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Theater Performances in a (German) Literature Class: Effective Language Learning through Medieval and Early Modern Plays

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ABSTRACT

Language and literature teachers know very well that theatrical performances can successfully contribute to the students' learning experience. Plays have always offered the opportunity to demonstrate one's language skills in a quasi-public space and in a practical manner. This paper suggests using pre-modern plays for contemporary purposes, which also allows us to build meaningful and enjoyable bridges to the past as a valuable dialogue partner for us today, as the fairy tales by the Brothers Grimm nicely illustrate. Most of the plays by tenth-century Hrotsvit of Gandersheim have proven to be highly effective in this regard, and this even on contemporary stages. They contain many voices, they are crisp in their structure and development of dramatic roles and shine forth through their ability to evoke diverse interests. Similarly, some plays by Hans Sachs can also be employed for pedagogical and linguistic purposes. Both the early medieval plays and those by Sachs can certainly be identified as entertaining and meaningful in their own terms. Teaching and practicing these texts can serve well for a German language and literature class because they invite students to study pre-modern texts as viable and expressive literary mediums for us today as well. The conclusions of this paper promise to apply to many other language and literature classes because the practical performance by students gets them personally engaged and offers good pedagogical tools to grasp more easily a foreign or a historical text in its timeless relevance.

Keywords: Theater Pedagogy; German Literary Education; Medieval Drama; Early Modern Drama; Drama-Based Learning; Brothers Grimm; Hans Sachs; Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

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1. Introduction

Based on multiple experiences in German language and literature classes on various levels at American colleges over many years, this paper intends to illustrate effective ways of employing theatrical performances to promote the study of the German language and, at the same time, facilitate and/or invigorate the teaching of older German literature, or of literature at large. It is based on empirical investigations and not on data collections, but it also outlines strategies and models of how to combine language with literature teaching via theatrical performances. We all know that most of our students today have very little awareness of or interest in medieval or early modern texts, which constitutes a serious loss in cultural history and deprives the current generation of its identificatory grounding in the past to build the future.

Unfortunately, this phenomenon is virtually global, and it does not matter whether teachers/professors work with native speakers or language learners. Some of the reasons for this apathy or simple ignorance rest in failing pedagogy at a rapidly changing time when AI threatens all education, when the computerization or robotization of our society creates huge problems for the younger generation to get motivated to study in the first place. Of course, in previous periods, we have also witnessed a lack of students' commitment and enthusiasm, often because teaching was not carried out in an exciting and energizing way. The challenges in pedagogy hence continue, so this paper presents a methodology and pragmatic approach that promises to tackle some of the issues in a productive and enjoyable fashion: Playing out certain texts in class as part of the effort to analyze and discuss them in depth points the way toward a more interactive and creative method of teaching a foreign language and literature.

This is not the first time that the significant role of dramas as an extraordinarily impactful method is discussed (see, for instance, the key request by the reviewer was to change all the footnotes into a numbering system, as you can see from here on Huber and Fratini^[1,2]; cf. the contributions to Willaredt and Nienaber-Willaredt, and Oelschläger^[3,4]; see also the contributions to Paule and Anne, and Standke^[5,6]). What might be new, however, is the suggestion to utilize some of the 'classical' dramatic texts in the history of German literature as teaching material that can be easily performed

by students on the various language levels. The suggestion developed here consists of transforming some older texts into plays so that, through the performance (or simply a reading practice) the fundamental meaning and value of a literary work can be brought out, which then promises to overcome the historical difference. Certainly, not every romance or epic poem would lend itself well for this purpose, but a theatrical dramatization easily proves to be an excellent bridge to the current student generation, getting them excited and motivated to work, even with some specific medieval and early modern narratives, which thus regain their timeless relevance and appeal. Undoubtedly, to prepare such a performance, the class would first have to study the historical and cultural context and also some of the linguistic features typical of a specific text. But that is one of the essential tasks of any actor, and most audiences attending a theater performance would need some preparation as well. So why not translate those everyday strategies into methods in the classroom as well?

The purpose of this paper is to present practical experiences and to outline the challenges and results of drama texts for the goal of creating improved motivation among our students and to get them actively engaged in practicing the target language in public, while at the same time being exposed to medieval and early modern literature. In other words, as I want to illustrate, a careful selection of texts that lend themselves well to a student performance even on the lower language level promises to facilitate a better understanding of the value, beauty, and meaningfulness of pre-modern texts and heightens the awareness of the historical frameworks determining a specific text^[7].

