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The Supreme and Fiery Force of a Poor Little Form of a Woman:  
The Development of the Prophetic Voice of Hildegard of Bingen

Maeve Nagel-Frazel

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Throughout the history of the Catholic Church women have consistently been relegated to the fringes of religious thought and ideology. However, in the history of the Catholic Church, a select number of women have managed to rise above and move beyond traditional, patriarchal church doctrines. St. Hildegard of Bingen, the 12th century mystic, theologian, and abbess is a prime exemplar of a way in which women have transgressed, but also remained indebted, to the orthodox gender and power structures of the Church.

Hildegard (AD 1098 –1179) was the embodiment of a polymath, someone who is able to be deeply accomplished in a wide variety of disciplines, Hildegard produced a broad spectrum of work stretching across theology, medicine, politics, and music. At the time of her death in AD 1179, Hildegard was a revered spiritual teacher who had managed to accumulate a sphere of influence far beyond that of most medieval women. Hildegard was the first woman given Papal authority to publish and preach on theological matters; with this authority, Hildegard published three books of theology, composed almost eighty songs, embarked on two preaching tours, and founded her own convent. Hildegard was officially canonized as a Saint, and named a Universal Doctor of the Church in 2012 by Pope Benedict XVI.<sup>1</sup> However, the acceptance and subsequent preservation of Hildegard's work would have been impossible without Hildegard's savvy cultivation of her own self-image.

The acceptance of Hildegard's work during her lifetime was the result of Hildegard's deliberately crafted, and sharply honed image of a weak woman unwillingly receiving the word of God through debilitating visions.<sup>2</sup> In order to authenticate her visions Hildegard employed

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<sup>1</sup> A distinction given to Saints who have made extremely significant contributions to Church doctrine and theology. Only thirty six Universal Doctors of the Church have been named in the entire history of the Catholic Church, of which Hildegard is only the fourth woman to be given such a title.

Benedict XVI, *Encyclical Proclaiming Saint Hildegard of Bingen professed nun of the Order of Saint Benedict, a Doctor of the Universal Church*. Vatican Website, 7 October, 2012.

[https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20121007\\_ildegarda-bingen.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen.html).

<sup>2</sup> Hildegard reported experiencing visions from the time she was a young child, wherein scriptural knowledge and allegorical prophecies for the future were revealed to her. Hildegard's three books of theology are all transcriptions of her visions.

three main rhetorical techniques: she emphasized the divine origins of her visions, established a connection between illness and vision, and positioned herself as a weak, unlearned woman.

Hildegard's power derived from a paradox: by deliberately down playing herself as a *paupercula femina forma*,<sup>3</sup> Hildegard was able to mold herself into the image of a prophetess effectively granting her the liberty to push for reform and gain independence within the church. Born during a time in which potent cultural taboos prevented women from speaking directly about theological matters, the ways in which Hildegard achieved power illustrates that women did play a role within the church in the Middle Ages.

Hildegard was born in AD 1098 as the tenth child of Hildebert and Mechtild, in Bermersheim, a region in southwest Germany. Hildegard was born into a family of lower, free nobility; in a letter, the monk Guibert describes Hildegard's parents as: "of the highest rank according to nobility of this world, and they enjoyed an abundance of earthly wealth."<sup>4</sup>

Hildegard was dedicated to the church, as a tithe, at birth and formally given to Jutta von Sponheim, an anchoress, at the monastery of Disibodenberg, a Benedictine monastery, at age eight. Tithing was the medieval practice of giving a tenth of one's wealth to church, and the scholar John Van Engen asserts, "Child oblation had provided most monks and nuns for centuries, and in 1106 the parental act was still deemed irreversible."<sup>5</sup> Why Hildegard was given to the Church is unclear, however, given Hildegard's many siblings coupled with early signs of visionary experiences,<sup>6</sup> giving young Hildegard to the church seems most likely to have been a motion of convenience for her parents, but also one of political alliance.

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<sup>3</sup> Translated as "a poor little form of a woman"

Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* (University of California, 1987), 2.

<sup>4</sup> Guibert of Disibodenberg, "Guibert's Letter to Bovo," in *Jutta and Hildegard: The Autobiographical Sources*, trans. Anna Silvas (Turnhout: Brepols), 103.

<sup>5</sup> John Van Engen, "Abbess: Mother and Teacher," in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman (University of California, 1998) 32.

