

The Miracle of Water in Early Medieval Latin and Vernacular Literature: With a Focus on Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's "Gongolf"

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Abstract

The topic of water has gained tremendously in significance and even urgency today because of global warming and the ever-shrinking availability of good drinking water for a constantly growing world population. One important approach to changing our attitude toward this precious resource without which there cannot be life proves to be a careful and meaningful close reading of literary texts where the protagonist/s pay explicit respect to water and identify it as what it really is, a gift from God or any other divine being/creator. Recent studies have already identified the great symbolic significance of rivers, and even seas, for human society because they interact intimately with human beings, providing resources, constituting dangers and barriers, and symbolizing human life through the natural entity. The present article highlights an early medieval verse narrative, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's religious legend narrative, "Gongolf," where the protagonist recognizes from early on the spiritual function of good clear water, which foreshadows his turning into a saint. Other literary texts from that early period also contributed to the global discourse on water as the *conditio sine qua non* for human existence, though Hrotsvit appears to be the most sophisticated and eloquent poet to create this literary paean on water. A useful term for this narrative phenomenon could be 'aquapoetics.'

Keywords: water, early medieval Latin literature, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim, "Gongolf", nature and spirituality, aquapoetics

1. Introduction

In her recent passionate appeal to humanity today, Annette Kehnel argued that in face of the global crisis, it might behoove us to return to the Middle Ages and to study models of

economic and social systems practiced then as potential alternatives to those dominating and threatening our post-capitalist society (Kehnel 2021, trans. 2024; see my review forthcoming in *Mediaevistik* 37). She examines, for instance, the Benedictine Order as predicated on sustainability, the Franciscan Order built on the basis of self-imposed poverty, and the movement of beguines and their successful struggle to establish their own economic units independent from the larger urban communities. In fact, Kehnel suggests that we might have to return to the economic and social principles of minimalism, recycling virtually everything, and the deep respect for nature. It might be a bit simplistic to envision specific inspirations from those models for our modern world, but in essence, Kehnel is right to suggest that human experience acquired over thousands of years deserves our full attention especially now in the twenty-first century when all our traditional concepts of production and consumption threaten our very own survival.

Undoubtedly, water represents one of the most valuable natural elements without which we would not be able to survive (Triebkorn and Wertheimer, ed., 2016). Not surprisingly, this has led throughout time not only to many different techniques of handling and using water in channels, wells, fountains, lakes, ponds, and all kinds of controlled environments (see the contributions to Walton, ed., 2006), but also to the establishment of entire civilizations depending on water for drinking, cooking, hygiene, and healthcare (see the contributions to Kosso and Scott, ed., 2009). Hence, water has also mattered centrally in literary texts, musical performances, and in the visual arts (Menon, ed., 2010), for which I would like to use the virtually innovative term ‘aquapoetics’ (for a parallel use, but pertaining to nineteenth-century American literature, see Dayan 2012).

We would not go too far in claiming that a close study of water as a cultural fact throughout time promises to shed profound light on the human conditions at large (see now the contributions to Cesario, Magennis, and Ramazzina, ed. 2024). The critical issue today – if it has not always been of critical importance – would be how humans treat and respect water, or how they integrate this essential element into their cultural awareness, and perhaps vice versa. Important topics would hence be: water and religion, water and healthcare, water and the arts, and water and philosophy. But does water have an agency by itself? Wasting precious water for whatever purpose (private swimming pools, golf courses, artificial lakes, etc.) seems to be not only a crime against nature, but also a crime against humanity. If we deem life itself invaluable, then we ought to pay the same respect to water in whatever form it might appear. A literary-historical analysis promises to shed more light on this phenomenon.

It would not be outlandish to argue that the current demands of society and our natural environment require new concepts of interdisciplinary research, and so the examination of water emerges as particularly relevant and rewarding in that regard (Zapf, ed., 2016). Without water, there is no culture or civilization. Once water dries up, people have always been forced to pack up and to leave for better pastures, e.g., the Sinagua people in the Southwest of modern-day United States (Downum 1992). Water makes human settlements possible in the first place, whereas dry territories such as Western Morocco or Southern Chile, the Gobi and the Sahara Deserts make it difficult if not impossible. Social and economic systems, military operations, religious organizations, and urban planning depend profoundly on the availability

of water, or they require new protections in the case of over-abundance (Mielzarek and Zscheschang, ed., 2019; Chiarenza, Haug, and Müller, ed. 2020). Water by itself has always been intimately associated with many different types of religious practices throughout the world, particularly baptism and cleansing of the body in physical and spiritual terms.