At the same time, the theatrical context brings these older plays vividly to life and promises to increase interest among students to study medieval and early modern literature as well, because it continues to carry important messages for us today. Plays from previous periods were effective in their own time because they evoked emotions and addressed important issues. The same strategy behind those plays can be productively reactivated for pedagogical purposes today. The following reflections and analysis of pedagogical strategies intend to be pragmatic and transferable from a class on older German texts to classes on literature from more modern periods in other classes^[8]. In essence, resorting to a dramatic performance can facilitate the teaching of many different

subjects (including Math, for instance) because the staging itself casts the issues, whether historical or modern, into a personally relevant mode and makes them thus intriguing and powerful.

Of course, a simple approach drawing from contemporary plays would certainly achieve some of the desired pedagogical goals, as well as we have already learned often (e.g., van Dixhoorn and Speakman Sutch, and Tselikas^[9,10]). But in many cases, modern texts are commonly highly complex, require a superior command of German (or any other foreign language), and demand from the readers/performers a sophisticated understanding of the social, political, cultural, and economic conditions determining the background. Granted, older, even medieval plays present very similar challenges, but some of those to be discussed here mostly address universal concerns that appeal to modern audiences as well because of their timeless relevance. Of course, if students at whatever level can handle those challenges, they will certainly profit from the enactment of those plays. For instance, the famous plays by Bertolt Brecht would be highly recommendable, and so would be those by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, but probably not for undergraduate students. Some of the problems consist of the length of the plays, the intellectual and political topics, the large number of actors necessary, the need for theater props, and, most critically, the necessary time to learn the individual roles, to practice the play, and finally to perform it.

2. Methodology and Pedagogical Goals

Following, I want to address two separate issues at the same time, first, the purely pedagogical question pertaining to how to improve students' interest in the study of German (or any other foreign language *mutatis mutandis*) and to strengthen their motivation. Second, which pertains probably mostly to the college level, the question is how to establish a meaningful and enjoyable platform to study not only contemporary literary works, but also texts from the early Middle Ages, the sixteenth century, or the early nineteenth century. My premise is that pre-modern literature also deserves our attention today, both from a scholarly and from a pedagogical perspective, and further, that there are many useful plays from the medieval and early modern period that

continue to appeal to a modern audience and invite meaningful conversations which the performance can successfully introduce.

There is a definite heuristic value to the alterity of Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's plays, for instance, whereas those by Hans Sachs can easily confirm the universally shared problems people face within their social environment, especially within marriage. Similarly, simplified plays based on fairy tales lend themselves well to introduce the genre and to embark on studying German (or any other foreign language) via theatrical performances in the classroom. As previous scholars have already demonstrated, there is a direct connection between language learning and a playful stage presentation of dramatic texts^[11-13], both assisting each other bringing out the best in our students, transforming a possibly dry textbook-based learning experience into a fun-filled and productive performance in the target language. In my experience, even shy students suddenly bloomed because they felt much freer in acting out their roles without necessarily being bound by the narrow constraints of grammar and lexicon. The actors normally felt much more uninhibited to speak, even with their limited vocabulary, which suddenly revealed to them the joy of operating in the language they studied.

As every actor knows, each role to be performed requires extensive efforts to embed oneself in the historical context and the cultural framework, so asking our students to transform their reading material into dramatic readings promises to achieve two goals at the same time: a) Creative interaction with and reflections on the text; b) Much deeper comprehension of the cultural background. While the use of theater has long been recognized as a useful pedagogical tool, here I take one extra step and present strategies to instrumentalize the dramatization of a literary work as a highly effective approach to the cultural and historical background.

3. Motivation

Whenever our students, on whatever language level, have the opportunity to apply their learning to a practical situation, we strengthen their interest in and fascination with German as their foreign language. Moving from a mostly theoretical teaching style to a practical performance in class that can involve a maximum of students represents a highly stimulating process. Undoubtedly, all language learning is

geared toward the practical application driven by the desire, at least idealistically speaking, to utilize the foreign language to gain access to new information, to meet people in the foreign culture successfully, and thus to empower oneself as a transcultural individual. There are countless ways of achieving those lofty goals to reenergize our students in a foreign language and/or literature class, and here I only want to add my own approach as a teacher/researcher of pre-modern texts because it has been so successful in linguistic and literary-historical terms. Obviously, practicing theater plays is only one of many other pedagogical tools, and I myself have used those only in combination with a variety of them. As I have been able to observe this both at my own home university in Arizona and at the German Summer School in Middlebury, Vermont, every time I scheduled some meeting times for work on a dramatic piece, all students got extremely excited and highly motivated because this was an excellent opportunity for them to practice their own language skills and to shine as actors. The texts we studied, from whatever cultural-historical period, became alive; they were accepted as a great medium to play with the new language, to perform in front of others, and to combine the linguistic aspects with the many different theatrical features (gestures, mimicry, props, clothing, sounds, images).

