

## ABSTRACT

### The Role of Womanhood in St. Hildegard's Medical Practices

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Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth-century German abbess (1098-1179), was not only a woman of great influence and power during her time, but she was also a female figure who wrote extensively about women – particularly about gender differences, reproductive health, and sexual nature. Gifted with divine visions since childhood, she produced written work ranging from theology, naturalism, philosophy, and medicine, to music, poetry, and cosmology on the basis of these extraordinary dreams. Not surprisingly, then, her idea of womanhood shaped much of her work; she also gave particular attention to holistic care. Holistic care places more emphasis on home life and on emotions, both of which are historically considered part of the feminine sphere. This thesis explores the way in which traditional femininity influenced St. Hildegard's practice of holistic medicine.

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THE ROLE OF WOMANHOOD IN ST. HLDEGARD'S MEDICAL PRACTICES

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By

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Who is St. Hildegard?

#### *Introduction*

Mostly regarded for her theological writings and divine visions, St. Hildegard von Bingen was held in high esteem among powerful religious and political figures in the Catholic Church, including various popes and kings. In addition to her divinely inspired counseling, she possessed natural ability for a multitude of disciplines – music composition, playwright, herbal concoction, and medicinal therapeutics, just to name a few. For the purposes of this thesis, I ultimately intend to focus on her work as the first female doctor of the Catholic Church, however, to begin, this chapter will provide background information on Hildegard in order to establish a level of familiarity with the subject of interest.

#### *Early Childhood into Adolescence*

Hildegard was born in 1098 into the distinguished Stein family. From the small town of Bockelheim, she would eventually travel throughout the regions of southern Germany to Switzerland and through Paris. However, her worldly accomplishments were unlikely due to her familial connections, but rather, through her own merit as she became successful in spite of her circumstances. Sickly since birth, she remained bedridden and visually impaired for most of her childhood.<sup>1</sup> Plagued with a variety of health

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<sup>1</sup> "Hildegard, Von Bingen." In *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*, edited by Victoria Boynton, and Jo Malin. (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 296.

complications, Hildegard became a burden to her prominent family. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, illustrious families were “often ruthless in sending sickly and unattractive girls to convents, as they were unlikely to “fetch much dowry” or be regarded as “much of a catch for a young lord” and the Stein family was no exception.<sup>2</sup> At the age of eight in 1106, Hildegard was given to the Disibondenberg convent under the supervision of Jutta von Spanheim who taught her how to read and write.<sup>3</sup>

Her move to the convent proved to be greatly advantageous, as married women during her lifetime were discouraged from participating in intellectual pursuits; In contrast, women serving in convents were free to engage in the scholarly. Hildegard’s life legacy was rooted in the skills she learned at the convent such as transcribing music as well as documenting her visions and herbal mixtures. Furthermore, various scholars describe her as a knowledge-hungry individual originating from her youth. She had taken an interest in “Latin, Scripture, and some philosophy and theology.”<sup>3</sup> Her passion for reading and her high agreeableness from adolescence would eventually lead her to a position of great leadership among the community of women.

### *Adulthood*

After her spiritual mentor’s death in 1136, Hildegard took over the role of superior, also referred to as abbess, of the community of Disibondenberg nuns. At the age of 40, she was instructed by Pope Eugene III to transcribe her divine visions – a phenomenon she experienced since her formative years but never formally shared until

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Newman. "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology." *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* 13, no. 1 (2013): 36-55.

<sup>3</sup> Francis Mershman. "St. Hildegard." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 159.

then.<sup>4</sup> Throughout this time, her visions and her advice became high in demand among religious officials as well as other women within the convent. Although this allowed Hildegard to share her gift with much of the community, it also was a matter of contention within the convent. Due to the challenges she faced among her previous community, she intentionally chose to build a new convent on the periphery of Bingen. Her new convent was located in Rupertsburg, allowing her the independence to explore her talents in music and the healing arts. She assigned nuns and her secretary to record her visions, artwork, and music associated with her visions into manuscripts.<sup>5</sup> A scriptorium, a room devoted to copying manuscripts, was constructed for the purpose of making multiple copies of her various works.<sup>6</sup> Few physical manuscripts survive, yet as a result of their preservation, much of her ideas still survive.

For most women who desired to gain an education remotely related to music, the only destination was the convent. Nuns engaged in singing as a prominent form of worship therefore music fluency, one's ability to read music, was a common and necessary skill for most of the women of the convent.<sup>7</sup> In contrast, composing music was not permitted to these religious women as it was an activity that only men participated in at the time – a fact that neither stopped nor discouraged Hildegard from composing her own devotional pieces. However, these pressures placed on women did prevent her from

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<sup>4</sup> "Hildegard, Von Bingen." In *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*, edited by Victoria Boynton, and Jo Malin. (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 296.

<sup>5</sup> Francis Mershman. "St. Hildegard." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 159.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Devonshire Jones. "Scriptorium," in *The Oxford Dictionary of Christian Art and Architecture*, ed. Tom Devonshire Jones, Linda Murray, and Peter Murray (Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Anne Bagnall Yardley. "*Ful Weel She Soong the Service Dyvyne*": *The Cloistered Musician in the Middle Ages* (1986), 28.

publicly performing her own music. It was only after she received divine visions regarding her music that she began sharing her compositions through performance and actively making copies of her works.

Her musical structure was unique for its time as it diverged from the Gregorian chant that was the dominant form of devotional music of the medieval period. Musical form became reduced, taking a more simplistic approach with each syllable bearing a single note rather than multiple notes within an embellishment – a trill or a variation of chords. Hildegard’s free form style, directly inspired by her visions, was in direct contrast with a more rigid and austere form of music pervading religious musical trends of the time.<sup>8</sup> Breaking the structure, her light and melodic compositions appealed to many listeners around Europe, allowing her to travel and to perform her pieces with the rest of her choir. One of her most famous allegorical morality plays, *Ordo virtutum*, depicts the spiritual battle waged between the physical embodiment of vices and virtues in order to persuade the soul to veer toward the path of purity and goodness.

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<sup>8</sup> Craig M. Wright and Bryan R. Simms. *Music In Western Civilization: Antiquity Through The Renaissance* (Thomson Schirmer, 2005), 365.



Figure 1: Embellishments in St. Hildegard's allegorical morality play

In this example, she uses embellishments to express emotional complexity within the penitent soul as well as the other characters. An embellishment is used to express one syllable, specifically at the end of "Qui" in the first line and in the last syllable of "nobis" in the fourth line. Had she chosen to conform to the musical conventions laid before her or to fit within societal expectations for women to not compose music, her captivating and intricately crafted hymns would have been forgotten over time. It is important to note that she resisted patriarchal standards within her society, but the idea that she composed music to further the proto-feminist movement is a misguided one. To start, her motivation to pursue music was entirely rooted in her religious beliefs and not to further her own

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Jean Jeskalian. "Hildegard von Bingen," In *Historical Anthology of Music by Women*, edited by James Briscoe, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8.

career or the state of women. She would not have shared her music had she not received divine revelations to do so, and thus, we must be careful not to label her a feminist as she simply stood against the narrow scope of opportunity society deemed appropriate for women of her time.

Some speculate that the visions she received from God were potentially associated with her sickness. Some medical commentators attribute her visions to symptoms related to hallucination-induced health problems from her youth, whereas others believe them to be truly supernatural.<sup>10</sup> Regardless of the origin of her visions, they greatly influenced the decisions of powerful men at a time that upheld hierarchal structures and limited outright opinion and action from women. As mentioned earlier, they inspired her to share her musical compositions and spurred her to engage in other male dominated work. She was able to assert her perspective and religious advice onto powerful men of her time such as the Pope Eugenius III.<sup>11</sup> In Chapter 52 of her biography, Flanagan mentions that the Pope was pleased with Hildegard's manuscript detailing her visions; she described the physical manifestation of God's word being revealed to her as, "A fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning, but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch."<sup>12</sup> Like other mystics, she experienced an all encompassing sensation associated with her visions. These visions were mostly kept secret due to the humility and self-doubt she battled within herself, but

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara Newman. "Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation." *Church History* 54, (1985): 163.

<sup>11</sup> "Hildegard, Von Bingen." In *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*, edited by Victoria Boynton, and Jo Malin. (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 296.

<sup>12</sup> Sabina Flanagan. *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999), 208.

for those who shared her way of life, she was willing to reveal her experiences. She once wrote in a letter to her secretary, Guibert of Gembloux, detailing the process behind her visions:

Whatever I see or learn in this vision, I retain as a memory for a long time, so that when I see or hear it, I remember it, and at the same time I see, hear, and know and as if in an instant, I learn what I know. But what I do not see, I do not know, since I am uneducated and have been taught only to read out letters in all simplicity. That which I write in the vision I see and hear, and I do not set down any words other than those that I hear. I bring them forth in unpolished Latin words just as I hear them in the vision, for in this vision I am not taught to write as the philosophers write.<sup>13</sup>

She separates the concept of knowing an idea and being able to understand what she knows: “I...know and if as in an instant, I learn what I know.” This description also provides a level of authenticity to her visions as she affirms that she only writes down what she hears directly from God. Once again, her humility is present within her writing and furthers this effect, claiming that she is uneducated strengthens her claim that her visions are purely from the divine. This complete acknowledgement of God’s presence in her work also carries over to one of the most highly regarded of her literary works, *Scivias*, in which she declares, “These Are True Visions Flowing from God.”<sup>14</sup>

Along with the her visions, Hildegard describes how her psychosomatic sensitivities are transcribed into other forms of art. Other monks and nuns who had

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<sup>13</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, Radd K. Ehrman, Joseph L. Baird, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen, Correspondence*.English (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990), 59.

artistic acuity painted her visions which she claims to have illuminated the mystical visions as well as the messages she derived from them. Most of her visions had unconventional imagery; for example, most Christians would liken God's presence to a fire or a thunderous voice; in contrast, Hildegard's visions use unusual symbolism such as a cosmic egg to represent the divine.<sup>14</sup> Hildegard is able to remember the very first vision that led her to formally share the divine's message with the rest of the world in *Scivias*. She recalls it as such: "In the forty-third year of my passing journey, when I clung to a heavenly vision with fear and trembling, I saw a very great light from which a heavenly voice spoke to me and said: 'O weak person, ashes of ashes, dust of dust, speak and write what you see and hear. Because you are timid about speaking and unskilled in writing, speak and write these things as a listener understanding the words of a teacher. Give others a clear account of what you see with your inner eye, and what you hear with your inner ear. Your testimony will help them come to know me.'"<sup>10</sup> Moving forward, she committed herself to sharing every detail and to spreading the Lord's message throughout her adult life despite her own anxiety and lack of confidence surrounding her ability to convey it properly.

