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Author: Hrotsvitha

Translator: William Charlton

Title: Life of Mary

Editors' Introduction:

The Life of Mary is a Latin poem by the tenth-century German writer, Hrotsvitha. She was probably a canoness, and belonged to the Abbey of Gandersheim, now Bad Gandersheim, in Lower Saxony. For this poem, she drew on the biblical texts but also, most notably, on the so-called *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew* (7th century?), which, in turn, drew on the *Protevangelium* attributed to James, the brother of Jesus. This is therefore a testimony to the importance of this second century text in medieval Europe (see the article by Thomas O'Loughlin in this issue and the book reviews). Hrotsvitha's poems were discovered in 1501.

William Charlton is the author of *Society and God* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2020). The present translation is made from the edition of Paul von Winterfeld, *Hrotsvithae Opera* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1902). A previous English translation of this piece can be found in Sr. M. Gonsalva Wiegand, O.S.F., *The Non-Dramatic Works of Hrosvitha: Texts, Translation, and Commentary* (St Louis MO: Sisters of St Francis, 1937, 14-73).

(Footnote: For the *Protevangelium*, see 'The Proto-Gospel of James', in Bart D. Ehrman and Zlatko Pleše (eds. and trans.), *The Apocryphal Gospels: Texts and Translations*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, 40-71; see also 'The Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew', in Ehrman and Pleše, 73-113.)

**History of the birth and praiseworthy life
Of the Virgin Mother of God
Which I found written under the name
Of St James, kinsman of the Lord**

[Invocation]

Sole hope of the world, bright empress of the sky

The holy royal mother and bright star of the sea,

[15] O kindly virgin, who by giving birth restored

The life the world had through a virgin lost

In time long past: take pity, please, and aid

Your handmaid Hrotsvitha, and these new lines

That, striving now to serve a woman's Muse,

[20] I form in dactyls, praying that I may touch

At least some surface particle of your praise,

And tell the beginning of your blessed birth,

You who would have a king for progeny.

[25] I acknowledge it exceeds my puny powers

To sing in praise of you as you deserve;

Your merits not the whole world can express;

Your light is more than angels can declare,

Since as a girl you in your virgin womb



[30] Enclosed the One whose rule all things obey.

But He who once the stupid ass commanded
To speak in His holy name, He who caused you,
Dear Virgin, to conceive at the angel's word,
Through the Holy Spirit, with no stain of shame,

[35] And be the mother of his child, beyond

All others good, He can untie my tongue
And touch my heart with a droplet of His grace,
By which great gift from His kind sympathy

[40] May I sing of you, Virgin, pleasingly to Him,

And not be justly blamed for tedium
By those weak praise of the All-high offends,¹
But rather deserve to join the virgin crowds
That sing forever before the royal Lamb.

The History

[45] Five thousand years had since creation passed,

And the happy sixth millennium began,

In which God, faithful to his word fulfilled

What truthful prophets had in song foretold:

¹ Ne comes ingratis condampner iure pigellis
Quos piget Altithrono psallere pro modulo.

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

That Jesus soon would come into the world.

[50] A man of Judah's tribe then did arise

In the land of Israel under the old Law,

One elderly, of great David's royal line,

Who bore the name, they say, of Joachim;

A righteous man, who from his suckling days

[55] Did worthily observe the Law's commands.

His greatest care was that he pasture well

The columns of his great flock, -- a sign that God

Designed him as forebear in earthly flesh

Of that true shepherd who did not refuse to bear

[60] His lambs on his own shoulders, and led them

To the joys of a happy life, enduring death

For his great love of us, and buying back

The guilty at the price of his dear life.

This hero Joachim of whom I'll speak

[65] A patriarch happy to have assigned for him

So great a grandson, strove to clothe himself

In deeds of peace, dividing all he had

[70] Into three parts; and one of them most often

He gave to widows, orphans, travellers from afar;

One to those serving in the temple he gave,



And kept the smallest part for all his house.
Acting thus frequently in benevolence
He was at last so worthily rewarded
That his small means were greatly multiplied
Till all his nation's chieftains he surpassed,
[75] Nor did the land hold anyone so powerful,
Upheld by such abundance of all things.

When he for twenty years had happily
Enjoyed this fortune, he espoused a friend
Most fair of face and exemplary in her life,
[80] Achar's child Anna, born of David's stock,
Cementing his private love by legal vows.
But she, they say, was barren for many years
Giving her faithful husband no hope of child.
[85] At last, when twenty years had passed, it chanced
That Joachim on a feast day in the temple
Was standing among the ministers who were deemed
Worthy to offer incense at the altar.

When Rueben, temple secretary, saw him,
[90] In bitter enmity he addressed him thus:
'It's not allowed,' he said 'for you to touch
The sacred incense, nor is it right for you

Hrotsvitha's *Life of Mary*

To offer sacrificial gifts to the Lord

Since he despises you and denies you an heir.'