During the Summer School in Middlebury, VT, for instance, a German theater director regularly organizes a modern play at which each time approximately 15–20 students from all language levels participate. In fact, this theater production consistently demonstrates to be one of the most popular out-of-class activities. What I suggest, however, could be easily implemented in any ordinary German or other language class and would have the same success, getting students actively involved, making the German class more attractive, which hence promises to increase enrollments. After all, as everyone would probably concur, introducing fun events in one's class which at the same time contribute constructively to the learning of the foreign language and culture, can only be welcomed at any level, and this from K-16. Middlebury constitutes, of course, a highly exclusive situation, but the practical experiences I had there, combined with those in my ordinary teaching framework at a land-grant state university (University of Arizona), confirm the validity of the approach to be discussed here.

4. A Simple Example for the Sake of Introduction: The Brothers Grimm

Years ago, I decided to use one of the fairy tales included in the famous *Kinder- und Hausmärchen* (Children's and House Fairy Tales) by the Brothers Grimm (1812, 1815; etc.; certainly, a world classic which has been translated until today into countless languages^[14]. Every teacher of German knows, of course, that those fairy tales are highly attractive and emotionally and conceptually appeal to our young student generation. After all, American culture, and similarly many other cultures across the world, has been deeply influenced by the Walt-Disney versions of some of those fairy tales, which, unfortunately, often move far away from the original German versions. Building on that background easily facilitates a teacher's outreach efforts by way of increasing the students' motivation in studying German because there are then events happening in the specific class.

Fairy tales are simply popular even though the language used often proves to be challenging because it tends to be antiquated, containing many phrases relevant in the medieval context in which those stories are often embedded. For my purposes, I selected "Hans im Glück" (The Fortunate Hans) which appears as no. 83 in the first volume of the 1819 edition^[15] of the Brothers Grimm's *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The storyline is fairly straightforward and becomes increasingly easier because it repeats the same event under slightly changing circumstances. This means that once the first episode has been fully understood, all the other episodes no longer represent any significant challenges in linguistic and thematic terms. This dramatized fairy tale proves to be highly effective because it is pretty simple in its content, although it contains many roles, because it sets the stage for a more historically oriented study of German literature. Each actor has to learn a specific vocabulary and yet also understand what the other speakers are saying. Hence, in this performance, learning the foreign language becomes a collective effort driven by a high level of motivation because the students turn into actors and want to shine in public.

To start with, a short plot summary: Hans has worked for his master for seven years and finally wants to return home to see his mother again. His master, full of respect for his loyal service, pays him his salary in the form of a big

lump of gold the size of Hans's head. Soon enough, however, the young man feels the weight of the gold as a burden on him, and when a horseman passes him, he loudly expresses his wish to own a horse as well because it would allow him to travel easily, whereas the gold has become a too heavy a load on his back. The horseman suggests that they exchange what they have, gold for the horse, and soon enough, Hans rides off, but when he urges the horse on to a faster pace, he is immediately thrown off and would have lost the horse if not a peasant with a cow had caught the animal and returned it to Hans. The latter prefers the cow because it would walk slowly and provide him with milk whenever needed, so they both agree on the deal. This then goes on for a while, each time Hans finding himself unhappy with what he had gained through the exchange, so next he owns a pig, which he trades for a goose, and that one for whetting stones. But those he happens to push down by accident into a well, which thus frees him from all his burdens. Completely happy about his 'good luck,' he goes on until he reaches the house of his mother: "frei von aller Last" (p. 558; freed from all burdens).

I have translated this prose narrative into a play that can be easily performed in modern German, in which many different roles have to be assumed by the student actors (<https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.arizona.edu/dist/0/269/files/2022/08/hans.iGluck.pdf>). The narrator, Hans, his master, the owners of the various animals, and the cutler. To expand the range of figures, I added some neighbors who observe the individual deals and comment on Hans and his foolishness, and finally, his mother. One could be even more creative and give voices to the animals so that every student in the class can play a role or act out an animal.