<sup>6</sup> A popular story recounts how Hildegard accurately foretold the color of an unborn calf as a young child. Sabrina, Flanagan, *Hildegard of Bingen: A Visionary Life* (Routledge, 1990), 22.

In AD 1106, Hildegard was given to the Church as a companion to Jutta von Sponheim. Jutta (1091-1136) was the daughter of Count Stephan of Sponheim, descending from an extremely wealthy family of high ranking nobility. In fact Hildegard's father was most likely a property owning but untitled knight, serving under Count Stephan of Sponheim.<sup>7</sup> Despite being given to the church in 1106, Jutta and Hildegard were not enclosed at the monastery of Disibodenberg until 1112. Where Hildegard resided from the ages of eight to fourteen (1106-1112), is unclear. The scholar Anna Silvas in a commentary on the *Vitae Jutta*,<sup>8</sup> writes:

“One thing is certain: in 1106, there was no properly constituted monastery to furnish the circumstances for a solemn anchoritic enclosure.<sup>9</sup> So if the woman were there, they were living in a somewhat informal, not quite canonical situation...Another is that Uda and Jutta actually remained at the family seat in Sponheim.”<sup>10</sup>

Without being formally enclosed in an anchoritic cell, Hildegard most likely had the opportunity to not only experience courtly life but also to deepen her education. Therefore, when Hildegard and Jutta were officially enclosed at Disibodenberg in 1112, Hildegard was fourteen, old enough to marry, and thus old enough, in the eyes of monastic reformers, to at least have some choice in her monastic profession.<sup>11</sup>

Only six years older than Hildegard, Jutta von Sponheim had pledged herself to the austere and eremitic life of an anchoress. Deriving from the Greek work *anakhōrein* meaning ‘to retire’ anchoritism is an ancient religious practice wherein oblates choose to be walled up in a cell in order to close themselves off from temptation and become closer to God.<sup>12</sup> Anchoresses

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<sup>7</sup> Silvas, 40.

<sup>8</sup> The *Vitae Jutta* is Jutta's formal Hagiography.

<sup>9</sup> After being founded by the St. Disibod of Ireland in the seventh century, the Disibodenberg Monastery shut down in the eleventh century until it was reinstated in 1108 by Archbishop Ruthard of Mainz.

Alison Beach, “Disibodenberg,” *monasticmatrix*, Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. <https://monasticmatrix.osu.edu/monasticon/disibodenberg>

<sup>10</sup> Uda was a widow to whom Jutta was entrusted for religious instruction.

*Jutta and Hildegard: The Biographical Sources*, trans. by Anna Silvas, (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998), 52.

<sup>11</sup> Silvas, 57.

<sup>12</sup> Emily, Bowyer, “Towards an Archeology of Anchoritism” (dissertation, Brandenburg University of Technology Cottbus, June 2012), 13.

lived a sparse and ascetic life focused on physical suffering; for Jutta pain was a vehicle to holiness, evidence of this is found in Jutta's hagiography when it comments: "After Jutta's death at age 44, Hildegard, one of three women allowed to prepare her body, saw the chain she had worn and the three 'grooves' it had cut into her body."<sup>13</sup> It was with this intent of ascetic purity that on All Souls' Day in 1112, Hildegard, Jutta, and at least one other girl were enclosed in their cell at the monastery of Disibodenberg in a solemn liturgical rite wherein "with lighted torches they were buried by the abbot of the place and the brothers, as if truly dead to the world."<sup>14</sup>

It is unknown what Jutta's anchorage looked like, most likely, Jutta and Hildegard lived in a small cell containing a screened window to pass food back and forth and to receive visitors. Hildegard lived with Jutta, literally bricked up, unable to partake in the outside world for twenty three years, until Jutta's death in AD 1136.<sup>15</sup> The annals of the Sponheim family describe the strict asceticism of Jutta's enclosure: "They all fought under the Rule of our Holy Father Benedict in obedience to the abbot, enclosed separately in a strict and well-walled custody. No men had access to them except the abbot."<sup>16</sup> Hildegard's life as Jutta's companion was most likely isolating and tedious; yet, from Jutta, Hildegard learned Latin and was taught the basics of Benedictine worship. Hildegard's first biographer, the monk Gottfried of Disibodenberg, writes, "Jutta clothed her with the garments of humility and taught her the psalms of David and showed her how to make joyful sound on the ten stringed psaltery."<sup>17</sup> However, education was not the only lesson Hildegard learned from Jutta.