The noble man made no reply in words

[95] But left in sorrow seeking the dark woods

In which he'd used to take his flocks to browse.

And moving on and on by lonely paths

He brought them with him and their herdsmen too

To secret places where he pastured them

[100] And lay concealed, not wanting afterwards

To return to the land he had left, so deep his shame

At Reuben's words of harsh reproach to him.

Five months went by and his illustrious wife

Wept daily, losing hope that he still lived.

[105] No comfort came to her and she poured out

These prayers in deep sorrow to the Lord:

'Ruler of Israel, sole lover of its people,

Who always in compassion kindly cherish

Those sorrowing, why did you wish to tear

From me my dear companion, and to add

[110] New pain to one already always grieving

That she stayed childless with a sterile womb?

Now I must bear an even sharper wound



The loss, to which I've nothing to compare,
Of my lord and husband, bound to me by law.
[115] How happy I, if I at least could know:
Is he now victim of quick cruel death
Or still enjoying the warm breath of life?
If that I knew, I'd have less right to weep
When he succumbed to the black shades of death,
[120] But could arrange a noble funeral,
Committing with the highest stately pomp
His glorious body to a worthy tomb.'

Having finished praying she lifted up her eyes
And in the branches of a laurel saw
Birds sweetly murmuring as they covered up
Their nestlings with the feathers of their wings;
[125] And at the sight, in a sad voice she sang:
'Strong King of heaven to whom the star-set sky
Turns subject, and who can all things dispose
As they should be, you are always to be praised
For mercies granted to all living things;
[130] To little fish, to cattle, snakes and birds
You grant it to rejoice in having young;
But wretched me alone you have ordained

Hrotsvitha's *Life of Mary*

For some just cause to be for ever barren.

Yet, Father of all, with an unswerving heart

[135] I call on you as witness to what I swore

When first I married: should you kindly grant

Fruit to my womb, soon as I might, that fruit

I'd dedicate to you and to your service

According to the custom of the law

In a temple duly consecrated to you.

.

While her pure lips were uttering these words,

[140] An angel suddenly from the starry heights

Came down and to her depth of sadness brought

Great consolation. Standing facing her,

He spoke these friendly words: 'Throw off your grief,

Relieve your heart of sorrow and believe

By God's design on high you are with child;

[145] That child in due time issuing from your womb

Will be the wonder of every race on earth.'

He spoke, and cutting the aether in golden flight²

Flew back, while Anna, terrified by his word

Went sadly home and took herself to bed,

² Dixit, et aurivagis revolans secat aethera pennis. For *aurivagis* read *aerivagis*?



[150] Passed the day trembling and reciting psalms,
And poured out prayers throughout the following night.

She summoned then her maid, and questioned her
Standing before her under her own eyes,
And asked why she despised her, and came so slowly

[155] When she felt something amazing had come on her.

The impudent servant in a servile whine
Answered her mistress in contemptuous words:

‘If God despises you and makes you barren,
What has God’s choice I ask, to do with me?’

[160] But Anna bore the impertinence patiently,
Merely in sadness shedding bitter tears.

The shining angel at that very hour,
In the hills where Joachim was pasturing
His sheep in secret, appeared and ordered him

[165] To hasten back to his forsaken wife.

He answered, moved by these considerations:

‘For twenty years she has remained with me
And the Lord has given me no child by her.

[170] Besides, just now I left the temple overwhelmed
With sharp reproaches on this same account.

Do you now bid me, scorned and soaked in ills,

Hrotsvitha's *Life of Mary*

To go back and submit to that same shame?’

The heavenly messenger made this mild reply:

‘Believe that I am a citizen of heaven,

Appointed in compassion by its King

[175] To be your guardian and bring consolation

To good Anna in her tearful loving prayers.

So now for your sake from the vault of heaven

I come bringing equal joy to both of you

[180] For a great gift; and this I say, that soon

Most noble Anna will conceive a girl

That shall be venerated in every age,

Holy beyond all human women born of men,

So that the Holy Spirit rests within her;

[185] The highest blessing on the world, like none

Before or afterwards, through her will come.

So dare now to return to your blessed wife

Who’ll bear with joy this ornament to the globe;

Both always give sweet thanks to the Creator

Who chose to grant the pair of you a child

[190] Such as no prophet certainly ever had,

Nor anyone chosen after you will have.’

Rejoicing in this promise Joachim answered:



‘Your favour to me your servant to confirm,
Please rest beneath my roof here for a time,
[195] And condescend to eat what is prepared.’

The angel gave him this polite reply:

‘Don’t call yourself my servant after this;
Believe yourself a member of our host.
I do not need to eat terrestrial food,
[200] Fed as I am perpetually by God’s presence.
Hence I can say you do enough for me
In pouring a holy offering to the Lord.’