This fairy tale is also available online, being orally presented by Rainer Antrim (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Sb3UxTgShks>), as a comics film for children (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3V3swThJJjE>), and as a fully developed film version (<https://www.ardmediathek.de/video/maerchen-in-der-ard/hans-im-glueck/ndr/Y3JpZDovL25kci5kZS80NDI2XzIwMjItMTItMjUtMDktMjA?isChildContent=>), which runs for almost a whole hour). In short, here we face the fantastic opportunity to engage with this text using a variety of media approaches, and each one can enrich the actors' personal experiences. Many of my students have enjoyed watching the movie on their own, but then they were particularly happy to be part of the dramatized version

and to perform the play.

The content is rather simple, and we might easily laugh about the protagonist, although the fairy tale also contains some valuable lessons about personal values and ideals. Every student is fully aware of the fantasy nature of this text, but there are also important messages about ethical behavior at work, the dubious value of money, the love for one's mother and home, and about danger of trusting material goods as a source of one's happiness. Significantly, studying and performing "Hans im Glück" facilitates a preliminary exploration of older German literature without being caught in too many historical features that might make the understanding of the text rather difficult. Finally, the vocabulary used by the Brothers Grimm is easy to handle, although the content of the story proves to be more complex and sophisticated than the first impression might signal. The dramatized version invites all students to engage with this story actively and also creatively. No role requires extensive memorizing of texts, and each person would be free to add creative features, such as outside comments by the various traders or bystanders, silent thoughts about the deal, or remarks by the master who regrets Hans's departure, and by the mother who welcomes her son back home but expresses, for instance, disappointment that he has returned without any money (my addition). Gestures and mimicry contribute undoubtedly to the dramatic charm of this fairly simple text and its performance.

Hence, this narrative, now in its dramatized version, invites many different critical questions that students can easily respond to depending on their maturity level. The historical-cultural difference needs to be examined at first (gold versus currency; traditional apprenticeship; people traveling on horseback, etc.), but those do not represent major hurdles for any student. More challenging would be the examination of the ethical role of money, of people's strategy to cheat the simple-minded Hans, and, ultimately, the meaning of happiness. Once we have accepted this model of transforming this fairy tale into a dramatized version and have worked with our students to act it out, many other fairy tales certainly lend themselves for the same purpose (see the contributions to Canepa^[16]). This would then also constitute an additional teaching strategy, asking the students to take any other fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm and dramatize it on their own, which would be an excellent writing exercise leading over to another theater performance.

5. Hans Sachs and Marital Problems

When we move further back in the history of German literature, we face increasingly challenges for ourselves and our students because the language and the cultural-historical context become more and more remote. But there are many reasons not to shy away from the effort to engage also with pre-modern literature on various levels of German teaching. If a text such as Hans Sachs's sixteenth-century Shrovetide play (*Fastnachtspiel—Shrovetide Play*) “Der fahrende Schüler im Paradies (The Wandering Student in Paradise)” can speak to us today as meaningful, then it carries universal value, and this beyond the literary-historical distance. It is simply important to open our students' eyes toward the historical dimension of German literature because the medieval, Reformation, or Baroque period established the foundations of modern-day culture and exerted a deep influence on contemporary culture. Ignoring Sachs, for instance, when studying Nuremberg, or leaving him aside when considering nineteenth-century opera music (Richard Wagner), would do a terrible disservice to our learners because no one lives only in and through the presence. By the same token, ignoring contemporary German dialect texts, which are still deeply invested in their medieval, origin would blind our students regarding the vast register of German language variants.

However, for current students of German, any pre-modern text constitutes a significant linguistic hurdle, even though Sachs already used a post-medieval German. Nevertheless, his language was still deeply influenced by his Franconian dialect. The play is available both in print (e.g., Sachs^[17] and the online resource: <https://www.projekt-gutenberg.org/sachs/3fassnac/chap02.html>). “Der fahrende Schüler im Paradies” is a short play involving only three persons, and it can be easily performed within ten minutes. For pragmatic purposes, I have ‘translated’ Sachs's text into modern German which only entailed some small adaptations and simplifications of the narrative (<https://bpb-us-e2.wpmucdn.com/sites.arizona.edu/dist/0/269/files/2022/08/deutsche-Mittelalter-in-seinen-Dichtungen.pdf>). Although Sachs has often been criticized as a prolific but not particularly qualitative poet, he certainly stands out as the most important sixteenth-century German composer of poetry, plays, fables, and jest narratives^[18]. The play about the student and the peasant couple was not an original creation, but it was well adapted by Sachs for public performance

in Nuremberg. Below, a drawing of this playwright from 1545, taken from Müller-Baden^[19] (p. 59, public domain at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Sachs.jpg, **Figure 1**):



Figure 1. Portrait of Hans Sachs from 1545.