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[https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/30993688/Thesis.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513833502&Signature=WorlONgzETRkP3CAkIDZHspmBI%3D&response-content-disposition=attachment%3B%20filename%3DTowards\\_an\\_archaeology\\_of\\_anchoritism.pdf](https://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/30993688/Thesis.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAIWOWYYGZ2Y53UL3A&Expires=1513833502&Signature=WorlONgzETRkP3CAkIDZHspmBI%3D&response-content-disposition=attachment%3B%20filename%3DTowards_an_archaeology_of_anchoritism.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Engen, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Silvas "The Life of Jutta," 70.

<sup>15</sup> It is unknown whether Jutta's cell contained a door. If it did, any door would have been locked from the outside. Since an anchoress is considered dead to the world, they are unable to leave their cell. Flanagan, 36

<sup>16</sup> Silvas, "Documents of Sponheim," 44.

<sup>17</sup> This quote is from Hildegard's Hagiography, a formal biography compiled after Hildegard's death meant to assist in the canonization process. The work was written by several monks and also likely was partly dictated by Hildegard before her death in 1179 AD. It was originally completed in the later part of the 12th century.

In addition, Hildegard saw in Jutta a paradigm for the oracular role she would later adopt when she was the Abbess of her own convent and revered as a wise and holy woman; despite her solitary enclosure, many pilgrims flocked to Jutta for counsel, therefore, providing a model for spiritual leadership that Hildegard would later draw upon. After Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard broke free of her anchorhold, and was elected *magistra* by the young oblates who had since come to join Jutta and Hildegard. After receiving the blessing of Pope Eugenius III in 1148, Hildegard began the publication of her visions and succeeded in founding her own convent, Rupertsberg, in 1150.<sup>18</sup> However, the true depth of Hildegard's education remains unclear because, as an adult, Hildegard made repeated and deliberate attempts to minimize the extent of her education, perhaps even retelling the story of her early life by editing out her time at the family seat of Sponheim, in order to mold herself into a prophetess.<sup>19</sup>

Hildegard's visionary experiences are part and parcel to her rise to prominence within the medieval world. From early childhood, Hildegard reports visionary experiences in which the voice of God spoke to her depicting vibrant images before her eyes. Modern scholars have searched for a scientific explanation for Hildegard's visions; Sabrina Flanagan and Peter Dronke have hypothesized that Hildegard's visions were a symptom of a type of migraine called Scintillating Scotoma, because of "the falling stars, the concentric luminous circles, the many

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In addition, a psaltery is a type of lap harp similar to a dulcimer.

Gottfried of Disibodenberg, and Theodoric of Echternach, *The Life of the Saintly Hildegard*, trans. Hugh Fess (Peregrina, 1996), 26.

<sup>18</sup> The scholar Jerome Deploige argues that Pope Eugenius' approval of Hildegard's writings was motivated by political intentions: "During the second half of the 11th century, a clear change occurred in the appreciation and use of visions by the ecclesiastical prelate. While till then visions always had been considered by the church with certain suspicion - as potentially dangerous but possibly useful messages - from the 11th century onward they got a new function in the context of the papal politics of reforms. In any case, Pope Eugenius III regarded the prophetic vision, when manifested to an important adherent of the reform, as an effective means of propaganda for the investiture controversy."

Jerome Deploige, "From Hildegard to Hadewijch: The Reappearance of the Female Voice in Medieval Literate Culture," in *The Voice of Silence: Women's Literacy in a Men's Church*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 11.

<sup>19</sup> See pages 9-10 for a further discussion of Hildegard's education.

evocations of dazzling or blinding lights” characteristic of Hildegard’s visions.<sup>20</sup> While Hildegard could indeed have suffered from Scintillating Scotoma, attempts to quantify Hildegard's visions also oversimplify the full mystery of Hildegard's visionary experiences. Sabrina Flanagan suggests that Hildegard's visions were the result of a physical migraine coalescing with her own mental processes to form a unique visionary experience, however, in actuality the full truth of Hildegard’s visions will never be able to be fully understood.<sup>21</sup>

Despite experiencing visions from childhood, Hildegard did not begin transcribing her visions until 1141 at age forty two. In the preface to her first work of theology, *Scivias*, Hildegard describes the circumstances under which God came to her and commanded her to write:

“Previously though, I had felt within myself the gift of secret mysteries and wondrous visions from the time I was a little girl, certainly from the time I was five years old right up to the present time. I revealed my gift to no one except to a select few. Although I saw and heard these things, I nevertheless refused to write them because of doubt and evil opinion...until I became sick, pressed down by the scourge of God. Eventually with the testimony of a certain noble man and young woman of good wishes,<sup>22</sup> I started to write what I had searched out and come upon secretly. As soon as I did that, I became healthy.”<sup>23</sup>

Hildegard justified the publication of her work by citing a providential calling. Wracked by fear, Hildegard crafted a narrative where the decision to share her visions was not a voluntary choice but rather one commanded to her by the "scourge of God." Hildegard believed her visions derived from the living light, or *lux vivens*, an ambiguous and amorphous divine presence that Hildegard claimed was always with her.<sup>24</sup> Therefore, Hildegard begins *Scivias* by writing, “I saw

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<sup>20</sup> Scintillating Scotoma is a type of visual migraine with auras or visual hallucinations are symptoms. See: Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder*, (University of California Berkeley Press, 1985), 106. Peter, Dronke, “Hildegard of Bingen,” in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 147.

<sup>21</sup> Flanagan, 201.

<sup>22</sup> This “certain young man” which Hildegard speaks of is most likely Volmar, Hildegard’s dear friend, confidant, and secretary. The “young woman of good wishes” is Richardis, Hildegard’s fellow nun and close friend.

<sup>23</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Bruce Hozeski (Santa Fe: Bear and Company, 1986), 2.

<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard attests, “Moreover my soul never lacks at any time that light named above which is called the semblance of the living Light. And I see it just as I would look at the sky without stars in a bright cloud and in it I see what I often say and what I reply to those asking about the splendour of the living Light.” Newman, 55.



a very great light from which a heavenly voice spoke.”<sup>25</sup> Hildegard’s vision of the living light originated from a verse in John 1:9 stating, “I am the true light that illuminates every person coming into the world,” Here Hildegard replaced “living” for “true” and thus subtly adopted her own vision of God.<sup>26</sup> In her letter to Guibert of Gembloux, Hildegard describes her vision of the living light:

“Therefore the light that I see is not local but far brighter than a cloud that bears the sunlight nor can I regard in it depth nor breadth nor width. And I call it the semblance of the living Light and just as the sun, moon, and stars appeared reflected in water, so the Scriptures, sermons, virtues, and some works formed by men shine in it for me.”<sup>27</sup>

Hildegard invoked the living light as the source of her visions in order to establish that her visions derived from God, in order to speak for God she had to deny her ability to speak for herself and put the emphasis of an omniscient divine source.<sup>28</sup> If Hildegard had claimed her visions were her own ideas, without visionary or prophetic origins, Hildegard would have been excommunicated from the church and her teachings branded heresy. The development of Hildegard's visionary identity was typical for religious women of her time, twelfth century religious ideology permitted women to speak theologically only if they themselves had no part in the making of the content. Therefore Hildegard's living light is an incredibly intelligent means of authenticating her theological ideas.

In order for the divine origin of Hildegard’s visions to be accepted, Hildegard also had to diminish her own authority. Hildegard begins many of her letters by squelching her own autonomy, with disclaimers such as, “I, as a poor little woman, am able to expound upon the

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<sup>25</sup> Hildegard, 1

<sup>26</sup> Newman, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, “A Reply from Hildegard to the Monk Guibert, AD 1175,” from “Translations from Rupert, Hildegard, and Guibert of Gembloux,” *The Centre for Computing in the Humanities and Social Sciences at the University of Toronto*, trans. Abigail Young, 1999.  
<http://homes.chass.utoronto.ca/~young/reply.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Barbara, Newman, “Three-Part Invention: The Vita S. Hildegardis and Mystical Hagiography” in *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of Her Thought and Art*, edited by Charles Burnett and Peter Dronke (Dorset, 1998), 193.

question you asked me, only because I have looked to the True Light, and I am sending along the answer I saw and heard in a vision - not my words.”<sup>29</sup> This type of diminution draws a clear line between Hildegard’s own thoughts and those of God, and thus shifts the source of Hildegard’s visions to the ‘living light,’ making Hildegard only the medium of God’s Word. The cultivation of Hildegard’s self image, as a weak woman, was a deliberate and strategic effort to shape how those around her perceived her actions.