He chose at once from his flock a yearling lamb
Hoping that Rueben’s taunt had come untrue,
[205] And, glad at heart, sacrificed it to the Lord,
In a burnt offering as the law prescribes.
These rites obediently performed, the angel
Soared in the altar’s smoke towards the stars.

And now the rays of the merciful Father’s grace,
[210] Little by little brightening, began
To light up the world, and terminate in peace
The former discord, when heaven’s citizens
Promised their company to the earth-born, whom
Earlier they scorned for their parent’s, Adam’s, fault.

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

[215] Nor did the mercy of the All-Father pass

Unseen by the assembly of the angels when,

Soon afterwards, in pity he determined

To place his own Son in a virgin's womb,

That, born of the Father supreme before all time,

He should in time take flesh from that virgin womb,

[220] And save all people by His sacred blood;

And that the cunning enemy of mankind

Should after this no longer have the joy

Of holding the world in his malignant snares;

But the Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Ghost,

Equal in power beneath a triple name

[225] Should thenceforth reign by right in a peaceful world.

After the angel had passed up through the stars

Joachim, overcome by the greatness of this news,

And fixed too by a great shaft of fear,

Prostrated on the ground by heaven's gift,

[230] Lay trembling and insensible, I think

From the sixth hour until the sun was set.

Meanwhile came boys worn out with shepherding,

And seeing their master lying on the ground;

[235] They stood around in sorrow trying to learn



The cause of the terror that had seized his mind.

With difficulty at last they raised him up.

And when he reported the heavenly being's words

They persuaded him to obey commands from on high

[240] And go back swiftly to the home he'd left.

Rejoicing he gathered his flocks and left the woods,

Bringing back with him even the shepherd boys.

And when the space of thirty days had passed,

An angel appeared to Anna as she prayed

[245] Addressing her in reassuring words:

'Arise, and come with cheerful mind and face

To what the people call the Golden Gate;

Where soon, perhaps, your lawful spouse you'll find

Returned alive his mind serene in peace.'

[250] Quicker than speech, she did his welcome bidding.

Impatient of delay she sped to the gate

Awaiting her defender with rejoicing mind,

And, soon as she saw him, with astonished eyes

Ran through the flowery fields to meet her love.

[255] Then, hanging about his neck and kissing him,

She uttered these thanks to Him who sits on high:

'Praise to You, lavisher of all things good,

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Who gives such joys to undeserving me!

Look! My own husband I see now safe before me,

[260] I who a long time have remained a widow;

And I who was barren have a mother's joy.'

Hearing this all the Jews in sympathy

Sang praise together to God with happy hearts.

When the ninth month after these events had passed

[265] The great day came on which most noble Anna

Gave birth to her whom every age must honour.

And eight days later the chief priests arrived

Summoned as customary to attach a name

To this great child and make her sanctified.

[270] Before them Joachim uttered this little prayer:

'Heavenly King, who alone may name the stars,

Be pleased by means of shining signs from above

To indicate a name for this tender girl.'

He spoke and suddenly from above there came

[275] A loud command to call the outstanding girl

'Mary', the Latin sound for 'Star of the Sea'.

That name falls rightly to the holy girl;

For she is that glorious star that ever shines

In the bright crown of Christ the eternal King.



[280] Then when two years had nearly run their course

The fortunate mother weaned her little girl,

And promptly, following a pious custom,

With a fitting gift placed Mary in the temple,

She who'd herself be temple of the Lord,

[285] That living with consecrated girls, the little virgin

Might grow up always singing hymns to Him

Whom heaven's citizens all unite to praise.

Standing then on the holy temple's wall

She suddenly ran boldly up a stair

[290] Of fifteen sloping steps, her tender age

Forgotten, a girl already filled with God

Not looking back, as is an infant's way,

Nor seeking parents standing at her side.

Kindled by this, the people stranding round

Were all amazed, the temple ministers too;

[295] Even the high priests also praised the feat,

And said that such a deed, done by a child

Foreshadowed by itself some great event,

Yes, truly great, and fit to astonish all.

What greater thing could be believed or could occur

[300] Than that a girl's virgin womb should carry

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The Maker of the world and her own parent?

Nor is it strange, if she should walk upright,

While still an infant and with milk-fed limbs,

Since, kindly Father, You enriched her, while

[305] She was within her saintly mother's womb

Still hidden, with the gift of the Holy Ghost,

Foreseeing she alone would be fit to bear

That Son of his own, famous though every age,

Who later, veiled by his corporeal form,

Would open in time all the stairs by which

[310] They strive to regain the home-land that they left,

Whose name is Christ, to whom be Heaven's praise.