These global observations hence invite us to study more in detail what poets, artists, or musicians had to say about water in the course of time, especially because their statements, in whatever medium, have always served us well to gain a solid understanding of the mental-historical structures at a given time (Classen 2018). Water has always been precious, and drinking water even more so; hence, when we can identify specific texts, for instance, that address water in a respectful manner, we are in a solid position to dive deeply into the cultural conditions of a particular society or period (see the contributions to Twomey and Anlezah, ed., 2021).

The resulting insights then promise to illuminate the true relationship between humans and water, which would certainly be a clarion call for our future. Even though Kehnel (2024) does not address water, her overall argument, insisting on the relevance of past cultural experiences for an alternative approach to our current global crisis, ought to be heeded. Ecocriticism, ecopoetics, and now aquapoetics represent the most advanced concepts in literary studies in conjunction with environmental studies (Glotfelty and Fromm, ed., 1996; Garrard 2015/2023; Hiltner, ed., 2015). The relevance of fictional texts dating also from the pre-modern world regarding a sensitive and respectful treatment of water has recently attracted some attention (Locher and Poster 2018), but much specific analysis remains to be done especially concerning early medieval heroic poetry and religious texts.

2. Water in Early Medieval Narratives

One of the best examples for the central function of water proves to be the anonymous heroic epic poem *Beowulf* (ca. 750 C.E.) in which the protagonist crosses the open water twice, where he has to pursue his enemies, and where he nearly finds his death and yet survives (Fulk, ed., 2010). Of course, this major piece of world literature has been discussed already from many different perspectives, so we need to address it only briefly as a steppingstone for our actual focus on the religious tale by Hrotsvit of Gandersheim (cf. Orchard 2003; Nemati 2018).

Beowulf arrives from Sweden, after having crossed the open sea, but water does not yet have any particular meaning in that context except that it mirrors the hero's impeccable character. The same observation can be made regarding his return home, which is simply a straightforward journey without any special significance. In the early scene, we are only told: "Driven by the wind, the foamy-necked ship then passed over the sea-waves most like a bird" (101). The return voyage also runs smoothly, but the narrator provides sophisticated and elegant images of the experience on the water, most likely because the protagonist has achieved his goal in a triumphant manner and is glorified by all his retainers, the host in Denmark, and his court: "The ship set out onward, stirring up the deep water, left behind the land of the Danes. By the mast there was then a certain ocean-vestment, a sail fastened to a rope, the sailing-wood groaned; there the wind did not hinder the wave-floater from its

voyage over the swells; the sea-walker proceeded, foamy-necked floated away over the waves, bound-prowed over the ocean currents, so that they could make out the Geats' cliffs, familiar headlands" (211–13).

However, behind these images of seemingly trouble-free voyages, we learn of meaning-filled episodes associated with water. First, Beowulf is challenged by one of King Hrothgar's retainers, Unferth, who relates of the swimming contest with Breca in a doubtful manner and dares Beowulf to come clean with his own claims as to their physical activities in the water: "Then I expect worse results for you, even if you have acquitted yourself in the rush of battle everywhere" (125). Beowulf, however, rejects this negative assessment, insisting on his superior swimming and fighting abilities: "He was not able to float far at all from me on the waves of the flood, faster in the swells, nor did I care to leave him. Then we were together on the sea the space of five nights, until the current drove us apart, the surging water, coldest of storms, darkening night, and the battle-grim wind turned from the north, the whitecaps were fierce" (121–23). After mighty battles against the sea monsters, Beowulf self-assuredly reports of his triumphs over the worst enemies, and simply sets Breca aside: "Breca has never yet at sword-play, nor either of you, accomplished so daring a deed with chased swords" (125). As unlikely as it might sound, but Beowulf does not boast and simply states facts because he is master over many natural forces, including the water of the cold sea. No monster can frighten him, not even deep down in the water.

Hence, neither Grendel, who is a hybrid creature originating from the swamps, nor his mother, hiding in an underwater cave, can frighten him, and Beowulf demonstrates his superior strength and extraordinary skills in his mortal fight against her. The situation is completely unbelievable for ordinary humans because he has to dive after her for a good part of the day and has to reach the bottom of the sea where she is already waiting for him in her cave. The battle that erupts between them would have almost ended up in a disaster for Beowulf, but his armor, or war-shirt, protects him, also from other sea monsters. The cave itself is free of water (185–87), but the poet is not concerned with any biological challenges, such as the need of air. Instead, the mother carries him against his will into her lair, but she cannot harm him because of his armor.