Close analysis of Hildegard's letters reveals Hildegard’s strategic use of her self image, the scholar Gillian T.W. Ahlgren argues that Hildegard employed three different literary formulas in her letters in order to best appeal and hone her image based on the recipient. Of approximately three hundred and ninety surviving letters penned by Hildegard, 42% of Hildegard’s correspondence is reportorial, wherein Hildegard directly transcribes her visions, often beginning with the words *vidi et audivi*, meaning “I saw and I heard.”<sup>30</sup> Hildegard used reportorial letters when writing to people of approximately the same religious status as herself.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, Hildegard writes instrumental letters, whereby she adds a deliberate plea for her own weakness.<sup>32</sup> These letters invoke the image of Hildegard as an *ego paupercula femina forma* and are employed when Hildegard writes to high authority figures or when she is unsure of the authority of the recipient.<sup>33</sup> Only 10% of Hildegard’s letters are instrumental, suggesting that Hildegard deliberately applied her image as a weak woman when writing to high authority figures. Rather than employing this image as a stock tool for all her correspondence, evidence suggests Hildegard employed it calculatingly and deliberately to certain people in order to gain

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<sup>29</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, “Hildegard to Eberhard, Bishop of Bamberg,” *The Letters of Hildegard von Bingen Vol. 1*, trans. Joseph Baird, and Radd Ehrman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 95.

<sup>30</sup> Gillian, Ahlgren, “Visions and Rhetorical Strategy in the Letters of Hildegard von Bingen,” in *Dear Sister: Medieval Women and the Epistolary Genre*, ed. Karen Cherewatuk, and Ulrike Wiethaus, (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993), 47.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

favor and acceptance. The third type of letter written by Hildegard, and by far the most common, is a representative letter during which she speaks directly from her visionary experiences, oftentimes beginning with the words *lux vivens ducit*.<sup>34</sup> In this third way, which makes up 48% of Hildegard's letters, Hildegard is "never less than certain that she knows the will of God" to the point in which "doing her will and God's will are identical."<sup>35</sup> Despite depicting herself as a weak woman, Hildegard was intelligent enough to understand that in order to gain power it was necessary for her own will to become synonymous with God's will. One of the most powerful tools Hildegard employed, in order to assert the will of God, was the power of her own illness.

From early childhood, Hildegard's visions were often accompanied by debilitating illness; yet, Hildegard's illness was a vital tool in authenticating her visionary experiences and gaining political power. When Hildegard writes, "I became sick, pressed down by the scourge of God," she relinquishes her ability to control her visionary experiences.<sup>36</sup> Since Hildegard believed her visions had providential origins, she believed her illness was God's punishment for failing to follow his will. Hildegard used her illness as a rhetorical strategy to shame those around her into following, what she believed to be, the will of God. In the Medieval Church sickness and sanctity were integrally connected, especially for women.<sup>37</sup> For Jutta sanctity was found through asceticism, fasting and self inflicted suffering; however, for Hildegard sanctity was found through paralyzing bouts of illness that would render Hildegard immovable in her bed for days while she experienced vibrant visions. A study by Donald Weinstein and Rudolph Bell analyzing the hagiographies of over eight hundred saints from the Middle Ages found that illness was a prominent feature of female saints, they comment that illness was "the one category in

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<sup>34</sup> Translated as "The Living light said

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>36</sup> Hildegard, 2.

<sup>37</sup> Barbara, Newman, "Three-Part Invention: The Vita S. Hildegardis and Mystical Hagiography" in *Hildegard of Bingen: The Context of Her Thought and Art*, edited by Charles Burnett and Peter Dronke (Dorset, 1998), 197.

which women were not merely statistically represented but constituted an absolute majority."<sup>38</sup> Weinstein and Rudolph's study revealed that approximately one in six female saints in the Middle Ages was chronically ill (25/151 or 16%) while only 3% of male saints were chronically ill (22/733).<sup>39</sup> Hildegard saw her body as a battlefield of celestial and demonic forces, a vehicle which God could use to show both his pleasure and displeasure. While Hildegard's illness was not her only claim to holiness, Hildegard's body was a means of validating inner spiritual graces, meanwhile Hildegard's mind was a means of proving her meager education.