Her mother Anne, made happy by this feat

Sang thus in praise of the eternal King:

'Almighty ruler, lover of kindness,

[315] You have done marvels of mercy for Your people,

And pitying also now my lowliness

Have gladdened me with a daughter beyond hope.

I dare now to make offerings to You

And have no fear that some enemy will stop me

[320] From going with those who in the temple serve.

Heaven's citizens join in praising You for this



And raise up eagerly unending song.'

Her prayer ending with these words, the parents,

Happy in having a child that was so endowed,

[325] Went home; and in the temple Mary stayed.

All human tongues are impotent,

Nor could the stable globe, if it could speak,

Put into words that infant's glorious fame

Or the marvellous life and manners of that girl.

[330] Who could praise worthily for time to come

This girl who, soon as she put off swaddling clothes

Shone out to all the world in adult ways,

Nor with her little limbs did childish acts

But kept most strictly to the Law's commands

[335] And gave herself constantly to David's songs?

Prudent and humble, yet burning with sweet good will,

Pleasing to all, with every virtue bright,

No ear heard her speak evil of anyone

Nor was she ever known to take offence,

[340] But always she was mild and dear to all,

And such few words as flowed out from her mouth

Were clothed in the nectar of supernal grace.

When anyone gave friendly praise to her

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She afterwards gave thanks to the Lord on high,

[345] Nor sang the less for that in praise of God.

To her companions she gave in herself

A noble model of every kind of goodness.

They say her face blazed with a pure light

That would outshine the radiance of the sun

[350] Without however dazzling human sight.

And what of her fingers, proved in handiwork?

The little girl with an unerring hand

Made things that full-grown women could not make.

And setting a hard standard for herself

She lived a stricter life within the temple

[355] Than all the other virgins placed with her.

She was assiduous in quiet prayers

And singing regularly hymns to God

From when, with the parting of the shades of night,

Aurora scattered light across the East

[360] Till Phoebus had so climbed the peaceful sky

That day had now arrived at its third hour.

Then her white fingers gave themselves to work

Deftly contriving with the purple threads;

But soon, when Phoebus in the ninth hour sank,



[365] The shining girl would go back to her prayers,

And she would steadily persist in them

Until an angel, daily sent from above

To serve the holy virgin, brought her food.

Though food was always given her by the priests

[370] This she would earlier pass to those in need.

And heavenly beings would come down from the stars

To keep her company with friendly words;

Through which she came to scorn terrestrial love

And with a chaste mind serve the eternal King.

[375] And anyone sick or having failing limbs

Who only touched her instantly was cured.

The fame of her spread through the stable globe

And the priest Abiathar, offering rich gifts

Implored the other temple priests to agree

[380] To bind the glorious Mary by legal bonds

In wedlock to his own distinguished son.

But this the chaste virgin would not allow,

Rejecting an illustrious marriage to a man

Of royal blood; and she declared at last

[385] She would submit her noble body in marriage

To no one. The high priests then said to her:

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'Is not a legitimate posterity

Of Jewish people to honour and worship God?

It is unfit such a girl should stay unwed.'

[390] To this, unmoved, the virgin made response:

'God likes to dwell in a temple that is clean,

And minds that are temperate, not in those

Stained with the wickedness of wanton lust.

[395] Abel, who was, we know, in the new-formed world

The first just man, deserved a double crown

One as a martyr, murdered by his brother,

A second, far brighter, for virginity;

Elias, we believe, to furthest heaven rose

With his true body since he always kept it

[400] Unstained and virgin and inviolate.

These things I learnt, being taught them by the Law,

And learning them resolved with steadfast mind

And vowed to keep my maiden modesty.'

After she had completed fourteen years,

[405] 'It is not our custom,' said the Pharisees,

'That girls should wish to stay virgin at that age.'

They summoned all the nation to assemble

In the temple built in honour of the Lord



To try together to resolve the case.

[410] And when they were all beneath the temple roof

Abiathar whom I mentioned, priest by law

Mounting the steps to the high presiding place

Addressed the people around in words like these:

‘From when this noble temple was constructed

[415] By direction of King Solomon the Great

There always lived in it, you are aware,

Girls tender in age and fair of form, descended

From noble kings and priests and prophets of old,

[420] Who rightly were held a glory to the nation;

And when they reached a fitting age, they all

To husbands worthy of them were united,

And this was far more pleasing to the Lord.

But Mary hopes to please in a way that’s new

[425] Rejecting men in honour of His name.

Now since it’s not agreed she can make this vow

It rests to us to pray to Him on high

To make us know his orders, and to whom

She rightly may be joined by legal bond.’

[430] The people all adopted his advice.

The priests together first cast lots between

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The twelve tribes that there were in Israel.