#### *Advanced Age, Death, and Beyond*

The end of her life was plagued with much controversy due to her decision to bury an excommunicated man in the Rupertsburg abbey's cemetery. She reasoned that the man received his sacraments prior to his death; thus, he made peace with the Church and could be buried under holy ground. The ecclesiastical authorities, however, refused to compromise with her over the matter and demanded that she unearth his corpse. Standing firmly with her principles, she accepted the consequences of her actions, as did

her community. The convent was indicted and forbidden from conducting basic Catholic services such as serving communion during mass for years until its removal after her renewed protestations.<sup>15</sup> In her last year of life, she succeeded in convincing officials to remove the indictment, and on September 17, 1179, she died in the convent she created roughly forty years earlier from natural causes.<sup>16</sup>

After her death, one of her more famous biographers, Theodoric, would address her as a saint despite her lack of an immediate formal canonization, which some may suggest to be a byproduct of male political dominance within the Church at the time.<sup>17</sup> In addition, he held much of her works and visions in high regard, noting them as miracles before their widespread acceptance to the public. Her feast day prior to formal canonization was September 18<sup>th</sup> and her name was included in the Roman Martyrology, indicating that her public behavior was deemed acceptable by many and motivated by genuine love for God. In 1632, her Rupertsberg abbey was destroyed, but important relics were salvaged and transported to Cologne and Eibingen.<sup>16</sup> In 1900, a new convent dedicated to St. Hildegard was raised under the guidance of Benedictine nuns as well as the wealth of Prince Karl of Löwenstein.<sup>17</sup> After much delay in her worldly recognition, most likely due to the controversy that arose during the end of her life, she was officially canonized by Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Square on May 27, 2012.<sup>18</sup> Penning five extensive books spanning multiple disciplines from age fifty until her death at eighty-one

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<sup>15</sup> Francis Mershman. "St. Hildegard." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 7. (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), 160.

<sup>16</sup> "Hildegard, Von Bingen." In *Encyclopedia of Women's Autobiography*, edited by Victoria Boynton, and Jo Malin. (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 296.

<sup>17</sup> Gerda Lerner. *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-Seventy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 41.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Benedict XVI. "Apostolic Letter Proclaiming Hildegard of Bingen as a Doctor of the Church." (Vatican: the Holy See. Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2005). Web. 27 Nov. 2018.

years old, composing seventy-seven devotional songs along with composing the dialogue and music for the first morality play in existence, St. Hildegard von Bingen was a fascinating and remarkable woman not only for her time, but for all of human history.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Medieval Medicine and its Relevance

Medicinal techniques that work on a completely different basis to Western medicine is often met with cynicism. Eastern medicine, for example, utilizes unconventional methods for treating illnesses such as acupuncture, meditation, moxibustion, and herbs.<sup>19</sup> Mexican folk medicine is grounded in Judeo-Christian roots, European witchcraft, Greek understanding of balancing temperature<sup>20</sup>, and African religion of Santeria which combines the authority of minor gods with that of Catholic saints.<sup>21</sup> To better illustrate this form of medicine, we should consider an infantile condition known as “Evil Eye,” in which the child’s sickness and potential death is due to neglect from his or her mother. The spiritual healer utilizes an egg over the child’s skull to absorb negative energy as a technique for treatment.<sup>22</sup> Undoubtedly, it comes as no surprise that the majority of modern-day westerners would be reluctant to accept any of these forms of alternative healing; complementary and holistic integrated medicine to some degree lacks scientific backing, which invalidates their intellectual credibility to most in the West. The basic foundations of medieval medicine, similarly to these forms, is irrational in nature. Believing that ritualistic practices, herbs, or that an eternal self-

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<sup>19</sup> National Academy of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine, and Society for Acupuncture Research. "Clinical Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine." (Oxford University Press, 1999), 4-7.

<sup>20</sup> Eliseo "Cheo" Torres and Timothy L. Sawyer. *Healing with Herbs and Rituals : A Mexican Tradition*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 5.

<sup>21</sup> Saldívar Arellano, Juan Manuel. "Orishas, Demonios y Santos. Un Acercamiento Al Sincretismo De La Santería, Caso Catemaco, Veracruz." (2009), 6.

<sup>22</sup> Eliseo "Cheo" Torres and Timothy L. Sawyer. *Healing with Herbs and Rituals : A Mexican Tradition*. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2014), 62.

sufficient creator could alleviate or cure sickness equates to believing in impossibility itself.

Historically, scientific credibility stems from the belief in the individual to discover truth – an idea that came about during the Age of Enlightenment; reason should be the primary source from which all other information originates. This can be seen near the end of the Enlightenment with the popularizing of deism – a more rational view of God in which He is a neutral and impersonal entity with no attachment for Humanity after its creation.<sup>23</sup> The important point being that science and religion were not completely isolated schools of thought during the time as they overlapped in certain aspects, however, these ideas were drastically shifting the established authority and eventually led to the modern-day rejection of the irrational.

With medieval medicine, there was no scientific explanation for how the system worked yet its practices were able to persist to modern day usage as additional forms of alternative holistic care are still being practiced; getting pregnant, recovering from paralysis, overcoming a cold, headache, and many more needs were treated with spiritual and fundamentally noninvasive practices. One could argue that there is value in this form of care so long as it proves to be useful for some and is relatively harmless, if not effective, for all; that although it is not rooted in science, perhaps it does not need to be in order to be valid. For example, every culture used healing plants to treat ailments up until the creation of modern drugs and vaccines; in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Western medicine departed from using herbal medicine – a story unlike Europe.<sup>24</sup> Integrating the established

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<sup>23</sup>Jeffrey R. Wigelsworth. *Deism in Enlightenment England: Theology, Politics, and Newtonian Public Science*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), 33.

<sup>24</sup> Susan Francia, Anne Stobart. *Critical Approaches to the History of Western Herbal Medicine: From Classical Antiquity to the Early Modern Period*. (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 2.

practice of healing plants with their modern medicine, European methods continue to hold a candle to the healing properties of the medieval.

St. Hildegard extensively catalogued her findings on healing plants and grains, specifically 230 of them, in a section from one of her most well-known and respected works, *Physica*. In addition, she documented her theories throughout this book and bases much of her healing techniques on the natural environment as well as on the spiritual. In her own words, “At the time of Man’s creation from the earth, all the elements were subject to him...the earth sprouted greenness in accordance with the race, nature, customs, and ways of humans.”<sup>25</sup> Likewise, taking herbs from the earth to treat illnesses would correspond with the truth of the world, because plants were essentially made to serve humans. Some might find this statement problematic as it echoes a long tradition of human exceptionalism – e.g., one of overconsumption, overpopulation, lack of regard for the health of the environment, and most importantly, an overall smugness toward other species. In one of his works on evolutionary theory, *The Descent of Man* published in 1871, Charles Darwin writes, “Man in his arrogance thinks of himself a great work, worthy the interposition of a deity. [Yet it is] more humble and, I believe, true to consider him created from animals.”<sup>26</sup> However, to take offense to her beliefs would be rather restrictive to one’s own narrowly-defined views. Understanding that she came from a Catholic background, that her beliefs stem from the idea that Man was made in God’s likeness, and that he has “dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth” is the underlying basis as to why she believes

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<sup>25</sup> Hildegard, *Hildegard’s Healing Plants: From Her Medieval Classic Physica*, vol. 1 (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>26</sup> Charles Darwin. *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*. (New York: Heritage Press, 1972), 401.

in the usage of plants and herbs for medical treatment.<sup>27</sup> In addition, other medieval physicians shared similar views on the matter. Paracelsus, a fellow medieval, German physician, philosopher, and the father of modern toxicology, once wrote in his *Defensiones septem*, that for every disease, God grows a plant and welcomes men to “Look around nature and draw from God’s pharmacy”.<sup>28</sup>

Hildegard’s original, complete and coherent work regarding health and healing, *Liber Subtilitatum Diversarum Naturarum Creaturarum*, was later separated into two treatises, *Physica* and *Cause et Curae*; the contents themselves differ greatly in subject matter despite being cut from the same cloth. *Physica* describes the history of natural medicine as well as the specific herbs and materials she used to treat her patients. *Cause et Curae* details the medical philosophy behind her work, converging cosmology with Judeo-Christian beliefs on creationism, as well as the treatment techniques she employed. Overall, these two provide a comprehensive understanding of natural medieval medicine and have influenced generations of physicians who follow her.

### *Nature as a Reflection of Oneself*

The popular saying, you are what you eat, may indeed originate from medieval roots. Hildegard compares natural, earthy substances to the human condition, whether that be through our collective behavior, our physical appearance, or through the attachment we derive from internal and external sources. This remains consistent throughout her writing as she explores the multitudes of emotions and motivations we contain. For instance, she mentions that useless herbs exist to reflect the diabolical and

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<sup>27</sup> Genesis 1:26.

<sup>28</sup> Paracelsus. *Septem Defensiones: Die Verantwortung Über Etliche Verunglimpfungen Durch Seine Missgönner*. 1. Aufl. trans. Henricus (2012), 96.

corrupt nature of Man. Although these herbs have no pharmacological purpose, their significance at the basest form is to exist and balance out the useful. Extending this metaphor, she explains that the juices of these useless herbs are poisonous and comparable to human waste.<sup>29</sup> She makes many physical comparisons to plants as well. For example, herbs that are light and nourishing are compared to the flesh. The stones of the earth and the toughness of a plant, nowadays we call *cellulose* that make up the undigestible portions of plants, represent people's bones. The moistness present in the herb is the marrow of the bone.<sup>30</sup>

In addition, she examines the way in which herbs are tended to heavily impacts their quality in medicine and food; similarly, how a person cares for himself or herself will greatly affect what he or she may offer to the world. In the example she uses, she warns that an anxiety-ridden farmer who sows herbs will likely produce herbs that soak in juices of "bitterness and harshness" that will damage the nourishment and usefulness of the herb.<sup>29</sup> Ones that are sown with virtue and fortitude will germinate unexpectedly and grow in fullness. It will be good and useful in food and drink as well as the art of healing. They counteract the noxious juices present in unhealthy individuals and allow for sufficient balance within the individual.

### *The Healing Properties of Temperature*

What Hildegard might have referred to as a 'balancing of temperatures' within one's inner environment would be referred to today as achieving homeostasis – an internal equilibrium maintained with physiological processes throughout the body. To

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<sup>29</sup> Hildegard's *Healing Plants*, 3.

