

Hildegard of Bingen: A Star Shining in Dark Ages

In an age where women were more likely to be taught spinning than reading, and were generally thought to be mentally inferior to men, most women not only lacked the desire to speak out - they also lacked the means. Education was generally restricted to the elite classes, so that took a large portion of women (and men) out of the equation. Within the elite classes, it seems that a woman might have access to an education under certain conditions. If a girl was lucky enough to have a liberal father who believed in her ability, he might provide access to learning. However, abbeys and convents were the institutions most likely to educate girls so they could read the scriptures. As we can see, pathways to education were available to *some* women. However, then and now, a well developed mind does not guarantee acceptance by one's peers. It appears there were women reading in abbeys and working as scribes, and yet so few had a voice that was heard beyond the four walls of their home or cell. This is what makes Hildegard of Bingen so exceptional. She was fortunate to be handed certain privileges that set her apart and gave her opportunities to cultivate her intellectual talents. Hildegard took full advantage of these privileges, coupled with cunning strategy, to ascend beyond the limitations imposed by her society.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 in the German province of Reinhessen (Storey, p16). Eleventh century Germany, under the Ottonian Empire, allowed "great convents... to flourish as places of learning" (Chadwick, p49) . Despite the more liberal climate of Germany during this period, Gregorian reforms of the 11th and 12th centuries

placed restraints on women. Hildegard worked within the system to not only make her voice heard, but to be an influence on other young women (Storey, p16).

As a young child, Hildegard began experiencing visions that she felt were spiritual in nature. Because her visions were physically painful episodes, some historians have written them off as migraine headaches. Her family, however, decided to consecrate her to religious life at the young age of eight. Yet, it was not until the age of forty that Hildegard began to reveal her visions. Like any young child who is different than her peers, Hildegard appears to have felt shame or embarrassment (Flanagan, p3). Perhaps at the age of forty she finally felt the self-consciousness of youth replaced by the confidence of womanhood. Another major factor may have been her recent promotion to head of her abbey in 1036 (Flanagan, p3). Her new title and position of authority may have given her the courage to reveal her visionary side.

In any case, Hildegard's visions were analyzed by the Church and verified as valid. When she began writing her first major work, the *Scivias*, a section of it was brought to the Pope. He was apparently so impressed by it, that he declared all of her visions must be henceforth recorded (Flanagan, p5). As abbess, Hildegard already wielded some authority over her own abbey. When her gift was acknowledged by the Church, she was actively sought out by people outside of the convent. Her gift brought her fame, which in turn gave her more authority.

The religious establishment in which she was raised actually originated as a monastery. When Hildegard entered as a child, it was originally to be enclosed in a cell with a noble woman turned anchoress called Jutta. Here, Jutta would have been Hildegard's religious mentor, tutoring her in the ways of the Lord (Flanagan, p3).

Eventually, the monastery grew and was forced to adapt to larger numbers. It soon turned into a co-ed establishment as both a monastery and convent inhabited by monks and nuns (Flanagan, p3). Jutta and Hildegard's position of being the first two women on the premises seems to have given them seniority over those who assumed the role upon Jutta's death (Flanagan, p3). Although her appointment was the result of a unanimous vote by her fellow nuns, it is hard to imagine her seniority as well as her close relationship with the former head abbess did not give her a competitive edge over any opponents, if not an uncontested claim.

While this part of Hildegard's rise could be attributed to dumb luck, it was after her promotion to abbess that she can be clearly seen making executive decisions that directly impact herself and her nuns. It was only *after* her promotion that she made her visions known. Whether it was calculated planning or a genuine spiritual urging can be debated. Either way, timing is everything, and her announcement was timed perfectly to work toward her benefit.

Having her visions accredited by the Pope empowered Hildegard in many ways. Again, she was very *lucky* to receive sanctioning from the Pope, but the way in which she used this power showed cunning on her part. Her convent was growing steadily, partially due to her own fame, and her nuns needed accommodations suitable for their numbers (Flanagan, p5). As the monastery had been adding on and expanding regularly anyway, plans to build were a non-issue (Flanagan, p5). What the monks didn't expect, however, was that Hildegard would announce she had received a "command from God to move her nuns to Rupertsberg... some 30 km from [their monastery] at Disibodenberg" (Flanagan, p5). Again, whether this was a sincere supernatural revelation or Hildegard's way of

manipulating the system in which she lived is open to speculation. When God's command was rejected by the monks, Hildegard was struck down by a severe illness rendering her bedridden, indicating that God was irritated at being denied (Flanagan, p6). If God's message wasn't clear enough, Hildegard also sought help from an influential noble widow who was able to sort things out with the Archbishop of Mainz who finally approved her request (Flanagan, p6).