The lot picked out the illustrious tribe of Judah,

And it being shown more worthy than the rest,

[435] They ordered all the men of that same tribe

Whom chance had so far left without a spouse

To come together on the following day

Carrying new-cut wands in their right hands.

When all were brought together, with them came

[440] Joseph, a worthy older man, who bore

A straight wand for the trial. And the high priest

Taking the wands with joy, and offering

A holocaust, prayed long to be instructed

What he should order. Decision soon from heaven

[445] Came telling him what next was to be done.

Obedient, he had the wands themselves

Placed in the famous temple's most sacred place,

And then commanded Judah's royal scions

[450] Next morning to assemble and take up

Each his own wand. The sign, he had been told,

Would show the noble virgin should be given

To him from whose wand a dove should flutter out,

[455] Essaying to ascend the highest skies.



Three thousand people at the appointed hour
Took up their wands, but when none gave the people
Their sign, the venerable president
[460] Again burned incense, pouring out more prayers;
To these a heavenly voice made this response:
‘The little wand of aged Joseph the just
Which lies in the temple, no one claiming it,
Alone can give the memorable sign.’
[465] When these words ended the priest’s voice rang out,
Commanding Joseph to come before the crowd.
He was retiring, modest with no show,
Reluctant to mix with such fine company,
Rejoicing rather to take hindmost place;
[470] But when he heard the loud voice calling him
He timidly came, as bidden took his wand,
And from it at once a splendid dove emerged
And swiftly flew, they say, to furthest heaven.

At this the people joined in shouts of praise,
[475] Returning joyous thanks to Him on high
For pointing out the just man with this sign.
But he, being conscious of his advancing years,
Protested he had princely grandchildren

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And begged the priests most modestly, it's said

[480] To give the beautiful Mary not to him

But rather as a bride to his own son.

This they refused: since he was designated,

The holy girl must go to him alone

That the Lord had made her only worthy spouse.

[485] He then began to pray that other girls

Be sent with Mary as companions,

Girls of her age, brought up along with her,

Able to cheer her with sweet friendly talk,

Without delay, in case the tender maid

[490] Should suffer shame at her husband's being so old.

This the priests gave orders to be done,

For in vain had the old man tired himself in pleading,

Since the virgin was destined not for him but Christ.

After the priests had departed from his protests,

[495] Joseph received the girl into his care,

Together with (I think) five sent with her,

The names of whom are given as Scephiphona

Rebecca, Susan, Zabel and Abigea.

Their task pertaining to the sacred temple,

[500] Was making works, it's said for its adornment,



Purple to go with cotton, Chinese silk with wool,

But shining purple for the precious veil

Of the temple to holy Mary was entrusted³.

This kindled anger in the girls with her;

[505] They spoke to her in this offensive way:

‘So is it settled you will be our queen,

Since purple is entrusted only to you to weave,

Though you are our junior by no little time?’

Such things, as always, she bore patiently,

[510] And uttered not a word in contradiction.

But her faithful angel guardian, soon descending

From the starry court of heaven said at her side:

‘If, virgin, words like these disturb you, these

Were spoken by way of certain prophecy,

[510] Foretelling now what things will come to pass,

Since you alone shall be perennial queen,

And rule renowned throughout the star-set sky.’

After this she dwelt apart in a quiet house,

Her blessed fingers working the purple threads,

[520] And Gabriel the archangel came to her,

³ Purpura cum bysso, linum cum vellere Serum
Purpura sed sanctae fulgens operanda Mariae
Creditur ad velum domini templi pretiosum.

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Descended visibly from heaven's court,
Addressing her virgin honour in friendly words,
And said that as all the prophets had foretold
From her chaste womb the child of the Most High,
[525] Though older than the world, chose to be born,
And that by a memorable virgin birth.

My verses lack the power to relate
The noble talk, extended through much time,
Between the Ever Virgin mother of Christ
[530] And the bridesman telling of this holy birth,
Nor need I put into dactylic lines
The deep distress of Joseph and the pain
That cut him to the heart, though causelessly,
When he perceived the girl was big with child,
[535] Or how his misery was cured at night
When he was ordered to keep in his care
The intact virgin and the star-sent child.
These things the gospels have related to us,
And also far exceed my meagre powers.
[540] These, then, omitted, as well known to all,
I'll form my narrative to you from those
I think more seldom to be heard in church.



When Caesar's order flew around the world
That his subjects everywhere should be enrolled
And a census taken, Joseph made his way
To Bethlehem his native city and with him
Took Mary his betrothed, then heavy with child.
And when they neared the famous city's walls
The virgin saw, not with her body's eyes,
[550] But those of mind, two crowds assembled there,
One laughing and the other shedding tears.
She told this to old Joseph; he replied:
'Just keep yourself in the carriage quietly,
And please refrain from uttering empty words.'
[555] But then he saw a page-boy standing near,
Who solved for him the mystery of the groups,
Defending the virgin with this solemn speech:
'Why say that Mary's words are not the truth,
Irate that she alone perceives what's hidden?
[560] She saw the Jewish people rightly weeping,
Since soon in hatred they will leave the Lord,
And gentile people surging up in joy
Since faith will bring them to great sacraments.'
With this he gently turned to kindly Mary,

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[565] And said the time to give birth to Christ had come.