<sup>30</sup> Hildegard's *Healing Plants*, 2.

better represent this, let us delve into one common example of homeostatic processes. If a patient's blood has high concentrations of carbon dioxide, he or she will breath at a more rapid rate. This is a mechanism to counteract the extremes of having too much or too little of an essential compound. As the patient exhales at a rapid rate, carbon dioxide is expelled from the body in greater volume than before which returns the body back to equilibrium.<sup>31</sup> Hildegard and other medieval physicians had admirable foresight to understanding this concept with very little resources surrounding them. Due to the fact that any semblance of modern medical equipment had been absent during this time, medieval physicians had only temperature and intuition as tools for measuring the equilibrium of the human body. This plays a significant role in Hildegard's understanding of herbs. She describes that each herb is either warm or cold.<sup>32</sup> The idea of resistance between the two energies is key to a healthy lifestyle. In other words, the complete absence of hot is cold and vice versa. Each herb in itself can only be one or the other, however, a human devoid of either of these halves cannot be in peak condition as balance is required to achieve good health. This idea stretches further back to some of the earliest societies such as that of Ancient Greece. Aristotle championed moderation as a key means to achieving happiness, what he referred to as *Eudaimonia*.<sup>33</sup> The understanding of balance by Hildegard's time narrowed down to health and healing, yet it is important to note that both Aristotle and Hildegard stressed a philosophy of holistic wellbeing based on habit formation.

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<sup>31</sup> Society for Experimental Biology and University of Cambridge Zoological Laboratory. *Homeostasis and Feedback Mechanisms*. Vol. no. 18. (New York: Academic Press, 1964), 49.

<sup>32</sup> *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Nagel. "Aristotle on Eudaimonia." *Phronesis* 17, no. 3 (1972): 252.

The herbs she categorizes as warm include nigella, hops, hemp, ginger, pepper, cumin, licorice, cinnamon, and wild thyme, to name a few. Cold herbs and plants include e.g. panic grass, millet, lentils, peas, oats, barley, rose, and lily, etc. Warm herbs have a more straightforward effect on the patient than cold ones as they invigorate the patient and give him or her strength, whereas cold ones treat insanity and a host of mental illnesses that are treated today with therapy and drugs such as anti-depressants, anti-anxiety/psychotics, stimulant medication, and mood stabilizing drugs. Ginger, classified as a warm herb, has a natural warming effect on the insides of the body<sup>34</sup> due to the breakdown of Zingerone, the principal chemical in ginger that gives it a burning sensation<sup>35</sup>; in addition, it contains capsaicin which is the same chemical that gives chili peppers their burn. In the case of cumin and cinnamon, internal warming sensation is generated during its breakdown in the gastrointestinal tract which produces heat; this is also why these two herbs are often recommended for those trying to increase their metabolism for weight-loss purposes.<sup>36</sup> The body uses more energy to process spicy foods than other types of foods, thereby increasing an individual's metabolism. However, at the opposite end of the spectrum, spicy foods contribute to heartburn and gastroesophageal reflux disease (GERD), also known as acid reflux, a condition in which

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<sup>34</sup> Hildegard's *Healing Plants*, 18.

<sup>35</sup> Yueh-Ping Chang, Chun-Hung Liu, Chih-Chung Wu, Chi-Ming Chiang, Juang-Lin Lian, and Shu-Ling Hsieh. "Dietary Administration of Zingerone to Enhance Growth, Non-Specific Immune Response, and Resistance to *Vibrio Alginolyticus* in Pacific White Shrimp (*Litopenaeus Vannamei*) Juveniles." *Fish and Shellfish Immunology* 32, no. 2 (2012): 284.

<sup>36</sup> Mohsen Taghizadeh, Narjes Farzin, Sara Taheri, Mahnaz Mahlouji, Hossein Akbari, Fatemeh Karamali, and Zatollah Asemi. "The Effect of Dietary Supplements Containing Green Tea, Capsaicin and Ginger Extracts on Weight Loss and Metabolic Profiles in Overweight Women: A Randomized Double-Blind Placebo-Controlled Clinical Trial." *Annals of Nutrition & Metabolism* 70, no. 4 (2017): 277.

acid from the stomach rises into the esophagus and after long-term exposure, could create lesions on top of many other complications within the esophagus.<sup>37</sup>

In application, Hildegard's medical knowledge from her books demonstrates that she had a very advanced grasp on the illnesses that affect a person's internal temperature like fevers and chills. Many "cold" treatments call for mixtures of alcohol and herbs to obtain the desired effect. For example, panic grass is mixed into wine to treat patients suffering from fevers. According to her classification system, panic grass is cold and will counteract the warmth of the fever. Another cold herb is "buszwurtz" or houseleek which is useful for treating male sterility and testicular azoospermia, the inability to produce sperm. She explains that for a healthy man who ingests houseleek, he will burn with desire "as if he were crazy".<sup>38</sup> One could equate this to the sensation a man may derive from testosterone enhancing medication. For someone who has erectile dysfunction or azoospermia in his old age, Hildegard recommends a mixture of houseleek in goat's milk, left for along time until the houseleek is completely steeped with the milk. It should then be cooked in eggs and served to the man for three to five days. If a sterile woman were to ingest this mixture, Hildegard explains that the effects will not be as promising. It will provoke her desire for a man but will not improve her fertility. Another interesting use of houseleek is for treating deafness. The recipe includes extracting milk from a mother who has birthed a son, mixing it with houseleek, and placing three to four drops into the patient's ear repeatedly until the hearing returns.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Roy C. Orlando. *Gastroesophageal Reflux Disease*. Vol. 6. (New York: Dekker, 2000), 6-7.

<sup>38</sup> *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, 38.

<sup>39</sup> *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, 40.

Many warm herbs are also used to treat affected individuals. An example of a warm herb is hemp. What Hildegard recommends for cold stomachs is to boil hemp in water, squeeze it out, and wrap the cooked hemp in cloth which will be used to wrap over the stomach. She refers to this process as a form of restoration for the body's health. Ulcers can also be treated with hemp cloth.<sup>40</sup> Another similar warm herb, the bryony, can be used to treat ulcers on the feet. She compares its utility to that of a weed in most respects, yet apart from its uselessness upon ingestion, its topical abilities through the skin are indispensable. She explains that it can produce poisonous odors, proving fatal for any animal or human depending on the degree of exposure. However, if bryony is boiled in water, it can be used to soak a person's feet and eventually remove the infection after repeated applications.<sup>41</sup> Straying from more practical medical applications, fern, a warm and dry herb, has a spiritual effect on the patient. It holds much virtue, making the devil flee from it. Comparing its effects to that of the sun, a fern will chase away apparitions and evil like the sun chases away darkness. Therefore, she suggests when a woman gives birth to a child, let the child be surrounded by fern. Medical applications of fern include the treatment of gout by bathing in water cooked with fern, the purification of eyes by removing the film and cloudiness surrounding it via placing fern over one's eyes during sleep, the removal of tongue burns by placing fern to affected areas, and the retrieval of memory by placing fern in one's hands.<sup>42</sup>

More practical examples of her knowledge utilized today includes the treatment of indigestion, gum inflammation, headaches, and colds/sore throats. For indigestion, she

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<sup>40</sup> *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, 13.

<sup>41</sup> *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, 40.

<sup>42</sup> *Hildegard's Healing Plants*, 31.

prescribes dissolving yarrow flowers into an alcohol solvent for at least three weeks while shaking the solution daily. Then, pour the yarrow solution through filter paper to obtain only the fluid and ingest. This also helps with menstrual cramps.<sup>43</sup> Fennel seeds also help with indigestion and aloe relieves headaches.<sup>44</sup> For gum inflammation, Hildegard recommends the usage of sage – a treatment utilized by monks long before her time; before the invention of toothpaste, they would wrap sage around their fingers and rub it against the surface of their gums and teeth as for hygienic purposes. For colds, sage proves to be useful once again as it diminishes phlegm. It should be cooked in wine, strained with cloth, and ingested frequently. In addition, coughing and sore throats can be treated with this herb mixed with honey in a warm tea<sup>45</sup>. Although this list of plants may already seem overwhelming, one must recognize that this only provides a bit of insight into the thousands of treatments she concocted over the course of her discoveries.

It is important to note, however, that despite the many health benefits associated with herbal care, there are dangers associated with it depending on the amount and type of medicinal plant being ingested. For example, overconsumption of sage can cause imbalance in the digestive system. Sage can be unhealthy if ingested in large quantities as it suppresses hunger and can lead to malnutrition if not taken with caution.<sup>46</sup> In addition, too much licorice can increase a person's blood pressure.<sup>47</sup> Thus, because a treatment or food is considered more 'natural' than another product in the market does not mean that it cannot be poisonous. As Paracelsus once wisely stated, "All substances are poisons; there

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<sup>43</sup> Hildegard's *Healing Plants*, 118.

<sup>44</sup> Hildegard's *Healing Plants*, 66.

<sup>45</sup> Hildegard's *Healing Plants*, 58.

<sup>46</sup> J. K. Aronson. *Meyler's Side Effects of Herbal Medicines*. (Amsterdam; Boston: Elsevier, 2009), 22.

<sup>47</sup> *Meyler's Side Effects of Herbal Medicines*, 24.

is none that is not a poison. The right dose differentiates a poison and a remedy.”<sup>48</sup>

Prudence and moderation are necessary for obtaining the best results.

### *Self-Healing as a Gardener to Plants*

Her different approach to medicine is based on the concept of *viriditas* – greening. She defines it as, “a divine gift, the invigorating force of life that animates the body just as sap animates a tree”<sup>49</sup>. In the absence of this life force or spirit, the human body would simply be nothing more than decaying matter. This comparison between the human body and a garden is a recurring theme throughout Hildegard’s writings; in order to heal the ill, one must remove obstacles that prevent the renewal of *viriditas* through diet, activity, and sleep.<sup>50</sup> The central idea behind Hildegard’s nutritional advice is that proper food can heal an individual from the inside out slowly over time. Additionally, one’s spiritual life is an important factor in determining one’s physical health. Her healing practices are based on Man’s relation to God and to the rest of the universe. Achieving balance between the three allows Man to exist in perfect harmony and preserves his health; a lack of balance in one’s spiritual and physical life makes one more susceptible to diseases. Although there are spiritual components, her pre-modern grasp of holistic healing greatly resembles that of today’s perspective as different parts of a human being are interconnected and contribute to the functionality of whole system.

In Victoria Sweet’s book on premodern medicine, *Rooted in the Earth, Rooted in the Sky*, she gives a description of Hildegard’s philosophy: “Instead of acting like a

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<sup>48</sup> Walter S. Pagel. *Paracelsus: An Introduction to Philosophical Medicine in the Era of the Renaissance*. 2nd, rev. ed. (Basel; New York: Karger, 1982), 12.

<sup>49</sup> Abraham M Nussbaum. “Sickbeds and Garden Beds.” *The Finest Traditions of My Calling: One Physician’s Search for the Renewal of Medicine*. (Yale University Press, 2016), 134.