However, then Beowulf spies an ancient sword, "a badge of distinction for warriors" (189) with which he can kill his enemy. Moreover, he also finds dead Grendel whom he decapitates, but the blood spurts out of the body and quickly moves up to the surface where the retainers are waiting for the reappearance of their leader. Hrothgar's men read the blood as a sign that Beowulf has died, and they leave, whereas the Swedes "sat sick at heart and stared at the pool; they wished and did not expect that they would see their friend and lord himself" (191).

Most remarkably, when the hero emerges from the depth, nature responds in a surprising manner, suddenly turning clear and peaceful: "The mingled waves were completely cleansed, the environment improved, now that the alien spirit had let go of its life-days and this fleeting existence" (193). The evil incarnate has been left behind, in the depth of the water, destroyed and thus eliminated, which thus makes it possible for the heroes back at Hrothgar's court to rejoice and celebrate the return of their happy existence as heroes. But Beowulf has not

neglected to transport Grendel's head with him, which is then displayed at court for all to marvel at: "a beautiful, treasured sight; the men looked on" (195). Only if we remember that this monster, like its mother, was intimately associated with water, can we fully understand the process described here. The depth of water contains, at least according to the *Beowulf* poet, evil all by itself. The protagonist also brings back with him the gold-studded hilt of the ancient sword as a reminder of the giants in the past, whereas the blade burned in the monster's blood, which constitutes the evil liquid – an ominous symbol of the deepest source of life, here turned against God (for some reflections on blood in medieval literature, see Bildhauer 2006, although she does not consider *Beowulf*), and while the protagonist travels with ease between Sweden and Denmark, the real challenge awaits him in the depth of the sea. This then also explains why Beowulf later dies in the dragon's lair because he had to walk down to its cave.

The true challenge in this moral and religious struggle consists of handling the vertical movement determined by the placements of good and evil within the course of human history. The metaphor of water, however, changes this discourse altogether by way of focusing on the depth of human existence, born in water and sustained by it at the same time. As Anlezark and his sources suggest, we might deal here with the close interaction between hell and human life, happiness and sorrowfulness (Anlezark 2006, 317). Beowulf could thus be interpreted as a metaphor of life bought by death, and hence as an image of human existence at large. After all, he arises from the depth of water and is alive and well, whereas Hrothgar's retainers believe that the blood in the water symbolizes death for them all. While Christian authors commonly engaged with the myth of the flood, or apocalypse, with humankind drowning almost altogether, in this secular heroic poetry, the protagonist operates as the master of water where he commands the highest authority and power (for preliminary studies on this topic, though very limited in scope, see Puhvel 1965; Mann 1977). The research on this figure and the two monsters is vast, but the intimate relationship between Beowulf and the waterworld does not seem to have been adequately addressed (see, for instance, Spencer 2024).

3. Christ in *Heliand*

3.1 The Spiritual Function of Water

In the more or less contemporary Old-Saxon *Heliand* (first half of the ninth century), the story of Christ is retold in vernacular terms, which allowed the poet to associate the biblical narrative with the popular Saxon worldview. This facilitated the teaching of the Christian message within the vernacular context. In essence, of course, the *Heliand* is the Old Saxon translation of the story in the New Testament, which also invited the poet to deal with the episode of Christ caught by a storm on the sea. Whereas before, his people were afraid of drowning, after Christ has spoken to the wind and to the sea itself, calmness and tranquility return and life can continue: "They carried out the command, the Ruler's word. The storm winds, died down and the sea became tranquil. Then the people who were with Him began to wonder, and some said it with their own words, what kind of a more powerful human being He might be, that both the wind and the waves obeyed His word of command" (Murphy,

trans., 1992, 75).

Upon His order, the natural forces subsided, and the boat could land safely in the harbor. As much as the poet follows the biblical account, it still deserves to be noted within our context that the divine power is specifically addressed through Christ's control of the natural forces, including water (Heinemann 2022).

4. Water in Vernacular Gospel Literature

The tenth century witnessed a major paradigm shift in literary-historical terms when the Alsatian poet Otfrid von Weißenburg (ca. 800–after 870) created his Old High German Gospel translation using end rhyme for the first time since antiquity (Hartmann 2005, 2014, 2023) was a gifted poet who managed in a powerful way to render the New Testament in a deeply appealing and meaningful manner into the vernacular, adding his own reading of the spiritual messages (for a critical edition, see Kleiber, ed., 2006; for a digital copy of the Heidelberg manuscript, see <https://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpl52>). The *Evangelienbuch* has survived in four manuscripts, one of which was Otfrid's autograph.