And she obediently left the carriage

And entered a cave located underground

To which the presence of light was all unknown,

Wrapped as it always was in unbroken dark.

[570] But when the mother of eternal Light

Came into it, it soon began to blaze

With shining rays that never ceased so long

As the happy mother abided in that place.

It was the middle hour of a tranquil night

[575] When that young virgin joyfully gave birth

To a child that every age would venerate,

Jesus by name, to whom be glory and praise,

Who, coming to fulfil old prophecies

That he should be the saviour of the world,

[580] Brought peace about between the earth and heaven.

As soon as from the virgin's sacred womb

He was delivered, angels gathered round,

In lowered voices praising the earth's Maker,

And prayed to the boy sent us from above.

[585] But Mary, whom all must venerate, speedily

Arranged Christ's little limbs within a manger



And wrapped the eternal King in swaddling clothes.

Good Joseph meanwhile had gone off to look
For midwives, and returned with two whose names
[590] Are said to have been Zelemi and Salome.

But Zelemi alone came in; Salome feared
To set her feet in a cave so filled with light.

Attending delicately to the virgin birth

Zelemi cried out, believing the strange signs:

[595] 'What means this baby born of one not wed?

This child of royal ancestry just delivered

Declares its mother to be untouched by man;

Alone a virgin parent, she suckles Him

With breasts that are filled chastely from on high.

[600] The mother had no pain, the child is spotless;.

Such things, I think, must be ordained by God.'

Salome scorned this voice that spoke the truth.

She would not trust to hearsay, she declared,

But must feel Mary with a probing hand,

[605] And coming in she stretched out her right hand,

Boldly intending to feel chaste Mary with it.

But this audacity brought a swift reward.

The advancing hand at once was paralysed

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

And stricken with excruciating pain.

[610] Salome, agonised, screamed out and wept

In bitter sorrow at this sudden loss,

And pleaded, as Jews did, her own good deeds;

And trusting in her pretended virtuous life,

She addressed in grief these words to Him on high:

[615] 'Witness to all our labours and Comforter,

You know how scrupulously I observe the Law,

And how for your sake I am bountiful

To all the poor whatever their origin:

Whoever comes to me in sorrow leaves in joy.

[620] And now for such good deeds I suffer loss.'

At this a shining youth appeared and said:

'Just touch the little infant's swaddling clothes,

Go over to that cradle of a King,

And He himself will bring you back to health

[625] Greater than ever before.' And when she did

What her consoler ordered, when she touched

The least thread of the swaddling clothes,

She felt that her whole body was restored,

And lifted her voice in thanks to God

For being pleased to grant her such well-being.



[630] When in succession there had taken place

The vision of the shepherds, and the sign

Foretold of a small child to be found in a manger,

And then the circumcision of that child,

And his receiving that great name of Christ,

[635] Royal astronomers from the sun's rising place

With skill in interpreting the stars arrived,

And seeking the city of Jerusalem

With guileless hearts put questions to King Herod

About the recent nativity of a king,

[640] Saying that they had lately seen a star

That indicated a king born for the Jews.

Disturbed, with malice in his mind the king

Summoned the scribes, and by them was informed

That all the prophetic bards agreed the Christ

[645] Was destined to be born in Bethlehem.

He sent away the Magi, deceitfully

Bidding them find the child and let him know

Its whereabouts, desiring to have it killed,

Although pretending he wished to worship it.

The star directing them, they swiftly came

[650] Directly to the royal child's retreat,

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

Not decorated in varied painted colours

But made to shine by the subservient star.

Prostrating themselves they kissed the infant's feet

And pouring out their prayers in humble tones

[655] Adored the heavenly King with threefold gifts

Showing him man and God and doomed to die.

Then, warned by night in dreams, by a different way

They went back to their land with happy hearts.

Just after this that worst of enemies Herod

[660] By order of Augustus was taken to Rome,

There either to clear himself, as Roman law

Decreed, of criminal charges lying upon him

Or justly suffer capital punishment.

For he was charged with treason to his master,

[665] And justly under that suspicion he fell

For wishing by tricks his foxy heart prepared

To kill the divine son of Heaven's King.

And this was done by God's will, I believe,

This order at that time to go to Rome,

[670] That swiftly, his authority being removed,

All things might for the Christ-child be completed.