<sup>50</sup> “Sickbeds and Garden Beds,” 137.

technician searching to fix a broken part, she encouraged self-healing of patients, as a gardener to plants.”<sup>49</sup> Sweet explains that treating a malfunctioning piece or mechanical error within the machine is not enough to fix the problem over a long period of time. This expectation for expediency and convenience in medicine is a byproduct of the commercialization of drugs and technological advances. Discovered in the 1900s, aspirin is currently one of the most widely distributed drugs in the market, averaging between 700-1,000 clinical trials per year.<sup>51</sup> With healing effects within 16 minutes using the standard 500mg dosage,<sup>52</sup> it has been an irresistible method of treatment for people worldwide and represents one of the largest industries contributing to ‘fast medicine’ – medicine that takes effect quickly and can be purchased in the pharmacy.

In defense of modern medicine, pharmacology and incentivized business have been extremely beneficial for human health. Continuing the aspirin example from earlier, globalization of the pharmaceutical industry allowed for greater distribution and more effective industrially-produced medicine. After World War I, the United Kingdom’s import duties incentivized the creation of foreign subsidiaries in Britain, bringing successful companies – e.g. Sandoz, MSD, Eli Lilly, Wyeth, etc. – and their knowledge around the globe. With competition driving these companies to put out better drugs, consumer health continues to improve each year.

Yet, the transition from using natural plants to substances derived from synthetic organic compounds in labs has made us lose a key aspect of medieval medicine: our relationship to our garden. The significance of this is that without being able to grow our

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<sup>51</sup> Maria Rosa Montinari, Sergio Minelli, and Raffaele De Caterina. "The First 3500 years of Aspirin History from its Roots – A Concise Summary." *Vascular Pharmacology* 113, (2019): 6.

<sup>52</sup> Tsung O. Cheng. *The History of Aspirin*. Texas Heart Institute Journal 34, no. 3 (2007): 392.

own medicine, we understand less of what we are putting into ourselves. Similarly to how health-minded individuals prefer to cook their own foods to avoid processed sugars and harmful additives, medieval medicine revolves around naturally derived ingredients to avoid complex chemicals that may have harmful effects on the body long-term. For example, a recent study conducted in 2013 by the University of Sydney has shown that the usage of baby aspirin for at least three months doubles a child's risk for macular degeneration *ten years* after aspirin usage. Researchers speculate that aspirin, known to increase complement activation by inhibiting the C1 inactivator, could also be linked to macular degeneration through complement pathways, the disruption of prostacyclin synthesis, and increased lipid metabolism.<sup>53</sup> As we get further from the production of our medication, our reliance on pharmaceutical companies for our own welfare prevents us from questioning the ingredients we ingest. Immediate pain relief of one area could mean long term impairment of other organs.

In contrast, the simplicity of exercise and healthy eating associated with Hildegardean practices heals the entire body with low relatively low risk of side effects and helps people take health into their own hands; for example, a study conducted between 2000-2007 for childhood eczema and probiotics in yogurt – microorganisms that act to improve intestinal gut flora which improves the overall immune system – illustrates the benefits of medicinal food and lifestyle changes. With a sample size of 1018 children, researchers discovered that treatment with probiotic strains in the first 6 months of a child's life reduced the risk of eczema by 20 percent. In conjunction with these

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<sup>53</sup> "New Age-Related Macular Degeneration Study Results from University of Sydney Described (Metabolic Syndrome and Risk of Age-Related Macular Degeneration)." *Obesity, Fitness & Wellness* (2015): 13.

probiotics, the children were exposed to 10-15 minutes of sunshine a day, were encouraged to have active lifestyles, were isolated from most common house allergens like dust mites and pet fur and were fed hypoallergenic formula milk.<sup>54</sup> Rather than simply treating the symptoms, doctors were able to achieve effective results using the holistic approach by eliminating multiple trigger factors simultaneously. This is not to say that herbal remedies and medicinal food is superior to synthetic drugs as the latter is necessary for treating severe illnesses, however, it should be recognized that herbal medicines provide a simplicity of ingredients, production, and proximity in medicine that can prove beneficial in the long run in terms of minimal side effects and low cost.

Slow medicinal effect is another benefit from Hildegard's practices. Typically, 'slow-acting anything' is never a commendable or praise-worthy attribute, but slow effect in treatment fosters habit formation and prolonged success in recovery. Slow medicine today is the effect acquired from utilizing medicinal foods and herbs to treat illnesses as opposed to using pharmaceuticals, but in the past, it would have been regarded as just 'medicine'. To ancients and medievals, this idea of using food to treat illnesses was second nature, and its establishment as a science-based form of healing originated from Hippocrates (460-377 BC), a physician from ancient Greece known as the "father of medicine" and the maker of the Hippocratic Oath 2,500 years ago. He famously said, "Leave your drugs in the chemist's pot if you can heal the patient with food,"<sup>55</sup> a

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<sup>54</sup> Randi J. Bertelsen, Anne Lise Brantsæter, Maria C. Magnus, Margaretha Haugen, Ronny Myhre, Bo Jacobsson, Matthew P. Longnecker, Helle M. Meltzer, and Stephanie J. London. "Probiotic Milk Consumption in Pregnancy and Infancy and Subsequent Childhood Allergic Diseases." *Journal of Allergy and Clinical Immunology*, the 133, no. 1 (2013-2014): 165-171

<sup>55</sup> Jacques Jouanna, Philip J. van der Eijk, Neil Allies, OAPEN Foundation, and Knowledge Unlatched. *Greek Medicine from Hippocrates to Galen: Selected Papers*. Vol. 40. Leiden (Boston: Brill, 2012), 15.

principle that lies at the heart of Hildegard's medical philosophy. Healthy foods provide the body with tools to fix itself rather than fixing the mechanical defect in the machine.

The overreliance on drugs in the medical community has spurred a revival of Hildegardean medicine in many facets of naturopathy and more commonly in the integration of drugs and holistic medicine. As the pressure on modern healthcare providers to treat patients more efficiently and costs continue to increase, holistic medicine is becoming a more relevant and viable alternative to traditional pharmaceuticals.

## CHAPTER THREE

### How did St. Hildegard Conceptualize the Feminine?

St. Hildegard of Bingen is often misattributed to voicing subversive opinions on gender for her time; her idea of womanhood was indeed quite conventional and consistent with her medieval contemporaries – adopted from opinions long-held by the society of her time. However, St. Hildegard was extraordinary in the fact that she deviated from the tradition before her in the degree of concern she had for gender differences, sexual nature, and reproductive health. These topics were rarely discussed by those who preceded her, thus, her contributions to female authority within the Church and in medical relevance was considerably significant as these ideas were present in much of her work throughout *Scivias* and *Physica*. In addition, some scholars argue that she was able to ascend her position in society by using acceptable language of the time that conformed to social expectations. In this chapter, the thesis will cover how she viewed feminine nature through her writings as well as through the visions she received and how she used language in a way to benefit her own social standing as a woman.

#### *Equal Dignity Before God*

According to Aristotelian doctrine, men and women resemble the four elements and can be organized hierarchically: fire at the top, then air, water, and earth at the bottom. Man is the top two elements as he is lighter, more adaptable, independent, and chaotic. Woman embodies the latter two as she is passive, more grounded to the earth and

inferior to her male counterpart.<sup>56</sup> Hildegard, like Aristotle, associates the two genders with the elements; however, her ranking differs in that men are both the top and the bottom, fire and earth, respectively, whereas women are the middle two elements, water and air.<sup>57</sup> Her understanding is derived from Genesis as the first man, Adam, was formed from clay of the Earth. Eve, the first woman, was created from Adam's rib. Her version of the ranking serves to demonstrate how she did not personally find one sex to be superior to the other in terms of eternal worth. This idea translates to her view of the intermingling of physical and spiritual halves.

Hildegard views the body and soul as a holistic unit, presenting the human body as a universe in multiple visions.<sup>58</sup> The body requires a soul in order to be itself and without one, the other lacks meaning. Similarly, this how Hildegard views women and men. They are distinct yet dependent on one another. For example, Hildegard uses marriage and procreation to illustrate romantic male-female relationships in *Scivias*:

“Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman. As she is from the man the man is also from her, lest they dissent from each other in the unity of making their children; for they should work as one in one work, as the air and the wind intermingle in their labor. In what way? The air is moved by the wind, and the wind is mingled with the air, so that in their movement all verdant things are subject to their influence. What does this mean? The wife must cooperate with the

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<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, and W. K. C. Guthrie. *On the Heavens* (Harvard University Press, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Bernard W. Scholz. *Hildegard Von Bingen on the Nature of Woman* (1980), 368.

<sup>58</sup> Sabina Flanagan. *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1999), 208.

husband and the husband with the wife in making children.”<sup>59</sup>

The comparison of the air and wind demonstrates that one’s existence is contingent upon that of the other element. That to have wind, one must have air for movement, and to have air, one must have wind so that it does not remain stagnant. To have children, wife and husband must agree upon the act of procreation. Hildegard also asserts that man and woman were created “for the sake” of the other. Purposefully designed to complement one another.

### *Weakness as Strength*

Despite some of her works being labeled as proto-feminist, some would argue that her ideas had the exact opposite effect in furthering female progress. Joan Cadden writes that Hildegard’s content is not exceptionally remarkable or subversive to popular opinion and that “While her particular assertions may not be clearly traceable to specific sources, none can be called heterodox: nothing she says about gender, sexuality, or reproduction contradicts standard assumptions.”<sup>60</sup> In truth, Cadden’s argument is quite valid. There are multiple instances in which Hildegard discusses gender differences while staying consistent with predominant opinions of the time.

However, what makes her unique is her willingness to embrace feminine qualities and further expand upon those ideas. In Book II of her *Liber Divinorum Operum*, Hildegard states that “woman depends on the man to live because of her weakness”<sup>61</sup>. It

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<sup>59</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, Jane Bishop, and Columba Hart. *Scivias* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1990), 78.

<sup>60</sup> Joan Cadden. “It Takes All Kinds: Sexuality and Gender Differences in Hildegard of Bingen’s ‘Book of Compound Medicine.’” *Traditio* 40 (1984): 152.

<sup>61</sup> Hildegard of Bingen. *Liber divinorum operum*. Ed. Peter Dronke and Albert Derolez (Turnhout: Brepols, 1996), 137.

is important to recognize that what Hildegard is referring to is not a characteristic flaw but rather a certain vulnerability associated with women – an inherent softness that men lacked. It is also uncertain if she phrased her ideas in a way that would be receptive to men of the time in order to have her voice heard like many other female writers. However, assuming what she stated was consistent with her beliefs, she in no way maligned women but wrote of gender differences and expectations that she interpreted to be true given the societal norms.