A modern re-enactment by our students can easily demonstrate its timeless value; we still laugh about some of the protagonists and are invited at the same time to reflect on our own situation when we find ourselves in such a battle of wits and in a conflict involving the genders. A brief synopsis easily sheds light on the timeless messages contained in this play and hence its great usefulness also in our contemporary classrooms. At stake here proves to be the matter of marriage, which tends to be conflicted by strife, miscommunication, lack of compassion and a sense of community. But there is also much satire involved, criticism of ignorant people, and ridicule of naive concepts of religious notions. Although the play is situated in a village, the audience is really encouraged to laugh at themselves because the peasant couple serves only as a substitute for all people.

In essence, a poor student arrives in a village and begs for some money and food. The first person to speak, however, is a peasant woman who laments about her second husband, with whom she does not enjoy a happy marriage. By contrast, she misses her first husband, who had been kind and friendly to her. The new one is miserly and wants to accumulate much wealth, which means that his wife has to

suffer under his dictatorial and patriarchal rule.

The student then explains that he has come from Paris, which she misunderstands as ‘Paradise’ because she commands no education and does not know anything about the French capital. She immediately inquires with him whether he might have seen her dead first husband in Paradise. At first, the student needs more concrete details before he can identify him, a deliberate strategy on his part to deceive the woman even better, but then he notes that the poor man has neither pants nor shoes and wears only the funeral shroud. Due to his lack of money, he cannot participate in the feasts that the other souls organize and must live from their alms. The student, of course, pursues a definite rhetorical plan to evoke the widow’s empathy for her deceased husband, which then comes true. She quickly assembles some clothing and money for her husband because the student will, as he had claimed, return to Paradise within a short time.

As soon as the ‘messenger’ has left, the peasant appears and learns from his ignorant wife what has happened. He pretends to be sympathetic to her and even wants to give the student more money. Of course, in reality, he only intends to follow the student and to retrieve the goods, probably in a violent fashion. But she, in her naiveté (naivete), finds all this to be an expression of kindness and support, which makes her new husband appear in quite a different light, although the very opposite is the case. As he remarks to himself while she prepares the horse for her husband, he intends to beat up the student, take back the bundle with clothing and money and, once returned, to give his wife also a bad beating as punishment for her foolishness. Of course, here we would need a trigger warning regarding domestic violence.

Next, the scene changes, and the student appears on the stage, now far away from the farm. He notices that the peasant is following him, so he hides the bundle in the hedge and changes his appearance a little. When the angry man has arrived, he does not recognize the student and only asks him whether he might have seen a man who would fit his description. The real student pretends that he had indeed observed another person running across the moor toward the forest. In his eagerness, the peasant gets off the horse, which cannot traverse the moor due to its weight, hands the animal over to the stranger, and follows the culprit. Of course, this presents the greatest opportunity to the student who retrieves the bundle and rides off with the horse. When the peasant

returns, he realizes how much he himself has been fooled by the student. In the original, we read: “Der gröst Narr ich auff erden bin” (p. 99; I am the greatest fool here on earth), which I have rendered as: “Ich bin doch der größte Narr auf Erden. (I am the greatest fool here on earth.)” The peasant then reflects on his wife and himself. He had intended to give her a bad beating for her stupidity, but now he realizes, “Ich habe viel größere Prügel verdient, weil ich mich für viel klüger hielt” (my trans: I would have deserved a much worse beating because I believed myself to be much smarter than her).

Having returned home, he pretends to his wife that he had gifted the horse to the student because the distance to Paradise would be very long, and so it would take the young man too much time to reach his destination. His wife is deeply moved by his seeming loyalty toward her first husband and wishes him to die soon as well so that she could likewise send him money, clothing, food, and other things in Paradise, “auf daß du auch meine Treue erkennst, die ich dir allzeit halte” (my trans: so that you will recognize my loyalty that I always observe). The poor peasant hopes that the entire story remains a secret, but she has already divulged it everywhere, and this to his great embarrassment. The play concludes with his final reflections about this foolish and outright dumb woman, but he also concedes that she has a loyal, good soul and had to be judged as being not much more ignorant than him, who, as it had turned out, also might be deceived by a grifter. Once this self-realization would have set in, as the narrator comments, bickering in marriage should come to an end, having given room to mutual respect and tolerance.

