

Hrotsvit 2014: Pageants and Pioneers
To be held on Saturday 31 May 2014 from 9.30-5pm
at University of Hull, England



In January 1914 in London, England, the Pioneer Players theatre society produced a remarkable and disturbing play about prostitution. This play was written by Hrotsvit, the tenth-century nun from Gandersheim. Known also as ‘strong voice’, Hrotsvit has been claimed as the first female dramatist. Edith Craig’s production of the play for the Pioneer Players theatre society and Christopher St John’s translation was part of a programme of encouraging women’s writing for the stage in the period of the campaign for women’s suffrage. The play featured the punishment of the prostitute, Thais, by imprisonment, providing a topical allusion in 1914 to the brutal treatment of suffragettes in London.

This interdisciplinary international symposium will mark the centenary of this remarkable 1914 production and provide an opportunity for a reassessment of Hrotsvit’s drama, bringing together researchers interested in the modern production of the play as well as the Medieval text and context.

Anna Birch will direct a workshop reading of *Paphnutius* and a discussion, which will be recorded as part of the ongoing project on Pageants and Pioneers. This began in May 2011 with the Fragments & Monuments production and film of Cicely Hamilton’s *A Pageant of Great Women*.

Programme

9.30-10am Registration and Welcome

10.00-10.30

Title: 'Remembering Hrotsvit 1914: Strong Voices and Imprisoned Bodies in Edith Craig's Production for the Pioneer Players'

Professor Katharine Cockin, Dept of English, University of Hull

Edith Craig's production of the play for the Pioneer Players theatre society and Christopher St John's translation was part of a programme of encouraging women's writing for the stage in the period of the campaign for women's suffrage. The play featured the punishment of the prostitute, Thais, by imprisonment, providing a topical allusion in 1914 to the brutal treatment of suffragettes in London. This paper will describe the context for the 1914 production and explore ways in which Hrotsvit and her play were suitable subjects for this particular moment in history. The wider significance for Edith Craig's career of religious drama and 'drama in churches' and the relevance of Craig's appropriation of Hrotsvit for the development of women's history will be explored in relation to later works (including Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*, where Hrotsvit was one of the invited guests from the past).

10.45-11.15

Title: 'Christopher St John and the Queer Significance of *Paphnutius*'

Ellen Ricketts, Doctoral Student, Dept of English, University of Hull

This paper seeks to reinstate the presence of the translator, Christopher St John (c1872-1960), in considerations of the overall significance of the performance of *Paphnutius* at the beginning of the twentieth century. The role of the translator who is also a woman is a fraught one, and raises questions about the choice of original text, its representation of women and the statement that is being made about the woman who wrote it. Moreover, St John's role as translator combined with her wider dramatic collaboration as part of the Pioneer Players complicates the adaptation of *Paphnutius* for the modern stage, particularly when its performance is motivated by political reasons. This paper analyses the themes and images of Hrotsvit's play in order to place it as a piece of work within St John's entire oeuvre. As a Catholic convert and a feminist, it is likely that St John found ideas in *Paphnutius* that resonated with her, and which may have informed her own complex aesthetic which is evinced, not only in her work, but in her life. It explores the way in which the play can be read alongside St John's other work in order to cultivate a better understanding of this much neglected author and playwright. However, understanding the ideological and aesthetic position of the translator may also enhance understandings of the play's significance at the time of its revival. This paper also posits an interpretation of St John's acts of translation as part of a larger trend of queer writers, such as Michael Field, who utilised translation as a mode of expression for ideas about queerness and creativity. It is, therefore, not only the choice of original source and the final adaptation which can reveal a feminist and queer imperative, but the act of translating itself which may reveal the drives and desires of the individual who does so.

11.15-30 break

11.30-12.00

Dr Philip Crispin, School of Drama, Music and Screen, University of Hull,

‘Scandal, Malice and the Kingdom of the Bazoche’

In this paper, I will examine the performance and politics of gender and sexuality in the repertoire of the Kingdom of the Bazoche, the name of the organisation of Parisian law clerks in the late Middle Ages.

The Bazoche was also a leading producer of festive, satirical and scurrilous drama.

I will focus on one of its *sotties* [fools’ plays] in which the protagonist is a hapless prostitute, the victim of male violence.

The prostitute’s name is Chose Publique (for which read Public Realm or Respublica).

I will examine how sexuality is harnessed in the play for rhetorical and satirical purposes and will further analyse transvestism and homo-eroticism within Bazochien theatre.

12.15-1.00 lunch

1.00-1.30

Title: ‘Considering the Source: Hrotsvit von Gandersheim and Christopher St. John’

Dr Helene Scheck, Dept of English, State University of New York at Albany

This paper will highlight some of the choices Christopher St. John made in producing her translation of Hrotsvit's play of the "Conversion of the Whore Thais" and consider the effects of those choices within the cultural milieu that prompted and informed her translation project, with an eye to the 1914 performance of *Paphnutius*. The understanding of the translation of both text and story from tenth-century Latin to twentieth-century English should provide a framework for rich discussion of the play and deeper understanding of how Hrotsvit, St John and the Pioneer Players used the Thais legend to address and work through the challenges women faced in each of these very different times and places.

1.45-2.15

Title: 'Resurrecting Callimachus: Staging Hrotsvit as a Modern Devised Performance'

Dr Jenna Soleo-Shanks, Assistant Professor, Theatre, University of Minnesota, Duluth

This paper examines the performance potential of key scenes from two of Hrotsvit's Plays -- the death and resurrection of titular character in *Callimachus* and the torture in the three daughters in *Sapientia* -- in order to argue two related points. Firstly, I argue that the unique theatrical potential of Hrotsvit's plays can be effectively brought to life through overtly modern, even presentational concepts that incorporate things like pop music, puppets, and pageantry. Secondly, I argue that while medieval plays are often dismissed by modern audiences, an overtly theatrical approach to the material can provide a necessary bridge between the medieval text and contemporary issues. My case study to discuss this potential is my own work on the aforementioned plays, which I am currently working to stage for the second time.

2.30-5.00

Play reading of Paphnutius by Hrotsvit (translated by Christopher St John, originally directed by Edith Craig) directed by Anna Birch

This offers the opportunity to hear the seldom read play by the first female playwright Hrotsvit. The Pioneer Players may have been the last people to see this play performed, so we are curious to find out your response in the discussion following the reading.

Anna Birch (PhD), Royal Conservatoire of Scotland, Glasgow is a theatre and film director whose work can be found in public spaces, libraries, museums and specialist archive holdings as evidence of the hidden histories of women's achievement. She directed *A Pageant of Great Women* (by Cicely Hamilton, originally directed by Edith Craig) for The Pioneer Players: Politics and Art of Theatre (2011) international conference at the University of Hull and produced a documentary film of the performance. Currently she is developing a new interpretation of *A Pageant of Great Women* in partnership with Glasgow Women's Library <http://womenslibrary.org.uk> for March 8 2015 with a milestone event on September 18th 2014 to celebrate the Scottish referendum.

Acknowledgements

This conference is supported by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, University of Hull. We are grateful to Ellen Ricketts, University of Hull PhD Scholar, for assistance with organisation and to James Calderbank, for assistance with sound and video recording.