She applies feminine weakness to her own life when she writes of how much influence she had on the clergymen: that “this poor little woman trembles because she speaks with the sound of words so great a magistrate” to shame clergymen from partaking in the “oppressive and impious...to cast them from your presence.”<sup>62</sup> Upon first glance, this statement is somewhat contradictory in its word choice as she simultaneously reduces her importance, describing herself with words like ‘poor’, ‘little’, and ‘trembles’, while elevating her purpose to keep clergymen in line. However, the juxtaposition of these statements is intentional, highlighting the importance of women in the church while recognizing an inherent asset. This would also suggest that the former attributes are not meant to be negative but rather instrumental to being a godly woman as humility is one of the most valued traits in the Bible.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 37.

<sup>63</sup> 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 (NIV): “Therefore, in order to keep me from becoming conceited, I was given a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.”

Hildegard acknowledges that women, though weak, are indispensable warriors of the Church. For instance, in a letter to the Bishops at Mainz, she writes, “This time is a womanish time because the dispensation of God’s justice is weak. But the strength of God’s justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice, so it might be defeated.”<sup>64</sup> According to Susan Camille, she uses the term womanish throughout her writing to describe the Church losing its “virility” as the clergy has become “weak and effeminate.”<sup>65</sup> Hildegard was critical of the clergy of her time for being passive, corrupt with the purchasing and selling of ecclesiastical privileges, and sinful as some priests were not obeying clerical celibacy.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, she recognizes that female warriors were the only solution to remedying this spiritual malaise, which appears to be ironic after using feminine diction negatively (“womanish clergy”; “weak and effeminate”); however, she uses the term ‘womanish’ to chastise the clergy, because these men should represent masculinity within the Catholic Church. She uses these adjectives as insults only because they misrepresent the clergy’s maleness and not because female nature is inferior. Hildegard is therefore not contradicting herself by uplifting women as warriors. In fact, this demonstrates that she held women in high regard as competent individuals who held the key to reforming the corruption.

### *Self-Deprecation Serving a Function*

Hildegard describes herself as a “poor little creature” throughout multiple letters and manuscripts. In her letter to Conrad, Archbishop of Mainz, she pleads with God:

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<sup>64</sup> Hildegard of Bingen and L. van. Acker. "Hildegardis Bingenensis Epistolarium." *Epistolarium*. (Turnholt: Brepols, 1991), 23.

<sup>65</sup> Susan M. Camille. "Hildegard of Bingen: Essential Writings and Chants of a Christian Mystic." *The Catholic Library World* 86, no. 4 (2016): 124.

“Master, hear this poor little creature writing to you... who in our need run to you for refuge”.<sup>66</sup> This again echoes Paul’s call to delight in one’s weakness in order to fully trust in the Lord’s strength. She acknowledges her weakness before God, which reinforces this notion of traditional womanhood. Interestingly, she uses self-deprecating language to both humble herself and to reinforce her authority on the subject. In the sermon she gave in Trier on the feast of Pentacost, she modestly precedes her message with “I, a poor little figure without health or strength or courage or learning, myself subject to masters.” Following these statements that acknowledge her lack of authority, she often attributes the vision or the work to God. In the same sermon, after introducing herself, she states that she has “heard these words addressed to the prelates and clergy of Trier, from the mystical light of the true vision.”<sup>67</sup> This fulfills her goal of glorifying God, while adding greater credibility to her work as historically, men were skeptical of female authority on intellectual subject matter. This partially stems from a biblical interpretation of the first man, Adam. The medieval, French writer, Jean d’Arras, wrote of the biblical concept of nature: “God has created wonders that surpass human understanding, invisible things about which only Adam before the Fall had perfect knowledge.”<sup>68</sup> In contrast to her male contemporaries, Hildegard cements her authority by referencing the first woman, Eve, in the beginning of *Scivias*. She writes:

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<sup>66</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 75.

<sup>67</sup> Barbara Newman. *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine, With a New Preface, Bibliography, and Discography* (University of California Press, 1987).

<sup>68</sup> Matilda Tomaryn Bruckner, “Natural and Unnatural Woman:: Melusine Inside and Out,” in *Founding Feminisms in Medieval Studies*, ed. Laine E. Doggett and Daniel E. O’Sullivan -New edition. Essays in Honor of E. Jane Burns (Boydell and Brewer, 2016), 21–32.

O frail human form from the dust of the earth, ashes from ashes: cry out and proclaim the beginning of undefiled salvation! Let those who see the inner meaning of Scripture, yet do not wish to proclaim or preach it, take instruction, for they are lukewarm and sluggish in observing the justice of God. Unlock for them the treasury of mysteries, which they, the timid ones, bury in a hidden field without fruit. Therefore pour out a fountain of abundance, overflow with mysterious learning, so that those who want you to be despicable on account of Eve's transgression may be overwhelmed by the flood of your profusion.<sup>69</sup>

Woman, indicated as the weaker of the two sexes with the term 'frail' and formed from 'ashes from ashes', was entrusted with the task of proclaiming God's word because of the laxity in piety of male priests and teachers. The juxtaposition of frailty and her call to action demonstrates that neither her inherent weakness nor Eve's sin can excuse spiritual weakness within herself. In *Liber divinorum operum* she has the same formulaic structure of self-deprecating language followed by an elevation of female status. She admits that while women have a certain vulnerability, they share a common interior life with men.<sup>70</sup> Her understanding of the spiritual is consistent with biblical teachings – that all are equal before God.<sup>71</sup> Therefore, Hildegard refers to herself as a 'fragile vessel' not to discredit her message, but rather to portray herself as a helpless creature whose knowledge is entirely derived from God.

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<sup>69</sup> *Scivias*, 8.

<sup>70</sup> *Liber divinorum operum*, 137.

<sup>71</sup> Galatians 3:28-29 (NIV): "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise."

To say whether she intentionally chose to criticize herself for the sake of her message or whether it came from a place of genuine humility cannot be satisfactorily answered except by reference to Hildegard herself. However, this writer would believe that her self-deprecating language was both an act of modesty and self-awareness. Much of her writing would not suggest otherwise as she wrote extensively on the importance of humility and minimizing one's own existence to emphasize that of the Creator's. In one of her many letters, she compares herself to a trumpet – a medium that projects sound but of itself is soundless without the breath of God.<sup>72</sup> She is filled with his inspiration so that He may perfect his works in her, and to be filled by Him would mean that she is completely dependent upon him. This is a very powerful claim: desiring to be an instrument, a tool for greater purpose outside of oneself. Therefore, one could reason that her intention is pure and truthful.

This does not mean that she spoke recklessly without an awareness of her audience. On the contrary, much of her actions appear to be motivated to preserve her public image. By remaining consistent within socially acceptable boundaries, partly through self-deprecating language, she was accepted by both religious and secular authorities. In addition, she supported the Pope's push for moral reform which brought about tremendous personal benefit.<sup>73</sup> For instance, it allowed her to further her writing career and to preach at a time when women were not officially permitted to do so.<sup>74</sup> Also, acquiring papal approval, she had enough influence to embark on personal projects that were not necessarily popular with those around her. For example, after gaining papal

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<sup>72</sup> *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, 201.

<sup>73</sup> Constant J. Mews. "From Scivias to the Liber Divinorum Operum: Hildegard's Apocalyptic Imagination and the Call to Reform." *Journal of Religious History* 24, no. 1 (2000): 44–56.

<sup>74</sup> Edwin Charles Dargan. *A History of Preaching* (New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1905), 269.

approval, Hildegard's visions of the church grew more radical in nature,<sup>17</sup> she moved her convent to Rupertsberg despite disapproval from monks and nuns in Disibodenberg, and she buried an excommunicated man which left her own community excommunicated for some time.<sup>75</sup> Her usage of such language and keeping to orthodox teachings, then, allowed her to appeal to traditional authority and to reach her full potential in numerous, diverse fields.

### *Requirements of a Fragile Vessel*

Hildegard refers to herself as a "fragile vessel" in order to portray herself as a helpless creature whose knowledge is entirely derived from God. She outlines multiple attributes that are necessary of a godly vessel – the first being physical frailty.

Throughout a letter to a fellow female mystic, Elisabeth of Schönau, ca. 1152-1156, she writes about the important qualities that Elisabeth must embody in order to properly serve the Lord. Hildegard insists that those who long to carry out God's works should remember that they are fragile vessels.<sup>76</sup> As such, "They must leave the heavenly things to him who is of heaven, for they are ignorant, ... are mild, gentle, poor, and afflicted." Thus, suffering brought about through pain and illness are requirements to becoming a vessel fit for God. Physical weakness was simply a price that she had to pay, just as any other fallen woman had before her. Hildegard admits to "constantly [being] fettered by sickness, and often in the grip of pain so intense that it threatens to kill me; but God has sustained me until now."<sup>77</sup> Her complete reliance on him for her survival evokes a certain

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<sup>75</sup> Flanagan. *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 11.

<sup>76</sup> *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, 201.

<sup>77</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1175.

level of Christ-like devotion. The concept of a frail woman is heavily intertwined with the idea of the vessel. Not only does she carry and spread the message of God, but her physical frailty earlier in life allows her to become a loyal disciple who depends entirely on God's strength.

The concept of purity and feminine power is also a characteristic of a good vessel ("O frail....profusion"<sup>13</sup>). She explains that God chose her to deliver his message, proclaiming 'undefiled salvation' to the world. God had to reveal his sacred mysteries through a vessel, untouched by men. There are many instances in which Hildegard discusses the importance of virginal women, however, her first vision in the second book of *Scivias* contains some of her best thoughts on the subject. In Book II, 1.5, Hildegard discusses how the "purity of virginitiy ...trickled every virtue of the knowledge of God, and Man lived again in the salvation of his soul."<sup>78</sup> Essentially, Hildegard places great value in practicing abstinence as it allows for individuals to have clarity of mind. She even mentions that knowledge itself is revealed to those who actively choose to remain abstinent outside of marriage. Within 1.23, she writes that "impurity weakens the virile strength ... and they cannot put good faith in God because the Devil turns them away from the life of felicity."<sup>79</sup> Sexual impurity, then, not only hurts people physically as they become dependent on the act of sexual gratification, but spiritually, it clouds them from true happiness in Christ. This is a topic St. Augustine wrote extensively about in his *Confessions*, detailing his experience of being "in the midst of a hissing cauldron of lust," and later admitting that, "My real need was for you, my God...I was not aware of this

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<sup>78</sup> *Scivias*, 59.

<sup>79</sup> *Scivias*, 66.

hunger.”<sup>80</sup> In the same way, Hildegard identifies this hunger as an essential one, yet one that is often overlooked and even exchanged for momentary pleasures. Being able to recognize which is of greater importance makes a vessel wise. In the last section entitled ‘Commendation of charity’ (1.24), Hildegard praises virginity for “being the most beautiful fruit of all the fruits...O sweetest flowers! My angels marvel at your struggle ... so as not to be polluted by the poisonous mud of the world; you have a carnal body, but you tread it under foot, and so you will be glorious...since you appear unpolluted.”<sup>81</sup> So, a fragile vessel is fragile partly because of her innocence which makes her impressionable to the world; however, she is useful to God despite her weakness because she is not tempted by worldly desires.