This play proves to be very easy for students to perform even after only a short period of preparation. Once the message of the text has been discussed, which is quite easy to do both in linguistic terms and regarding the content with its specific lesson of the common problems within married life, small student groups can enact the play. While the misogynist and violence-prone tendencies in the play are obvious, and while the social satire about peasants at large cannot be overlooked, the outcome itself undermines both negative tendencies, alerting the audience to be mindful of their own fallibility and liability to fall prey to such a deceiver as the student in this play.

The actors are invited to employ all kinds of gestures

and mimicry to emphasize the strong feelings expressed by all three characters. We could easily invent new roles representing the neighbors, for instance, who are informed about the situation and first laugh about the wife, and later, also about the husband. Moreover, we could similarly imagine a round of other students who learn about our protagonist's success and comment sarcastically about the peasant couple. Thus, there would not be any trouble in including the entire class and assigning a role to every learner.

The student in the play is the cool, smart, rational, and cunning individual (almost a trickster) who knows how to manipulate both husband and wife, leading each one on by instrumentalizing their character weaknesses to his own advantage. The wife is identified as purely driven by her emotions, lamenting the loss of her first husband and ready to believe the student on the spur of the moment if only she can do something good for her dead husband. She believes every word which the student utters, so she is truly a convenient victim of the student's verbal strategies, a topic we today are so well informed about, considering the barrage of 'fake news' or the claim that 'factual' information is nothing but 'fake.' It might be a fun intervention to have an outside narrator commenting on the various conversations and actions. The husband demonstrates a rather brutal character since he does not hesitate for a moment to track down the student, to beat him up, and to recover the 'stolen' goods. However, he is the only one in their marriage to think critically about himself and thus able, by default, to see through the student's eyes. But, as the conclusion illustrates, under the right circumstances, he can be as easily deceived as his wife. All his rationality does not help him to see through the student's second masquerade, so he loses his bet and finds himself even worse off than his wife because of the value of the horse.

Sachs's message about married life proves to be simple and yet universally employable. We could draw, for instance, from the words in the New Testament, Matthew 7: 3–5: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?" As Sachs emphasizes, this proverb with its global relevance applies to marriage as well, and the more each individual acknowledges his/her own fallibility, the more arguments and bickering between the couple can be avoided.

As simplistic as the play proves to be, with just three actors, it has appealed to audiences throughout time, and thus it could easily and effectively be performed in a German class as well, where the focus already rests on the study of literary texts. In fact, modern theater troupes have taken on this Shrovetide play and performed it successfully (<https://www.dtver.de/downloads/leseprobe/b-V-V-V-151.pdf>; <https://www.instagram.com/p/COblkXJBFSN/>). By way of a few simple adjustments to the original text, as in my translation, students can pick up this Shrovetide play and re-enact it themselves quite creatively without changing the substantive content. My experiences in a variety of literature classes have always confirmed the same observation: the performance of this play breaks up the quotidian classroom situation, it frees students from their textbooks, it injects a lively and physical activity, and it then accompanies the entire learning situation with excitement, joy, and a fruitful translation of the theoretically acquired language into a practical application.

Although this text takes us to the sixteenth century, its genius theatrical quality is self-evident, and the focus on just three characters makes it a very easy teaching tool. Student groups could compete against each other to determine who performed the best, and who managed to bring out the specific features of the peasant woman and her husband. Indeed, in a subtle but effective way, students can thus gain a good understanding of the major public discourse in sixteenth-century literature focused on conflicts in marriage^[20,21] and realize at the same time the universal messages about human mis/communication, love, and marital relationships. Unfortunately, despite numerous efforts by Sachs scholars to investigate his work and to edit his texts, there are no modern German translations of other plays by him, except for this one piece.