When forty days had run their course since when



The Virgin bore the Ruler of the skies,
With tender little limbs he was presented
[675] In his own temple, along with an offering.
Good Simeon took him in his aged arms,
And blessings on the world's Ruler were intoned
By Simeon and Anna the prophetess.

[680] These rites completed as the Law ordained
They went back to their native Bethlehem.

When they had there a full two years remained
Their wicked enemy, back from his hated exile,
Reflected anxiously on what the Magi said
[685] Of seeing the fair star of a new-born king.
He asked his attendant nobles if the Magi
Had come as they promised on their journey home
And what they reported of the new-born Christ.

[690] They answered firmly that they did not know
Whether the Magi had gone back to their land;
Themselves, they knew nothing of the new-born king,

Enraged by this the furious Herod ordered
That all the children should forthwith be killed,
Who then were in the bounds of Bethlehem,
[695] Hoping thereby to end the life of Christ.

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

But venerable Joseph, warned in sleep,
Set off for Egypt, taking the tender child
And mother by lengthy bye-ways through the desert,
[700] With Christ controlling the terrors of earth's night.
But this he did with heavenly compassion
Lighting with his own light the ancient dark
Of Egypt, putting it totally to flight.

One day it happened holy Mary wished
To rest her child and herself beside a cave,
[705] And so sat wearied down upon the ground,
To cuddle Jesus on her sweet soft lap;
But many fearsome serpents then emerged
Out of the cave in front of which she sat.
When Joseph's servants saw them, panicking
[710] They started to emit loud cries of fear.
But from that lovable lap the child rose up
And mildly Jesus stood on His sacred feet
Facing the snakes; furious, they gnashed their fangs;
Then suddenly pacified they fell to the ground,
[715] Adoring, wordless, him who made the earth.
He led them then aside and into where
The desert stretched, commanding them to follow.



On seeing this Joseph and Christ's holy mother,
Were paralysed as weak flesh often is,
[720] And trembled, fearing the boy would suffer hurt;
He, reading their minds and knowing too their hearts
Turned to the frightened pair and said to them:
'Why do you see in me only milk-fed limbs
And not the timeless power of my mind?
[725] Although my body is that of a small child
I am a man that wields omnipotence,
And savage beasts all rightly in my presence
Grow meek and lose their former ferocity.'

After this proud lions with leopards and wild beasts
Of every kind collected, once they sensed
The presence of the Son of Him who made them,
With lowered voices worshipping the child
And playing round glorious Mary in their joy.
Seeing her anxiety at this strange sign,
[735] In cheerful tones they say Christ reassured her:
'Let not the striking novelty, dear Mother,
Of this kind miracle give you unease;
It is to do us service they have come
They neither wish to harm you nor have power.'

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

[740] These words removed anxiety from her heart,

And the wild beasts went joyously ahead

To show them the right way across the desert;

And none departed in the hours of night,

But kept true company with Joseph's oxen,

[745] Their natural ferocity forgotten,

And peacefully pastured on a little hay.

And such a concord there arose among them

That timid lambs lay side by side with wolves

And gentle lions kept company with oxen.

[750] And rightly so; for true heavenly peace,

Which rules the wide sky, ratified the truce

And kept them faithful to their minds' changed ways.

After this Mary, tired by the summer heat,

Paused underneath a palm tree's welcome shade

[755] And turning her bright eyes upward, she perceived

The tree was loaded with dates that now were ripe.

As she looked at them her lips formed words like these:

'How much I'd like it, if it were possible,

To feed on fruit from that so laden palm.'

[760] The worthy aged servant of the law

Replied a little sharply to her speech:



'I wonder at you, uttering such a wish,
When you see the branches rising from the trunk
So high they almost brush against the stars.
[765] My chief concern is rather that I might
Be able at least to get us some clean water,
Since we have not a drop for either of us.'
So did the venerable hero speak,
Or so lose hope, since Christ was present there,
[770] Hidden in bodily limbs, all-powerful.
The boy, reclining in his mother's lap,
Turned and looked gladly at the tree itself,
And in obedience to his father's order
Addressed it, saying with a face serene:
[775] 'Bend down your branches, tree, that from the top
My mother may gather from you all she wants.'
He spoke and at his command that mighty tree
Bent meekly down at kindly Mary's feet;
And when it was despoiled of all its fruit
[780] It stayed inclined, not trying to rise on high,
But waiting till Christ's word was duly done.
'Now, Palm,' said Christ, 'arise without delay,
That henceforth you may be among my trees

Hrotsvitha's *Life of Mary*

Planted to make the groves of paradise.

[785] And with your root bring up from underground

A spring to flow in a sweet-tasting stream.'

These things no sooner said than all were done.

The child's companions, seeing the fresh spring,

Returned thanks graciously with happy hearts,

[790] Quenching harsh thirst with waters newly born.