A vessel must also be open and willing to learn from God’s knowledge with little conceit or pride found within her. Hildegard does exactly this when she repeatedly describes herself as an uneducated woman, poorly versed in Latin.<sup>82</sup> While stating that she lacked in education, she implies that she is an empty vessel, worthy of receiving God’s messages and worthy of acting as a medium through which they may be carried. This also gives her visions greater credibility for being divinely inspired if she lacks the natural ability to produce these thoughts on her own. She also was not the only one to criticize her education level as many others around her did the same. In *Vita*, she recounted the remarks made after her move to the Rupertsberg convent: many asked, “why so many mysteries should be revealed to a foolish and uneducated woman, when

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<sup>80</sup> Augustine, Watts, and W. H. D. Rouse. 1912. *St. Augustine's Confessions*. London: William Heinemann, 55.

<sup>81</sup> *Scivias*, 66-67.

<sup>82</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 47.

there are so many powerful and learned men,” as well as others wondering if she had been tempted by satanic spirits.<sup>83</sup>

Her writing style with regard to her visions also conveys a certain lack of confidence in her writing comparable to prophets from the Bible. Ultimately, a vessel should give authority to God. The manner in which she writes mirrors that presented by biblical figures such as Jeremiah. Later called “the weeping prophet” by scholars due to the hardship he endured and his initial reluctance to accept his role as a prophet, Jeremiah writes, “The Lord came to me saying, ‘...I appoint you a prophet to the nations.’ Then I said, ‘...Truly I do not know how to speak, for I am only a boy.’”<sup>84</sup> In the same way, Hildegard felt essentially passive and powerless, only speaking when the divine called her to do so. She writes, “...all that God wished to make was foreshadowed in him before it came to He. When reason utters its voice, the sound is like thought and the word like a work. From this ‘shadow’ issued the book Scivias, through the form of a woman who was but a shadow of strength and health, for these vital forces were not active in her.”<sup>85</sup> The lack of confidence in this portion of her writing is present in both content and form. It is seen firstly, when she is remarking on how she is used as a medium in spite of her flaws (“woman...shadow”), and secondly, with the lack of personal voice she has. She refers to herself in third person in order to let His voice overshadow her own.

Lastly, a vessel must willingly agree to be an instrument of God. Hildegard compares herself and other female mystics to multiple musical instruments throughout her writing, demonstrating the importance of completely surrendering oneself to the

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<sup>83</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard's Theology of the Feminine*.

<sup>84</sup> Jeremiah 1:5-8 (NIV).

<sup>85</sup> *Liber divinorum operum*, 197.

Lord. In one instance, she compares herself to a trumpet which projects sound but of itself is soundless without the breath of God.<sup>86</sup> In another instance, she compares the physical frame of a woman's body to that of a lyre. She has holes drilled within her in order to accommodate for strings.<sup>87</sup> The strings can be inferred to be inherent tools used to bring about the gifts of God. The image of the lyre is a recurring one as it has been used throughout history to symbolize divine inspiration: commonly depicted as the harp of God and portrayed as a divine medium since Greek classical antiquity with the myth of Hermes, Apollo, and the tortoiseshell lyre.<sup>88</sup> Not surprisingly, the prophetic lyre reappears in her visions. Assuming God's voice, she writes of herself in third person proclaiming, "The person who has seen and revealed these things in writing lives and does not live...she reveals the marvels of God not by herself but as one touched by them, just as a string is touched by the harper sounds not by itself but by his touch."<sup>89</sup> She acknowledges that her life is devoted to living out His purposes and as such, she does not truly live for herself. This is meant to remind us that vessels are meant to be tools with little personal attachment and emotion to what they produce, yet a certain level of personal attachment does come from belief in the source itself as she believes enough in God's intentions to vocalize His words; thus, instruments of God serve a functional role in the divine plan in the same way a vessel is an indispensable tool for holding water.

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<sup>86</sup> Hildegardis Bingensis *Epistolarium*, 303.

<sup>87</sup> Hildegard of Bingen. *Hildegard of Bingen: On Natural Philosophy and Medicine: selections from Cause et cure*, trans. Margret Berger (Cambridge ; Rochester, N.Y: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 105.

<sup>88</sup> Sherry Roush. *Hermes' Lyre: Italian Poetic Self-Commentary from Dante to Tommaso Campanella* (Toronto; Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

<sup>89</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, Bruce W. Hozeski, *Liber Vitae Meritorium*. Oxford University Press, 1997, 68.

### *Gender and Priesthood*

Despite having radical opinions on excommunication and heretics, Hildegard stayed consistent with traditional teachings of the Church, especially her opinions on female authority within the Church. She advises that priestly ordination is reserved for men alone. She does so in one instance by discussing the act of procreation and comparing it to farming in *Scivias*:

I do not wish, however, that [women] should take part in the ministry of My altar, but that they should humbly fulfil their virtue in good works...those of female sex should not approach the office of My altar; for they are an infirm and weak habitation, appointed to bear children and diligently nurture them. A woman conceives a child not by herself but through a man, as the ground is plowed not by itself, but by a farmer. Therefore, just as the earth cannot plow itself, a woman must not be a priest and do the work of consecrating the body and blood of My Son; though she can sing the praise of her Creator, as the earth can receive rain to water its fruits. And as the earth brings forth all fruits, so in Woman the fruit of all good works is perfected. How? Because she can receive the High Priest as Bridegroom. How? A virgin betrothed to My Son will receive Him as Bridegroom, for she has shut her body away from a physical husband; and in her Bridegroom she has the priesthood and all the ministry of My altar, and with Him possesses all its riches.<sup>90</sup>

Hildegard rejects women's ordination because of the natural differences in male and female roles within the Church. In order to fulfill the divine will, men and women must act together in separate ways just as in the act of procreation in which men and

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<sup>90</sup> *Scivias*, 278.

women accomplish the same end while embodying different roles (“Therefore, just as the earth....My Son”). While women, who represent the Church, are the embodiment of the sacred, men are called to protect the sacred.<sup>91</sup> Priests are called to continue Jesus’s role as the Bridegroom and his marriage to the Church; in addition, they are called to act as a father to all who are baptized because they create spiritual children through the sacraments. In her *Liber Divinorum Operum*, Hildegard proposes that “man signifies the divinity and woman the humanity of Christ.”<sup>92</sup> So they’re called to embody in a particular way the person of Jesus who came down in the form of a man to save humanity from their sins. Women, then, are not called to become priests because Jesus gives us the priesthood, so to defend the tradition of the Church, men continue that ministry. This calls us to recognize the necessary role that women provide within the Church, a role Pope John Paul II refers to as the “genius of women” or the “feminine genius”<sup>93</sup>, in which their talents, gifts, and leadership must be cultivated in the Church and becomes a complement to the ministry of priests.

She provides an optimistic resolution for women to this dilemma, suggesting that women are able to experience the same spiritual benefits as any priest. The reason being, she has the capability of becoming a Bride of Christ (“Because she can receive the High Priest as Bridegroom...husband”). Furthermore, Brides of Christ can enjoy the same spiritual well-being of those in ordained priesthood as women who embody Jesus will

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<sup>91</sup> Alice von Hildebrand, *The Privilege of Being a Woman*, First edition (Ypsilanti, Mich: Ignatius Press, 2005).

<sup>92</sup> *Liber divinorum operum*, 168.

<sup>93</sup> Pope John Paul II, Brooke Williams Deely. *Pope John Paul II Speaks on Women* (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 2014).

possess the riches endowed to the ministry of His altar through her Bridegroom (“And in her...riches”).

Hildegard likens the inherent difference that predisposes men and women to different roles in the Church to clothing. In Book II, vision 77 of *Scivias*, she professes, “A man should never put on feminine dress or a woman use male attire, so that their roles may remain distinct, the man displaying manly strength and the woman womanly weakness...unless a man’s life or a woman’s chastity is in danger...if they do it humbly in fear of death” and if “they seek My mercy for this deed they shall find it, because they did it not in boldness but in danger of their safety.”<sup>94</sup> Interestingly, Hildegard believes that God only allows for men and women to dress in a similar manner when two things are threatened: a man’s life and a woman’s chastity. This demonstrates the importance she places on virginity, especially for women, holding it to the same level as a man’s life. Hildegard’s desire to maintain gender differences through appearance bleeds into her ideas regarding the clergy. Within the same vision, she declares, “But as a woman should not wear a man’s clothes, she should also not approach the office of My altar, for she should not take on a masculine role either in her hair or in her attire.”<sup>40</sup> Upholding certain expectations of how men and women should dress emphasizes their separate responsibilities and individual significance within the Church.

Hildegard appears to be in accordance with Catholic teaching regarding clothing and how it played a symbolic role in religious life. During this time, Medieval monks would wear tunics with scapulas, a garment that draped over the shoulders, connected to cowls, and leather or cloth belts fastened below the waist and around the loins. In fact,

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<sup>94</sup> *Scivias*, 278.

the belts would signify a monk's deadness to the world and would also symbolize the act of controlling bodily desires.<sup>95</sup> In similar fashion, Hildegard believed that the female dress worn by her own nuns carried a symbolic meaning. At Hildegard's Rupertsberg convent, the ceremony of veiling was a liturgical occasion and occurred at certain times of the year under the supervision of the bishop.<sup>96</sup> At mass, the veil of the candidate would be placed on the altar for a proper blessing from the bishop and the candidate would carry a candle to the altar, then blessed by the bishop, and crowned with the veil. The veil would signify modesty, self-restraint, and virginity. Hildegard fully supported this practice and viewed it as a marriage between "wise virgins awaiting the arrival of the heavenly spouse."<sup>42</sup> She was heavily criticized for dressing nuns in a form of bridal attire during their initiation. In particular, an abbess by the name of Tengswich from Andernach addresses her at length "about certain strange and irregular practices that you countenance...such unheard-of practices far exceed the capacity of our understanding." Within her letter, she reveals that Hildegard and her nuns wear white, silk veils that touch the floor, golden crowns, with fingers adorned with golden rings which Tengswich criticizes for promoting vanity and status among the girls. In her response, Hildegard defends her practice by referencing various scripture verses<sup>97</sup> on vanity and stating that they do not apply to virgins. She writes, "A virgin is not commanded to cover up her hair, but she willingly does so out of her great humility, for a person will naturally hide the beauty of her soul"<sup>98</sup>, and they are married with the holiness of the Holy Spirit; thus, it is

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<sup>95</sup> Monk of St. Tikhon's Monastery. "The Monastic Grades." *St. Tikhon's Seminary Press*, (1986). Accessed April 14, 2019. <https://www.stots.edu/article.php?id=25>.