When Christ appears to John the Baptist and asks him for the baptism (Book I, 25–27), the latter is deeply frightened and emphasizes that their roles should be reversed since he is only Christ's servant. But Christ in his mildness insists because it is His wish and that it was prearranged that way. As soon as the baptism has happened, the sky opens up and God the Father announces that this is His beloved son who would carry out all his wishes. Whereas Adam refused to do his bidding, Christ would redeem humankind by pursuing everything according to God's expectations.

In Book V, 13–14, Christ's appearance to his disciples after his resurrection (John 21:1-9) at Lake Tiberias is described in highly vivid terms, emphasizing the waves' motion and response to the divine miracle, which is most dramatically manifested in the great catch of fish upon Christ's command. St. Peter, in his complete delight to see his Lord again, throws himself out of the boat and swims to the shore, where everything is already prepared to cook the fish. The poet then explains the symbolic meaning of both the sea and the shore, the former representing the unsteadiness of human life subject to the vagaries of all existence, whereas the latter standing in for the eternal life where Christ abides. Water and firm land thus assume the spiritual opposites, the lake mirroring the constant struggles people have to go through, whereas the firm land promises final stability and salvation in and through God. Nevertheless, Otfrid also signals that humans are fishermen, and with his help, they can rely on catching all the fish they need. Christ serves as the pilot light and directs people to come from the turmoil of the water to the sanctity and safety of the divine world (for an older German translation, see Kelle 1870).

5. A Tenth-Century Female Writer Pays Respect to Water

James L. Smith has already explored the huge role of water for twelfth-century monasteries, especially the Cistercians (Smith 2017); Paolo Squatriti has offered a focused study of the role of water in early medieval Italian society (Squatriti 1998), and Classen (2011) examined the spiritual meaning of water in a variety of medieval texts. For the present purpose, I want

to examine as closely as possible statements by the tenth-century canoness, Hrotsvit of Gandersheim. She is famous today for her major dramas, her religious narratives, and her historical poems about her own convent and about the emperor, Otto I. Hrotsvit enjoyed some reputation during her lifetime, as we can tell from the fact that her works have survived in a manuscript discovered by the Humanist Conrad Celtis (1459–1508) ca. 1492 in the monastery of Emmeram in Regensburg. Gandersheim is located in northern Germany near Braunschweig, whereas Regensburg is northwest of Munich in southern Germany. This manuscript, written by several hands and containing all her works, is housed today in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich, Clm 14485. A fragment exists also in the Studienbibliothek Klagenfurt, Austria, Hs. 447 (for further manuscripts, Cologne, Pommersfelden (near Bamberg), Berlin, Heiligenkreuz Stiftsbibliothek, Vienna, Hildesheim, Zwettl, and Melk, and their discussion, see Berschin 2001, X–XXX).

Although Hrotsvit composed her works only for the fellow-sisters in Gandersheim, we have learned to appreciate them ever since Celtis had discovered her manuscript. Particularly today, Hrotsvit is highly praised as a major female spokesperson who was a first in many respects at her time: the first female playwright, the first Saxon woman writer, the first female chronicle author, the first author of legendary tales, and the first canoness to be active as a literary author (Haight 1965; Nagel 1965; Rädle 1983; Bodarwé 2006; Classen 2010; Classen 2018; Classen 2021).

In her religious narrative “Gongolf,” we encounter a most impressive example of aquapoetics insofar as the divine power manifests itself through the appearance of a well (Dräger, ed. and trans., 2011). This aquapoetics does not appear in any of her religious plays or other religious tales, which might also be the reason why previous scholarship has not paid any attention to this topic (Wilson, ed. 1987; Brown, McMillin, and Wilson, ed., 2004; but see Classen 2018, 2–3). Of course, there are many other themes that stand out remarkably, such as virginity, virtues, vices, martyrdom, sexuality, and prostitution, and then also adultery, murder, burials, sciences, etc. In “Gongolf,” as Dräger observes, the poet resorts to elegiac distiches and embellishes her source, the anonymous *vita* of Gangulf, the martyr of Varenne (*Vita Gaangulfi martyris Varennensis*), by adding a distinct tone of humor, which is predicated on the body itself and its gaseous emissions (Dräger 2011, 162–64). Hrotsvit did not hesitate to intervene into the text and change it considerably according to her own taste and interests. So we are certainly justified to characterize “Gongolf” as a unique literary creation of a high poetic quality combining deeply religious, ethical, moral, and comic elements in one text.