In her writing, Hildegard repeatedly downplayed and diminished her own education, positioning herself as *indocta* or unlearned, in order to assert the divine origins of her writings. In her letter to Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux, Hildegard stresses her own ignorance as she seeks support for her writing: "I have no formal training at all, for I know how read on only the most elementary level."<sup>40</sup> The extent of Hildegard's actual education is unknown, Hildegard's Latin can be very cumbersome to translate, and the extent of Hildegard's education would, of course, been inferior to that which a boy would have received.<sup>41</sup> However, Hildegard most likely had more education than she alludes to, at the very least she was able to read and write Latin and had knowledge of the Scriptures.<sup>42</sup> Hildegard's childhood narrative of being given to the church at age eight and enclosed with Jutta sometime much closer to 1106 as found in *Scivias*, minimizes Hildegard's possibility of a formal education; however, cross referencing Hildegard's own narrative with the Sponheim family documents, the annals of the Disibodenberg Monastery, and

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<sup>38</sup> Donald Weinstein, and Rudolph Bell, "Men and Women," in *Saints and Society* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 235.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 237.

<sup>40</sup> Hildegard of Bingen, "Hildegard to Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux," *The Letters of Hildegard von Bingen, Vol. 1*, 28.

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Baird, and Radd Ehrman, introduction to *The Letters of Hildegard von Bingen, Vol. 1* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 6.

<sup>42</sup> Although Hildegard did have a secretary/scribe, and most likely was not making directly transcribing all of her visions. Hildegard's biographer Guibert writes: "she wrote with her own hand and spoke orally with a pure mind, without any change in meaning and in the very same words. She was contents with just one faithful man as her collaborator. He arranged he words, according to the rules of the grammatical art - cases tenses, kinds - which she did not know."

Gottfried, and Theodoric, 43.

Jutta's hagiography reveals the true nature of Hildegard's education is far broader than originally perceived. Since Hildegard was not enclosed at Disibodenberg until age fourteen, she most likely received a deeper education than is described in both *Scivias* and *Vitae Sancta Hildegard*.

Hildegard favored a narrative of ignorance because 'uneducated,' Hildegard was an empty vessel able to receive the word of God in its purest form. Hildegard's lack of education emphasizes her lack of involvement in her visions; if Hildegard is uneducated it means her complex visions must come from God, and if she has no knowledge of scriptures, as she claims, then she is unable to 'meddle' with the word of God. The cultivation of Hildegard's image through visions, education, and illness was not only a passive tool but also an active strategy employed by Hildegard during the founding of her own convent, Rupertsberg, in 1150.

Hildegard's departure from the Disibodenberg monastery in AD 1150 and her subsequent foundation of her own convent, Rupertsberg, is an example of the practical applications of Hildegard's carefully cultivated image. In order to convince her superiors to allow her to found her own convent as described in her hagiography, Hildegard began by invoking the living light:

"Since a single recluse's dwelling could scarcely hold all of them, she took council about transferring and expanding their quarters. The Spirit showed her a place at the confluence of the Nahe with the Rhine... The virgin of God then told her abbot and brothers about the place where they were transferring, though she knew not by corporeal sight but by interior vision. They were reluctant because her departure would be inconvenient to them."<sup>43</sup>

Hildegard's biographer attests that Hildegard's departure was "inconvenient" for the monks at Disibodenberg, and indeed Abbot Cuno and the monks of Disibodenberg had a direct financial incentive from Hildegard's residence at their monastery. When novitiate nuns joined the convent, their dowries became the possession of Abbot Cuno, therefore, acquiring the resources necessary to found her own convent took persistent effort. Hildegard began by appealing to Richardis of Stade, a noblewoman whose daughter was a nun in her convent;

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<sup>43</sup> Gottfried, and Theodoric, 30.