Hildegard continued to break gender barriers throughout her life. She felt confident enough to not only write a congratulatory letter to the new King in 1152, but also give him advice (Flanagan, p8), and also corresponded with other European heads of state (Chadwick, 58). If the idea of a woman preaching openly to a mixed audience is still controversial in some Christian sects today, then it was undoubtedly more so in 12th century Europe. Yet Hildegard did so openly in 1160 in the city of Trier (Flanagan, p9). While continuing her writing, Hildegard founded a second convent in 1165 "presumably to cater to nuns who could not be accommodated in" her original convent (Flanagan, p9). Here we can clearly see her influence was such that she attracted many followers.

Although Hildegard's decisions, actions, influence, autonomy, and, in essence, her life story in general are enough to make her shining star for femininity of her time, she also left a large body of work that we, in posterity, can dig through and analyze. In her article entitled "Hildegard of Bingen at 900, The Eye of a Woman," June Boyce-Tillman argues that Western culture has lost, and therefore must reclaim, our historical femininity (Boyce-Tillman, p31). Boyce-Tillman acknowledges the notion that a modern "feminist approach [cannot be applied] to an age that knew nothing of feminist theorists" (Boyce-Tillman, p31). Yet she goes on to make an analogy between Western history and

conventional psychiatry. In the 1970s, she says, female researchers Mary Field Belenky and Carol Gillian noted “that women have been missing... as research subjects at the formative stages of psychological theories” (Boyce-Tillman, p31). When women were finally studied it was found that they have “similarities... but also significant differences” from their male counterparts (Boyce, Tillman, p31). Boyce-Tillman parallels the characteristics in Hildegard’s art, especially in how it differs from her male contemporaries, as inherently influenced by her femininity.

Because much of Hildegard’s musical compositions differed from the rules followed by her male contemporaries, detractors have “attributed [this] to lack of education” (Boyce-Tillman, p32). Boyce-Tillman, however, believes that Hildegard’s “free-flowing” music echoes “the free-flowing interconnectedness of her thinking” (Boyce-Tillman, p32). This is an important observation, especially when juxtaposed with Boyce-Tillman’s psychology analogy. If women sometimes think differently than men, it stands to reason that they might express themselves differently than men, which would in turn be reflected within their art. Boyce-Tillman points out that within Hildegard’s visual art “circular and oval shapes [often associated with the feminine] are common” (Boyce, Tillman, p32).

Indeed, Boyce-Tillman discusses aspects of Hildegard’s career that are hard *not* to consider feminist. In her musical drama *Ordo virtutum*, Hildegard melds together all of her many talents, including writing, music, and visual art (Boyce-Tillman, p34). This play was cast almost entirely with women actors, “the only man with a significant part” is the Devil (Boyce-Tillman, p34). In another anecdote we find is that unlike the dour dress code typically worn by nuns, Hildegard’s “nuns wore crowns and beautiful robes, which

she considered justified because of their high calling as the brides of Christ” (Boyce-Tillman, p34). Here we see Hildegard elevating the status of the women under her leadership when the trend of the time was to subjugate them.

Ann Storey discusses other ways in which Hildegard promoted the interests of women in her article, The Theophany of the Feminine. Though Hildegard did suffer from “self-doubt and fear of ridicule” (Storey, p16), it appears she possessed enough boldness to re-word scripture in a way more flattering toward women, changing “the man was not created for the woman but the woman for the man” to “woman is created for the man and man is made for woman” thus placing woman on equal footing as men (Storey, p17). Storey says that Hildegard “emphasize[d] the female aspects of the divine (Storey, p16 - 17). We can see this in her personification of not only the church, but also the Holy Spirit as female (Storey, p17). This approach is astounding considering “the misogyny of the Christian church” (Storey, p16).

Although most scholars marvel at Hildegard’s forward thinking views on her sex, there is one issue that many find puzzling; “her rejection of the ordination of women” (Thompson, p350). Augustine Thompson, in her article Hildegard of Bingen on Gender and the Priesthood, argues that “Hildegard’s rejection of the ordination of women is not evidence of any inconsistency in her thought” (Thompson, p50). She asserts that although “Hildegard does use the common medieval rationale for excluding women priests... she places little stress on it” (Thompson, p351). Furthermore, Hildegard seems to ascribe both masculine *and* feminine attributes to God (Thompson, p352). According to Thompson, Hildegard views the roles of men and women as serving two distinctly different functions. As afore mentioned, Hildegard thought of the Church as female.

This leaves the role of the priesthood as masculine. Thompson asserts that Hildegard viewed the two roles akin to a farmer and the land he tills to bring forth his crop (Thompson, p352). The idea of the fertile earth as feminine is not unique to Hildegard, but rather a universal theme in many earlier pagan mythologies. Through this analogy, the priest sows the seeds which cause the “body of the church [to] conceive” (Thompson, p364). In other words, the priest’s sermons fertilize the church, and the church nurtures his teachings so that the congregation can be fruitful.

Hildegard of Bingen’s legacy is not only that she stands out for her exceptional intellectual merits and extensive body of work, but also in that she was an advocate for her entire sex.

Works Cited:

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