<sup>96</sup> Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 27.

<sup>97</sup> Matthew 19:6; 2 Corinthians 12:2; Ephesians 5:22; Colossians 3:18; 1 Thessalonians 4:4; Apocalypse 14:4

<sup>98</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 129.

appropriate for them to wear bridal clothing. In the final defense of her work, she says she continues the practice because it is commanded by God.<sup>99</sup>

Lastly, she associates feminine consecrated life with God's humanity through an extension of mercy. She emphasizes the importance of mercy particularly in the person of a woman as it "is a most fruitful mother of souls snatched from perdition. For as a woman covers her head, so Mercy subdues the death of souls. And as woman is sweeter than man, so Mercy is sweeter than the fury of crimes raging in a sinner's madness before his heart has been visited by God. This same virtue appears in the form of a woman because the sweetest Mercy arose in feminine chastity, in the body of Mary."<sup>100</sup> Mary exhibits such mercy because she bore Jesus out of pure compassion and love despite the negative treatment she would receive for having a child outside of her marriage. In addition, her usage of the word *sweeter* can be interpreted as a quality of soothing and softening, empathy, and sensitivity toward matters of the heart. In a letter to Pope Eugenius III, she also urges him to judge a corrupt bishop while "keeping with the motherly heart of God's mercy" as he would desire mercy over sacrifice.<sup>101</sup> So while she recognized the distinction, she encouraged both genders to learn from the other and embody pieces of both. Hildegard identifies specific spiritual gifts given to men and women, attributing women with penance, grace, and mercy and men with solidity, bravery, and fairness.<sup>102</sup> Therefore, to Hildegard, women are necessary beings as they provide the soul comfort and prevent a person's heart from being hardened by sin.

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<sup>99</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*: "These words do not come from a human being but from the Living Light. Let the one who hears see and believe where these words come from," 130.

<sup>100</sup> *Scivias*, 380.

<sup>101</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 38.

<sup>102</sup> *Liber Divinorum Operum*, 256.

While there are many critics who disagree with how she described women during her time, she certainly did not diminish the value of either sex. In fact, she celebrated women for their spiritual contributions as well as their embodiment of Jesus's mercy. In closing, her own words may provide the best reflection of how she highly she viewed womanhood: "Why is she so resplendent? For two reasons: on the one hand, because she was created by the finger of God and, on the other, because she was endowed with wondrous beauty. O, woman, what a splendid being you are! For you have set your foundation in the sun, and have conquered the world."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 128.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### The Implications of Femininity on her Medical Practices

I concluded the previous chapter by commenting that not only are females assigned different roles within the priesthood, but that the personification of women can be associated with the body itself. There is an innate connection between the two, according to Hildegard, in matters of gender, the complementary role they assume, and the bodily health of women. Thus, in this final chapter, I want to look at the specific ways in which Hildegard connects them, and in doing so, how does she treat male and female patients differently. Hildegard herself was a woman who ailed from immense childhood sickness that left her bedridden until she was eight years old. Unlike many who have endured maladies to such a degree, she does not view her afflictions as a tragedy, but is able to embrace the goodness it has brought about in her own life. Therefore, I think she is a very suitable figure for examining the capabilities associated with self-maintenance of the human body and the integrated importance of an individual's mental and spiritual health.

#### *Airy Temperament and Infirmary*

If we look at how medieval people personified the natural elements by assigning gender to them, we find that they have been taught to associate warmth and kindness with women like Mother Nature. Medieval Christian philosophers, unlike ancient thinkers in Mesopotamia, did not view Mother Nature as a female goddess but viewed her to be a creation by God.<sup>104</sup> Hildegard takes a similar yet innovative approach to medieval ideas

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<sup>104</sup> David Adams Leeming. *Creation Myths of the World: An Encyclopedia*. 2nd ed. Santa Barbara (Calif: ABC-CLIO, 2009-2010), 19.

on female personification of nature. Like others of her time, she viewed the standard four elements – fire, air, earth, and water – as only personifications, not deities; however, she deviates regarding which elements she considers to be womanly. In what follows, I would like to primarily explore the different theories proposed in Hildegard’s medical treatise, *Cause et Curae*, in order to find the underlying framework that unites these ideas.

According to Hildegard, there existed a special compatibility between female nature and airy temperament. She defines airy temperament as a woman’s disposition and affinity for air (Woman’s “wind expands by her belly...[and] for fear or out of modesty, she is able to contain it more easily than man”<sup>105</sup>). As explored in the previous chapter, Hildegard believes that womanhood can only be experienced through motherhood and through religious orders. She uses both scenarios to illustrate the importance of air for feminine health and for spiritual sustenance.

### *Origins from Eve*

While “the form of [Adam] was of water and mud” into which God breathed life and “the mud became blood”<sup>106</sup>, Eve possessed “a sharp mind, of air, and a delicate life, for the weight of the earth did not oppress her.” Adam was created from earthy substances such as clay as he is called to have dominion over the land.<sup>107</sup> Furthermore, God used the same clay to mold his interior organs – the heart, liver, lungs, stomach, intestines, brain, eyes, tongue, etc.<sup>3</sup> Eve, on the other hand, is not bound to the earth

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<sup>105</sup> *Causae et curae*, 72-73.

<sup>106</sup> *Causae et curae*, 52.

<sup>107</sup> Genesis 1:28 (NIV): " God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”.

which allows her to embody the lightness of air. Hildegard proposed that Eve was created from air of the greatest quality. She, therefore, was able to carry the human race inside of her.<sup>108</sup> Hildegard notes that before the fall, Eve's airy temperament only brought about benefits to humanity. She was incorrupt and free from human suffering. Female suffering was brought about after the fall of Eve.

After the fall, Eve's airy nature made women more fragile and allowed for pain and sickness to easily enter female bodies as opposed to that of males. She mentions fragility while explaining the reasoning behind why Eve was the first to fall. Had Adam sinned before Eve, sin would have become too strong and consumed humankind in which neither man or woman could be saved, so "as Eve sinned first, the sin was easier to erase, because it was more fragile than that of men."<sup>5</sup> So although this allowed sin to be erasable, woman was still plagued with greater weakness. She describes the future pain it produces, asserting that "the meat [of children] became increasingly fragile and so it will be until the Last Day."<sup>5</sup> The consequence of Eve's Fall then made women more susceptible to certain illnesses.

According to Hildegard, since the fall, the female body has become window-like, admitting tempestuous wind and storms freely. The female brain has 'windows' that are always aerated by entrances of the nose, mouth, eyes, and ears, allowing for impure matter to enter. She even goes on to say that these windows, not only present in the brain but in the skin of the female body, tolerates 'dirt' – a term she uses to describe maladies and sickness.<sup>109</sup> Thus, women are much more vulnerable than men to weather-related

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<sup>108</sup> *Causae et curae*, 55.

<sup>109</sup> *Causae et curae*, 105.

sicknesses, and their immune system is more fragile in comparison to the male immune system.

### *Pregnancy and Conception*

In her extensive medical composition, she details the pregnant female body and its dependency on air, stating that the body needs to be airy in order to provide room for the fetus: “woman is only a container for [man] to conceive and for the offspring. That’s why your wind is windy, your veins open, and their members faint before those of man.”<sup>110</sup> The container is meant to describe a spacious environment that can accommodate for new life. In addition, wind used in this context refers to moving masses of air throughout the womb which suggests that it must be porous and permeable, allowing for change and growth within the system. The following figure is a medieval depiction of the gross anatomical structures of the female body:

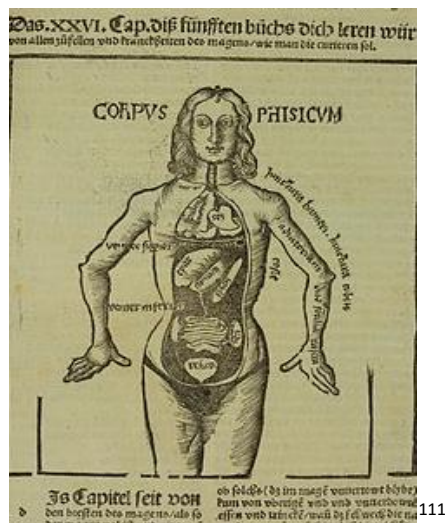


Figure 2: Female Anatomy Illustration from the Middle Ages

<sup>110</sup> *Causae et curae*, 73.

<sup>111</sup> *Corpus physicum*, from *Liber de arte Distillandi de Compositis*, 1512.

During the process of conception, air plays a vital role within the female body in delivering the sperm to the egg. She refers to this as air taking on ‘wet humor’ which has the capacity to move substances more readily. Interestingly, she also conceptualizes gametes as forms of blood. Sperm is called ‘foam of the blood’ which unites with the ‘blood of the woman’.<sup>112</sup> The intermingling of the blood that Hildegard describes can be inferred as conception or implantation.

Air within the female body during conception also affects the health of her child. Hildegard presents two separate examples: one of good air which produces a healthy child and one of bad air which plagues a child with various health problems. Also, Hildegard integrates medieval astrology and medicine within this example. For the positive scenario, she writes that if conception takes place during the time the sun is in the sign of Cancer, when the air is full and of ‘correct quality’, the offspring will have a healthy liver.<sup>113</sup> Whereas, if conception takes place in a “climate of foggy and humid air, so they have foul breath, smelly sweat....in the disease they are so damaged...that their brain is not rid of the harmful humors and this foul breath passes into the lungs and harms them.”<sup>114</sup> A woman’s air therefore affects many aspects associated with the processes necessary for motherhood.

### *Hildegard’s Airiness*

Similarly to how airiness provides other women the capacity for motherhood, airy nature provides Hildegard the capacity for God. She associates her sickness with her own

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<sup>112</sup> *Causae et curae*, 63.

<sup>113</sup> *Causae et curae*, 85.

<sup>114</sup> *Causae et curae*, 84.

airy nature characteristic of women. In a letter to Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard describes her sickness as a necessary component to experiencing and connecting with God. She writes, “But because of the constant sickness that I suffer, I sometimes get tired of writing the words and visions that are there revealed to me. Yet when my soul tastes and sees them, I am so transformed that, as I say, I forget all pain and trouble.”<sup>115</sup> The airiness she inherited from Eve may allow room for sickness and pain from air, wind, and storm, but it also allows for the Holy Spirit to dwell inside of her.<sup>116</sup> We can see that airiness can be applied to mystics too, and that it builds on the idea that airiness has the potential to promote positive traits.