We face here a traditional story of a Christian martyr who died for his faith. But the circumstances of his suffering and death are remarkable, steeped in history and a complex biography. Gongolf is identified as an extraordinary martyr (14) who in his young years served in King Pippin’s military, shining forth through his physical abilities and his skills with weapons. The narrator even suspects that he might have been of royal origin. From early on, he accepted the Christian faith and thus cleansed himself from the original sin. He rejected worldly glories and distributed much of his fatherly inheritance among the poor. As a military leader, he achieved many triumphs, but he also achieved peace with the defeated peoples.

On his way home from the battlefield, Gongolf happens to come by a garden owned by a poor man. A dense hedge surrounds the place which is kept green and fresh through a delightful well which feeds all the plants (94). For the protagonist, this almost seems to be a little utopia, and he is so pleased with this hidden location that he immediately decides to buy it from the “*Dominus florigeri ipsius ergo loci*” (100; the master of this location filled with flowers). The focus rests on the fresh, clear, and delightful water, as much as Gongolf feels deep love for this hidden space: “*Frigoreae captus limphae paulisper amore*” (97; filled with love for the cold water). To make sure that the owner does not refuse his monetary offer, he increases the amount right from the start, although his servants think that this would seem exorbitant. The wording strongly underscores the great delight Gongolf feels about this little garden: “*Ut vendas purum hunc mihi fonticulum*” (108; so that you sell me this pure little well). In other words, it’s not so much the garden, but the water itself that profoundly appeals to the future martyr, at that point the general of his people.

Those, however, disagree with the purchase, decrying the high price, whereas Gongolf insists on the unique value of this precious garden idyll. He describes the details in moving and certainly highly poetic words, praising the gurgling sounds of the well water, the multicolored flowers, and the tranquility and peacefulness of the place (159–64). To get verification of the beauty and refreshing quality of the site, Gongolf sends one of his men back to examine the garden again, but the situation has suddenly changed. The garden is now surrounded by a thick hedge of thorny shrubs, as is often the case when a piece of land is basically abandoned. Sadly, the well itself has dried up; there is no water left. The messenger desperately tries to lick at least some remaining drops to quench his thirst, but even that is in vain.

Having returned to his lord, he reports about the disastrous situation in the garden, but now he notices a cloud hovering above Gongolf’s head “*Instar candidoli denique pallioli*” (196; shining like shimmering towel). At the same time, they believe that the purchase had only been a pretext to give an alm, and they all finally recognize in him the saint. The protagonist then pushes his staff into the earth and enters the hall where a feast is underway. Even there, however, Gongolf demonstrates his holy nature, feeding the poor first.

The next morning, Gongolf requests a servant to bring him the staff, and when the latter pulls it out of the soil, the above-mentioned cloud bursts open over the cleaving hole and fills it with water. The amazed servant reports this miracle to his master, identifying it as a divine grace granted by the “*rex ipse poli summo de vertice caeli*” (268; the King Himself from the highest peak of the sky). This miracle is compared with the one granted by God to the Israelites when they had to cross the Red Sea (Exodus 14:19-31). The transfer of the well, a major divine intervention, was possible because God wanted to demonstrate His overarching power and His pleasure with Gongolf’s sanctity (295–96).

The true miracle, however, consists of the healing power of the water, and soon, many sick people arrive from far and wide to drink just a little from the well and to recover their health (297–324). Water thus gains a magical power, or a divine property, offering all those sick people finally a way to regain their health (Classen 2017; Stoudt 2017).

Subsequently, the spiritual power of the water is manifested once again after Gongolf has

married to secure the procreation of heirs. But his wife turns out to be an adulteress who has a cleric as her lover. Rumors spread, and Gongolf soon confronts his wife with the charge, asking her to dip her right hand into the water of the mysterious well to swear and oath concerning her innocence, an approximation of the practice of the *ordal* (or ‘ordeal’), asking for divine intervention to confirm or disapprove the truth of a claim. Gongolf arranges a private meeting with his wife in that garden to avoid public embarrassment and to give her a chance to demonstrate her innocence. However, she is guilty through and through, and when she puts her hand into the water (405–18; cf. Ziegler 2004; Neumann 2010; neither one, however, engages with this example of the water ordeal in Hrotsvit’s work), she becomes badly burned (410). The water has spoken, once again, and thus God has spoken, but the outcome is rather tragic. Gongolf forgives his wife, yet he sends her lover, a deeply misguided cleric, into exile. The latter then orchestrates Gongolf’s murder, and she is subsequently punished by God in a most undignified manner. She falsely claims that she could create more or rather true miracles than her husband’s corpse.