6. An Early Medieval Masterpiece of Theatrical Performance: Hrotsvit of Gandersheim

The final example to be studied here takes us really far back in time, dating from the tenth century and belonging only indirectly to the history of German literature. The canoness Hrotsvit of Gandersheim was famous as the first medieval woman to compose plays, the first Saxon woman to write religious verse narratives, and the first medieval woman to produce chronicles in verse. Scholarship has paid great respect to

Hrotsvit and acknowledged her as a major female author from the early middle ages (for an introduction and selections of her texts in English translation^[22]; for a solid introduction and a German translation, see von Gandersheim^[23]. Although she uses exclusively Latin, her plays, above all, are commonly included into the history of German literature^[24]. Here I focus on her play “Dulcitius” which has already attracted much attention by theater directors across the world, e.g., in the English version (Dulcitius—Part 1, available online at YouTube, for an introduction from a theatrical perspective today, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XdvIsJF9d9s>), a modern German version, based on the original translation by Hohmeyer, was recently presented by Löning^[25], which makes it easily possible to get enough text copies for our students; the introduction is very insightful and addresses the general reader). For a presentation of this early medieval poet in a woodcut by Albrecht Dürer from 1501, showing Hrotsvit handing over her works to Emperor Otto I (public domain, e.g., online at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roswitha_Duerer.jpg), see **Figure 2**.



Figure 2. Hrotsvit of Gandersheim hands her works to Emperor Otto I, woodcut by the famous Albrecht Dürer from 1501. This reflects the enormous excitement about the rediscovery of Hrotsvit’s early medieval works during the late fifteenth century.

As in other plays from her pen, here we are dealing with Christian martyr women who demonstrate through their strong faith, morality, and virtues that they can resist all male temptations to abandon their faith, which tragically, however, leads to their death.

The Roman Emperor Diocletian wants to force the three virgins Agape, Chionia, and Hierena—the names of the Christian virtues Love, Purity, and Peace—to convert back to his own pagan faith, but they are adamant in their insistence to remain steadfast in their belief in the Christian God. When nothing can move them, neither promises nor threats, Diocletian turns them over to his governor Dulcitius, allowing him to do with them what he wants. After they have been imprisoned in a room next to the kitchen, he decides to visit them at night and take advantage of his opportunity to rape them, although the soldiers warn him about their strong faith and resolute resistance. Dulcitius then enters the building, but since God has confused his mind, he ends up in the kitchen instead of in the room with the women.

While we do not witness what happens there in the dark, the virgins notice a loud noise in the neighboring room. In a teichoscopic operation—reporting to the audience what they perceive in another space—they gaze through a crack in the wall and discover that Dulcitius has been confused by God, mistaking the pots and pans for the three virgins, hugging and kissing them, getting black from the soot all over his body. Hence, while the three women are chuckling about the funny scene, the soldiers get deeply terrified when Dulcitius vacates the kitchen, believing him to be the devil. The play then continues involving other representatives of the emperor who are to frighten the virgins and then, because they refuse to submit under the pressure, to kill them, creating martyrs out of them, two being burned at the stake, and the third, being shot to death by the soldiers’ arrows.

The play is short, highly dramatic, involving a large number of characters, and develops in a fast clip, combining deeply religious messages with humor. The dialogues are brief and intense, allowing the actors to play out their role with gestures, comments, laughter, and spiritual remarks. A very recent and somewhat popularizing German translation is available, apart from translations into English and Spanish^[26], but it would need some adaptations, particularly in the syntax, so that students can more easily perform it (for an excellent introduction geared for younger readers, see

the work by Angelina Bruns and Elanur Sürücü online at: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bc/Dulcitus_Drama.pdf.

Since numerous modern theater companies or student groups have performed this play and others by Hrotsvit, and this with great success in the German-speaking countries and elsewhere, I recommend trying this experiment as well in our German language and literature classes. On the one hand, here we face a unique opportunity to translate an ordinary study session involving a written play into a theater production, and this is just the same way as with the other plays discussed above. On the other hand, students will get excited and empowered using their German for such a performance. And finally, they are exposed to older literary texts and are invited to appreciate and value the topics addressed there. Significantly, here we deal with a female playwright, a very devout Christian author, and then also with one of the most sophisticated and appealing playwrights not only of her own time, but for our purposes today as well. Of course, Hrotsvit composed her text from a very Christian perspective, but this can be reconceptualized as a topic highlighting a person's fundamental belief in whatever religion, values, or ideals. The key aspect here proves to be that students would work with the German translation of this playwright's piece and perform it in the target language. Contrary to many expectations, in this play, "Dulcitus," female endurance, virtue, strength, and devotion are highlighted and idealized. At the same time, there are also humorous scenes, which lighten up, at least for a short moment, the tragic development toward martyrdom.