When they were on the point of setting forth

Across the desert, Christ said to the tree:

'Concerning you, dear Palm, my order is

That from the sky an angel should descend

[795] And from your topmost branch should take a sprig

To plant without delay in Paradise.

This further honour too I grant to you,

That you'll be made the palm of triumph for this:

Whoever conquers famously in war,

[800] People will mention you in praising him:

"You carry off the palm of a great triumph."

Upon these words an angel from the stars

Came down, and took a branch and bore it off.

Those present all, astounded at the sight,

[805] Trembling prostrated themselves upon the ground,



But Jesus reassured them, speaking thus:

‘There is no need for you to be afraid

Because I ordered the branch to be carried up

For transplant in the Garden of Delights;

[810] And just as in this desert at my command

It promptly yielded for us food and drink,

So there eternally it will delight the saints.’

Taking close note of signs so great as these

Joseph invoked the supernatural power

[815] His child possessed and said submissively:

‘See how our limbs are roasted in this heat!

Your kingdom is for ever; if you wish,

Command that by the paths of the broad sea

We may pass over to the towns that lie

[820] Beyond, that the peace that awaits us there

May make the long journey pass more rapidly.’⁴

Jesus made answer, bright with Godly power:

‘Yes, and that length I shall abbreviate:

What scarcely could be travelled in thirty days

[825] I shall contract into a single day.’

⁴ Urbibus appositis quo certa quies data nobis
Nos citius spatium faciat percurrere tantum.
Or: ‘That the peace that this affords us’?

Hrotsvitha's *Life of Mary*

Soon after this they sighted Sonite,
Great town of Egypt, by tall walls surrounded.
They entered it and sought the temple where
The foolish pagans' custom was to place
[830] Their spurious gods and offer evil worship.
But as soon as Mary and her sacred Child went in
The false gods' images together all
Fell face down suddenly upon the ground
In recognition that the eternal God,
The God of gods with mighty power had come.
[835] Thus was fulfilled what in prophetic song
Was long ago foretold, that seated high
Upon a shining cloud, the Lord would come,
And before his face the statues of the gods
Of Egypt all would suddenly be shattered.
[840] When news of this reached Aphrodisias,
The general who was ruler of the town,
He hastened there with a large company;
And when the profane temple's priests heard this,
They hoped he would severely punish those
[845] Who had done this damage to their stupid gods.
But when he saw the beautiful images



Face down and broken, drifting in the wind,

Fired suddenly by the light of heavenly love

And holy faith, he had a change of heart.

[850] He stopped and said rejoicing to his friends:

‘Look! Plainly the all-powerful Lord is here,

The one whom tacitly perhaps our gods proclaim

To be the only rightful and true God.

So prostrating ourselves as did the gods themselves,

[855] We should devoutly worship the eternal King,

Remembering what He did to Pharaoh when

He wrongly scorned to heed divine commands,

For fear He thrust us into death’s dark pit.’

Then, throwing himself bodily on the ground,

[860] He rolled at holy Mary’s feet and pleaded

With fervent voice for favour from the Boy

Who lay in his happy mother’s loving lap.

O, how to be praised your glorious goodness, Christ!

How wondered at, your pledge of everlasting love,

[865] Who with a silent nod bring all to order!

Sole Child of God, resembling your high Parent,

Who can admire as they deserve gifts that you

Hrotsvitha's Life of Mary

In kindness give us, who can find fit words

To praise the marvels you have worked for us?

[870] You, born of a heavenly Father before all time,

Obedient to Him filled your mother's womb,

Taking in time corporeal form from her,

And You who could hold within your palm the world

Were willing to be bound in swaddling clothes;

[875] Enthroned among the stars above our airs,

You in a little manger lay confined.

You who give names to hosts of varied stars

And number accurately the falling drops

Of rain, and the sands that lie beside the sea,

[880] Kept silent, as a feeble little infant

While sucking at your Mother's virgin paps.

Then You escaped King Herod, not from fear,

But solely from compassion, to make plain

You'd truly taken on the form of flesh;

And later You made swiftly the proud hearts

Of pagans soften, not by using force,

But they sensed your rule was solid through all ages,

Being warned by God-sent signs that You were He

Who by his word created all of time,



[890] Whose coming the prophets all foretold in song.

For this may glory to your Father come

Through every age from all created things,

Who did not spare You, his beloved Son;

And, Christ, to You be honour perpetual

And victory and strength, who with your blood

[895] Redeemed a world that was about to perish;

Together always with the Holy Spirit,

Through whom all grace from Heaven comes to us.

What gifts can I now to the Maker make

To match what He has given to myself,

[900] Who, ever kindly to his little servant,

Has moved me to return these meagre thanks?

For this I pray that heaven's choirs with me

May never cease to praise the one true God.