#### *Airy Ailments and Treatments*

Women are more susceptible to fevers from exposure to harsh weather. Hildegard proposes that different types of fevers are caused by different types of air – hot, cold, humid. She states that air typically retains its correct and moderate temperature, however, “if heat arises from the air in excess and out of the ordinary” they can become “acute fevers” for some women.<sup>117</sup> In addition, if a woman is exposed to excessively cold air or moist air, she may be susceptible to tertian fever.<sup>118</sup> For those who suffer from tertian fevers, Hildegard suggests that the sick take grass of St. Mary and three radishes, mix them in heated wine, strain them in cloth, and pulverize a clove of garlic and ginger into the liquid. Then the sick should ingest the liquid for the next nine days.<sup>119</sup> Hildegard does

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<sup>115</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 23.

<sup>116</sup> *Liber divinorum operum*, 391-392.

<sup>117</sup> *Causae et curae*, 123.

<sup>118</sup> Tertian fevers are intermittent fever active two days in a row, ceases the third and resumes the next day.

<sup>119</sup> *Causae et curae*, 159.

not offer remedies for the other fevers, but she offers consolation that “in spite of everything, [they] will not die” from such ailments.<sup>120</sup>

‘Gray eyes’ is yet another airy illness that Hildegard recognizes. She records the symptoms as ‘clouded’ and ‘discomfort in sight’. Furthermore, she writes that “the gray eyes are of air and that is why the dew adds to these components.”<sup>121</sup> Gray eyes are most likely cataracts, a medical condition in which lenses of the eye grow more opaque over time, leading to blurrier vision. Hildegard suggests crushing fennel seeds and mixing them with dew from the grass and with a little spelt flour. Then, place them over the eyes over night with a cloth tied wrapped around the eyes.<sup>16</sup> Of course, both men and women can have cataracts and fevers, but Hildegard suggests that women are more prone to getting airy infirmities such as these and should take greater care in preventing diseases/illnesses such as these.

### *Sex, Spirit and Holistic Practices*

I would now like to focus on the final phase that is in many ways, the ultimate topic of my thesis. My question is how did her view of womanhood impact her version of holistic care. Airy temperament and menstruation are two examples of how she integrates femininity with her version of care, however, in this portion of the thesis I will explore the underlying framework behind her medical practices. In the second chapter, I explained the general way in which she practiced medicine: on the practical level, she utilized herbs based on temperature to treat various ailments and on the metaphysical level, she recommended prayer and connection to God. In the third chapter, I explored

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<sup>120</sup> *Causae et curae*, 167.

<sup>121</sup> *Causae et curae*, 129.

her opinion of women and their relationship to men. Ultimately, after gaining some insight, limiting myself mostly to primary literature, I have concluded that Hildegard is motivated to practice her holistic form of medicine based on the complementary relationship between man and woman as well as the complementary relationship between body and soul.

### *Man and Woman as Complements*

Firstly, we have seen in passages discussed in the previous chapter that Hildegard viewed men and women with equal dignity. She utilizes the words ‘complement’ and ‘mirror’ to detail the codependency in their creation:

So God gave him a helper which was his mirror image, woman, in whom the whole human race lay hidden. It was to be brought forth in the power of God’s strength, just as the first man was produced by him. And the man and the woman were thus complementary, so that one works through the other, because man is not called ‘man’ without woman, nor is woman without man called ‘woman’. For woman is the work of man, and man the form of woman’s consolation; and neither of them can exist without the other.<sup>122</sup>

There is a distinction between the assumption that men and women are opposites and the idea that they are complementary. These are not necessarily mutually exclusive, however, it is important to note that Hildegard addresses these concepts separately as they are separate ideas. The former suggests that their differences are polarizing whereas the latter is concerned with the necessity of one’s existence on the other. To be a

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<sup>122</sup> Flanagan. *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life*, 58.

“mirror image”, Hildegard implies that men and women are opposites by nature yet they reflect their traits on their counterpart. And explicitly, she discusses the completeness they have in unity. Thus, women are not designed to be inferior to men but distinct beings with their own inner strengths that manifest in emotional depth, fortitude, dignity, and intuition.

### *Man as Soul and Woman as Body*

She likens maleness to the spiritual, the intellectual and the soul, whereas she associates femaleness with the material, the senses and the body. This is consistent with traditional standards as women are often portrayed as more nurturing and empathic than men. In Hildegard’s *Divine Works*, she writes that “Man and woman are one, because man is like the soul and woman like the body.”<sup>123</sup> Man therefore represents Christ’s divinity while woman signifies His humanity. Hildegard genders body and soul and views them in both a dualistic and holistic way.

In an age where many individuals believed the body to be sinful with misdirected desires, Hildegard’s view was unique as it embraced the body as a divine gift and evaluated both body and soul as positive and necessary complements. For instance, she celebrates the human body’s purpose in the divine in her letter praising virginity and when she describes women giving birth and breast feeding.<sup>124</sup> In contrast, the negative view of the body was often connected to stories including themes of eroticism or involving the temptress archetype, luring men to treacherous situations<sup>125</sup>. This is because

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<sup>123</sup> *Liber divinorum operum*, 168.

<sup>124</sup> *Hildegardis Bingensis Epistolarium*, 201.

<sup>125</sup> Helen Hanson and Catherine O’Rawe. *The Femme Fatale: Images, Histories, Contexts*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 216: “The femme fatale was also defined as textually

the chaste female body is viewed as a medium with reproductive and nurturing capacities, whereas the sexualized female body, portrayed as shameful and naked, for medieval people serves only to fulfill selfish motivations. Furthermore, there appears to be less emphasis and value placed on male bodies than that of females. In medieval literature, the old male body would be judged in a neutral way, stirring little emotion, however the old female body would be met with revulsion.<sup>126</sup> Therefore, women are distinctly connected to materiality and their corporeality. Men in the same way are culturally authoritative and align themselves spiritually.<sup>127</sup> Hildegard believes these associations are naturally predisposed, which does not imply that she positioned them hierarchically, but rather she viewed them relationally.

In addition, she believed that *viriditas* was to be cultivated in body and soul. In this example, I will focus primarily on the soul for she often used metaphors to express the importance of attaining fruitfulness of the soul. In a letter to her congregation of nuns, Hildegard compares the nuns to fig trees, explaining that they need to be cultivated with care so that they can become sweet.

So it is with the spiritual life: it must be cultivated with great care, lest the winter of tedium cause it to wither in a person's mind. In the beginning the labor is bitter, because it prohibits the desire of the flesh, the individuality of the will, and other such

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disruptive, as 'the obstacle to the male quest', a sexual distraction that is 'desirable but dangerous'."

<sup>126</sup> Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin. "The old body in medieval culture." *Framing medieval bodies* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1994), 164-178.

<sup>127</sup> Christina Cedillo. "Habitual Gender: Rhetorical Androgyny in Franciscan Texts." *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 31, no. 1 (2015): 78.

matters, but contempt for the world is very pleasant and sweet when the spirit, sanctified, envelops itself in sanctity. Still, care must be taken, lest it wither.<sup>128</sup>

Greening, then, can only occur with God's participation within our spiritual lives. In the letter to her nuns, Hildegard points out that although this greening is not always pleasant, it is the foundation of our existence, a divine gift that invigorates our lives, and we have the responsibility to care for it.

However, simply cultivating one's spiritual life does not reflect the entirety of Hildegard's message. She in fact encourages that people allow for the animation or transformation of their whole body and spirit. In her letter to the Abbot of Adalard, Hildegard advises the abbot to respect the three strengths with which He endowed Mankind – understanding, the senses, and motion of the body – “For through the Spirit of the Lord, you see with understanding, and through the body you become aware of evil things by means of the senses. You know both good and evil, for you are both spiritual and corporeal.”<sup>129</sup> We see that Hildegard finds equal value in the body and soul as they show different aspects of life and shape a person's morality. Balance between both elements allows a person to be transformed in all aspects of their lives.

#### *Implications of Body and Soul on Hildegardean Medicine*

Hildegard, as previously acknowledged, practiced a form of holistic medicine that focused on nurturing both the soul and the body – a necessary process for healing the system, or rather allowing the system to heal itself. The first of the four major tenets of modern day osteopathic medical philosophy is the idea that the body is completely united

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<sup>128</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 112.

<sup>129</sup> *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 101.

and that the person is a fully integrated being in body, soul, and mind. The second tenet acknowledges the body has the capability of self-regulation and self-maintenance.<sup>130</sup>

Hildegard, likewise, believed in the human body's capabilities and ultimately found that bodies of her patients were filled with wonders and mysteries.<sup>131</sup> Thus, the philosophy behind her medical practices at the core is still relevant today.

The direct connection between her medicine and the complements of body and soul can be found in her Plants and Herbs section in *Physica*. As explored in Chapter 2, Hildegard practiced herbal medicine in which temperature moderation was a fundamental tool for healing. The warmth of the herbs represents the human soul, whereas the cold represents the physical body.<sup>132</sup> She favors the unity and balance of these two sides. Essentially, balancing the warmth and coolness of herbs contributes to the benefit of human health. The usage of hot and cold herbs must be moderated so that the two will be in constant harmony.<sup>133</sup> Overusing cold herbs at the expense of warm ones is equivalent to prioritizing flesh over soul. In addition, prioritizing soul over flesh also leads to illness as both body and soul are equally important in preserving one's health. So in conclusion, Hildegard's idea of hot and cold herbs was greatly influenced by her views on spirituality and corporeality as well as by her construction of gendered behavior and dispositions.

### *Hildegard and Medicine Today*

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<sup>130</sup> FJ Rogers. "Proposed Tenets of Osteopathic Medicine and Principles for Patient Care." *The Journal of the American Osteopathic Association*, Vol. 102, no. 2 (2002): 63-65.

<sup>131</sup> Abraham M Nussbaum. "Sickbeds and Garden Beds." *The Finest Traditions of My Calling: One Physician's Search for the Renewal of Medicine*. (Yale University Press, 2016), 137.

<sup>132</sup> *Physica*, 3.

<sup>133</sup> *Physica*, 7.

While in many respects, Hildegard's medicine differs from osteopathic medicine practiced today as better equipment and technology are now available, many of her underlying ideas behind human health remains relevant today – the importance of balancing bodily and spiritual health, the value of 'slow medicine', and habit formation ("daily stretching, dietary changes, coping strategies"<sup>28</sup>), to name a few. A contemporary physician, Victoria Sweet, explains the difference between Hildegard's premodern practice and contemporary medicine, asserting that "Modern medicine's framework for the body, then, is industrial, mechanical, and democratic: The body is a factory with workers; a machine with parts."<sup>134</sup> If we acknowledge Sweet's claim, it is possible to say that Hildegardean practices could benefit the way in which we care for patients. Rather than encouraging physicians to act like technicians, perhaps we should encourage them to act like wise gardeners who approach patients as they would plants.

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<sup>134</sup> Victoria Sweet. *God's Hotel: A Doctor, a Hospital, and a Pilgrimage to the Heart of Medicine* (Calif: Riverhead Books, 2013), 179.

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