read these linguistic echoes as evidence for understanding Hrotsvit to be presenting herself as a follower of Christ, aligning herself with His prayers, suffering, and reverence, and at the same time, in a typological sense, as a precursor of Christ, inviting others to witness the incarnation as John the Baptist did. In her prefatory addresses to readers, Hrotsvit provides a few details about her life directly. For example, names and other specifics make it clear that she was a canoness at the royal convent Gandersheim and that the main period of her writing occurred between 960 and 975, when Gandersheim was one of the most privileged and richly endowed monasteries of the Saxon empire. Walter Berschin hypothesizes that Hrotsvit was likely born around 935 because she specifies in the First Preface that her abbess Gerberga was younger than she and in the Primordia that she was born a long time after the death of the Saxon duke Otto (ob. 912). In the First Preface she names two teachers, Rikkardis and her abbess, Gerberga, who—though younger than Hrotsvit—was “more advanced in learning.” Also in the First Preface, Hrotsvit specifies that Gerberga had introduced her to other very learned persons, “sapientissimis,” with whom Gerberga herself had studied. In her Preface to the Plays, Hrotsvit specifies her purpose in imitating the pagan Roman playwright Terence’s style in her plays: because “many Catholics” prefer the “uselessness of pagan guile” on account of its eloquence, therefore, “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.” In his very influential chapter on Hrotsvit, Peter Dronke argued persuasively that this statement should not be read literally:

none of what Hrotsvitha claims, ostensibly solemnly, [about the popularity of Terence’s plays] at the opening of this Preface can conceivably be literally true. In the fourth century there were, to be sure, some Christian men of letters who preferred reading pagan authors, because of their more elegant style, to reading the Bible—Augustine’s and Jerome’s a