Tragically for her, from then on she is forced to fart whenever she utters a word, which completes this tale, certainly a rather humorous, almost scatological comedy, and this within a strongly religious context (cf. Allen 2007). Water, however, no longer matters for the conclusion of the poem because Gongolf is dead, the cleric has been exiled, and the widow can not speak anymore without farting.

6. Conclusion

In the *Vita Gangulfi martyris Varenennsis*, some of the specific elements concerning the purchase of the garden and the relocation of the well are different, but the miracle with the water is the same. The anonymous author also highlights the healing power of the water, but he does not go into details (Dräger, ed. and trans., 2011, 22). Hrotsvit obviously thought quite differently about the water’s miraculous quality since she emphasizes at length how much people flocked to the site and experienced a sudden healing, even in basically impossible cases. Much more important, however, proves to be the religious symbolism of the well which mirrors Gongolf’s sainthood and then his martyrdom. The protagonist realizes immediately that the well produces particularly valuable water, and so he is more than willing to pay an excessive price for the small property. But the water then dries up and moves away, driven by God’s intervention, to Gongolf’s estate because this reflects the divine will to honor this saintly figure. In a way, we might hence conclude that water emanates from God, as Hrotsvit implies it, or constitutes His entity as manifested in nature. The reader is hence strongly encouraged to pay greatest respect to good water because it sustains all life, that is, divine creation.

How ever we might read this remarkable passage in “Gongolf,” it highlights the enormously important symbolism of water as it flows naturally out of the ground. In *Beowulf*, water represents mighty natural forces the protagonist manages to handle because he is built to do so as a hero. In Hrotsvit’s poem, by contrast, water is associated with martyrdom, saintliness, and the physical manifestation of God. Thus, it does not come as a surprise that gospel literature such as Otfrid’s *Evangelienbuch* places so much attention to the baptism scene or

the reappearance of Christ at the Lake Tiberias following his resurrection. In many ways, Hrotsvit anticipated the late medieval topos of the *locus amoenus* with its fountain or pond (Guillaume de Lorris's *Roman de la rose*, ca. 1230), except that Gongolf's purchase of the garden at first seems to be an utter financial loss because the water quickly dried up.

Yet, the water actually follows this protagonist and profiles him as the saint who he truly is. Upon the divine intervention, water thus gains an agency we otherwise do not really hear about in medieval and later literature. Only when we consider the mysterious figure of Melusine – first manifested in the twelfth century (see the mosaic image in the cathedral floor of Otranto) – or the various water nixies such as those who predict the future for Hagen in the anonymous *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200), do we encounter once again water assuming an agency on its own insofar as Melusine IS the water by itself as the most elementary aspect of all life.

Since the Romantic movement from around 1800, the same notion re-emerged, but the emphasis then rested on the mysterious, the horrendous, the dangerous and dark element (Sütterlin 1983; Härtling 1994). For Hrotsvit, by contrast, and to some extent also for the anonymous poet of *Beowulf*, water had an agency by itself and either supported the protagonist in his efforts or manifested God's will in human life. It does not come as a surprise that gospel authors such as Otfrid von Weissenburg embraced that notion, drawing from the specific scenes as already developed in the New Testament. In his case, however, water and firm land assumed deeply symbolic meaning, reflecting on the properties of both elements, water constituting the vagaries of all human existence, and land representing Christ and eternal life.

In Otfrid's *Evangelienbuch* and many other biblical narratives, baptism in holy water has always been a signal moment in a new person's life, but it could also stand in for the workings of *Fortuna*. Most critically, however, Hrotsvit, above all, deserves our acknowledgment for her highly skillful development of her aquapoetic theme with water in the clear well emanating not only from the soil, but from God Himself. Gongolf's sainthood thus finds its most vivid manifestation in his deep delight in the well and his willingness to purchase the land and hence the crystal-clear water. The divine power then transports the water away from that garden and to Gongolf's own estate where it then demonstrates its healing properties (Classen 2011).

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