Finally, without going too much into detail because every teacher will pursue his/her own pedagogical ideals and strategies, we can also point out that working with a play has the obvious effect of improving students' memorizing capacities since they have to work through the text first as such, then learn the major terms, whereupon they then have to practice their roles and interact with each other like in an ordinary conversation, but on the 'stage.' In terms of vocabulary, this means, of course, that key words are repeated many times and placed into a natural situation. In order to translate all this practical work (pre-reading, reading, role playing, performance) also into a writing exercise, the final stage might then be to make students compose a review of the play as if they were publishing it in a news-

paper. Hrotsvit's plays serve this purpose exceedingly well because the 'reviewer' would first have to explain something about the individual play and the playwright, investigate the historical and cultural context, and thus carry out substantial research. Thus, students will develop a certain expertise in early medieval literature, sixteenth-century Shrovetide plays, and in the history of German fairy tales.

7. Conclusions

Throughout time, poets have created plays, and this has already been done in the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Teaching German (or any other language) at all language levels should also contain a cultural-historical dimension, taking us as far back as the Middle Ages, which certainly matters significantly also in the present time. Plays by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim and Hans Sachs, and a dramatized version of a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, point the way toward an entertaining and productive method to get our students actively engaged in their learning process and thereby to acquire an understanding and appreciation of older texts that continue to matter today. All three plays prove to be short, easy to understand, effective in their performative power, and hence as useful material for a class on German literature past and present. The texts considered here represent three major cultural-historical periods, which the students can thus enact themselves, and this promises to have a lasting memory for them all.

Learning in the true sense of the word does not consist of rote study of data or facts, a simple form of memorization. Instead, as I strongly argue, real learning is an active process of engagement with people's conditions, experiences, problems, or with natural phenomena and scientific aspects^[27]. Instead of consulting nothing but a textbook, future students need to get involved and reflect on their own about the case presented to them in the classroom. This can apply to history, such as the Holocaust (see now the contributions to Lehmann, ed.^[28]), or to natural disasters. Theatrical re-enactments are certainly a powerful method to make all those phenomena active and alive and thus gain meaning, so students can learn real lessons for life and move beyond the abstract instructional texts^[29]. As the contributors to Bev Hogue's *Teaching Comedy* convincingly argue Hogue^[30], plays, along with images, youtube videos, and other media can serve exceedingly

well to connect students with teachers and create a highly productive classroom with a sense of community. Performing pre-modern texts in the classroom promises to open the eyes of the participants to the universal value of those texts and creates a new sense of the cultural-historical dimension of what we teach in a German or any other foreign language and literature class (for a useful introduction to medieval dramas for modern usage, see YouTube^[31]).

There are also global implications for any foreign language and literature class because the theatrical production and performance entail a very intensive engagement with the text (the staging), or with the production of a theatrical narrative (translation from prose narrative to drama). To make a stage production possible, in most cases, we would need to have available a simplified text, while complex issues would have to be substituted by gestures, mimicry, clothing, or props. In general, when students perform a play, they tend to identify with their roles and enjoy it, once shyness or linguistic hurdles have been overcome, their acting. This simply entails a specific form of linguistic empowerment, while the students learn, in the background, much about the literary-historical context. In other words, with just a few moderations, the concept of theater performance certainly contributes to a much more intensive interactive study of literary works. And, to be sure, there are also numerous potentials to make our students to active writers when they create their own versions of historical plays. Both fairy tales and Sachs's Shrovetide plays offer themselves exceedingly well for these purposes^[32].

There are additional implications resulting from these reflections for the teaching of literature from all cultural and historical periods. While I have emphasized the dramatization of medieval and early modern texts as a productive means to overcome significant hurdles regarding linguistic comprehension and conceptual challenges, we can certainly go one step further and accept the idea of theater in the literature class globally. Anyone can easily translate a prose text into a drama, especially if there are numerous voices involved. Modern fairy tales and narratives for younger readers lend themselves particularly well to this purpose. By contrast, it might be too much of a challenge even for the best students studying a foreign language to carry out a performance of some plays by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (Enlightenment) or Heinrich von Kleist (Classicism). Bertolt

Brecht's "Lehrstücke" (theater plays as didactic instruments) might work better, but they tend to be too complex and extensive for a school performance.

Whatever selection we might prefer, there is no doubt that transforming a literature class into a theater operation strongly supports our pedagogical ideals and purposes. When students are invited to participate in a play, their active learning process of the foreign language will certainly improve, while they will also recognize more easily the universal value of older (dramatic) texts for us today.

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