Richardis, in turn persuaded the Archbishop to acquire land around Rupertsberg. The material resources for the land came from the network of nobility that had supported Hildegard's women: the count palatine Hermann von Stahleck and his wife Gertrude, Count Meinhard of Sponheim (Jutta's brother), Hildegard's own brothers, and other noblemen.<sup>44</sup> Although Hildegard's motivations for founding her own convent can be hard to discern it seems likely that Hildegard was frustrated with her inability to control the finances of her nuns and subsequently worship in the way she wanted.<sup>45</sup> Therefore Hildegard justifies her desire to leave through providential methods, when the men she is held accountable to voice their opposition, Hildegard supersedes them by appealing to a divine source.<sup>46</sup>

Secondly, when her vision appears not to have the desired affect, Hildegard resorts to her second strategy: falling gravely ill because, Hildegard believed, her male superiors had disobeyed the will of God:

“So that there would be no impediment to carrying out the will of God, she took to her bed as she had done before, suffering from an extended period of languor. She did not rise until the abbot and the others saw that it was divine will which urged them to consent. They were not to obstruct her going, but as far as they could, support it.”<sup>47</sup>

The successful foundation of Hildegard's Rupertsberg convent was a remarkable feat. In a letter, Hildegard's friend Guibert of Gembloux comments on the founding of Rupertsberg, writing: “this monastery was founded not by any of the emperors or bishops or the powerful or the rich of any region, but by a woman who was poor, a stranger, and sick.”<sup>48</sup> Indeed, Hildegard began the process of acquiring the title to the land and financing the convent at least five years before she was successfully granted permission to move in 1150; throughout the entire process

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<sup>44</sup> Newman, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Alexandra Borkowski, “For the Sake of the Salvation of Our Souls: A Reformist Analysis of Hildegard of Bingen's Authority and Reformist Theology in Relation to the Founding of Mount St. Rupert,” (master's thesis, University of Massachusetts, Boston, December 2016), 11.

<sup>46</sup> Despite Hildegard's autonomous self image it is important to remember that financially she was dependent on the abbot of the Disibodenberg monastery, she did not hold the title to that land, and without the approval of her abbot and therefore the monasteries patrons she was powerless.  
Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Gottfried and Theodoric, 31.

<sup>48</sup> Silvas, 101.

Hildegard was dependent on noble connections to finance the project. Hildegard's illness proved an effective rhetorical strategy leading ultimately to the foundation of the convent of Mt. St.

Rupert in AD 1150.

After moving, Hildegard grew into her role as an Abbess, leading approximately eighty nuns, governing, preaching, and writing music. At the same time, Hildegard's continued writings led to the development of the public acceptance of Hildegard as a prophetess. As a prophetess Hildegard was granted the authority to become a reformer. As a reformer Hildegard was a staunch Benedictine who believed that a return to strict observance of the Benedictine Rule was the best way to ensure salvation of both the church and the individual soul. Hildegard most often advocated for moderate reform, by embodying the voice of the living light in order to admonish popes and bishops, fight injustice and corruption, and serve as a mediator within monastic disputes. Hildegard often used the symbolic figures of *Ecclesia* (the true and hidden church), *Caritas* (divine love), and *Sapientia* (divine wisdom) as an allegorical model to instigate reform and call out corruption within her writing. In particular, Hildegard utilized *Ecclesia* to call out corruption within the church, for example, depicting *Ecclesia* as a raped bride in order to argue that the purity of the church had been soiled: "Christ's beleaguered bride appeared to her in grave distress, like a virgin threatened with rape, her face spattered with dust, her silken robe in tatters, her face mired in grime."<sup>49</sup> As a reformer, dealing with a Church deeply embedded in the investiture controversy and rife with monastic reform, Hildegard dealt strongly with those in power and sympathetically with those in distress, asserting the voice of the living light even when it dissented from the established orthodoxy.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara Newman, "Hildegard's Life and Times," in *Voice of the Living Light*, ed. Barbara Newman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 20.

<sup>50</sup> Joan Ferrante, "Hildegard of Bingen," *Epistolae: Medieval Women's Latin Letters*, Columbia University. <https://epistolae.ctl.columbia.edu/woman/115.html>

Hildegard's dissenting views are fully embodied in Hildegard's response to the interdict placed on the Rupertsberg convent in 1178.<sup>51</sup> In the Middle Ages it was customary for noble patrons to be buried in the cemeteries of the monastic houses they supported; burial within a monastic community "represented a last act of piety on the part of the deceased patron."<sup>52</sup> In 1178, a certain nobleman, whose identity is unknown, was buried within in the walls of Hildegard's convent. During his life the nobleman had committed some grave, unknown sin and was excommunicated from the church; however, before his death he had repented and received last rights.<sup>53</sup> Either due to a grievance against Hildegard or bureaucratic miscommunication, after his burial the clergy at Mainz ordered Hildegard to remove the man's body from her graveyard.<sup>54</sup> Receiving a command from the living light, Hildegard refused to obey, arguing that removing his body would be a violation of the sanctity of burial, and instead had her nuns remove all evidence of his grave by desecrating their graveyard, making it impossible for the prelates to locate his body.<sup>55</sup> In response, the prelates placed an interdict over Hildegard's convent which forbade Hildegard's community from receiving the Eucharist and also forbade them from performing music during their worship (the divine office).<sup>56</sup> Hildegard's response is a powerful statement of defiance that portrays Hildegard masterfully wielding her public image.<sup>57</sup> Writing to the prelates of Mainz, in a prophetic and fiery voice, Hildegard worked for the repeal of the interdict:

"Therefore, those who, without just cause, impose silence on a church and prohibit the singing of God's praises....will lose their place among the chorus of angels...This time

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<sup>51</sup> "to place under ban of the Church, excommunicate," from Latin *interdicere* "interpose by speech, prohibit, forbid," and *dicere* "to say, speak."

Douglas, Harper, "Interdict," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, Accessed December 29, 2017.  
<https://www.etymonline.com/word/interdict>.

<sup>52</sup> Erin Lambert, "The Role of Medieval Women as Monastic Patrons," *Indiana University of Pennsylvania*, 75.  
<https://www.iup.edu/WorkArea/DownloadAsset.aspx?id=37707>.

<sup>53</sup> Borkowski, 22.

<sup>54</sup> What the nobleman did to cause such revulsion among the prelates is unknown.

<sup>55</sup> Prelate: from Medieval Latin *prelatus* "clergyman of high rank,"  
 Douglas Harper, "Prelate," *Online Etymology Dictionary*, accessed December 29, 2017  
<https://www.etymonline.com/word/prelate>.

<sup>56</sup> Talley, "Visions of Power and Influence."

See Peter, Dronke, "Hildegard of Bingen," in *Women Writers of the Middle Ages* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), 196.



is a womanish time,<sup>58</sup> because the dispensations of God's justice is weak. But the strength of God's justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice so that it might fall defeated."<sup>59</sup>

Here, Hildegard's tone in this letter is fierce as she vindicates the prelates from her place as the voice of the living light. In 1179, six months before her death, Hildegard no longer saw herself bound to her assigned hierarchy within the patriarchal church. From her place of divine inspiration, Hildegard condemned her male superiors as she said, "those who, without cause impose silence on a church...will lose their place among the chorus of angels."<sup>60</sup> Not only does Hildegard discredit their reasons for the interdict, she also asserts that because of their actions they will no longer be allowed into heaven. Furthermore Hildegard both reaffirms her status as a *paupercula femina forma* while also criticizing the behavior of the prelates as weak when she calls her time a "womanish time."<sup>61</sup> Here, as described by biographer S. Flanagan, Hildegard's position as a prophet is on full display:

"Hildegard persisted because no rebuff by mortal man could undermine her faith in herself. To those who proved obdurate she had a ready answer: they were spiritually blind, to take the charitable view, or worse, led astray by the devil."<sup>62</sup>

Hildegard's prophetic persona granted her immense power and the ability to achieve many roles that had typically been reserved for men."<sup>63</sup> Yet, the interdict placed on Hildegard's convent is also a vital example of the shortcomings of Hildegard's prophetic persona. After Hildegard's fiery letter to the prelates of Mainz referenced above, perhaps realizing she had overstepped her bounds,<sup>64</sup> Hildegard wrote a second, much more placid, letter:

"O, most placid father and lord...we humbly give thanks to the almighty God and to your paternal piety that you have received our letter compassionately, poor though we

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<sup>58</sup> *Tempus Muliebre*

<sup>59</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, "Hildegard to the Prelates at Mainz," *The Letters of Hildegard von Bingen, Vol.1*, 79.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>62</sup> Flanagan, 183.

<sup>63</sup> Dronke, 149.

<sup>64</sup> The prelates response to Hildegard's first letter has not survived, but judging by the docile tone of Hildegard's second letter it is assumed that the prelates response was not sympathetic to Hildegard's cause.

are... Though we did cease singing the divine offices for some time, the mighty judge whose commands I have dared not disobey, sent the true vision into my soul. And forced by this, despite a grievous illness, I went to our superiors in Mainz... thus might they know the will of God.”<sup>65</sup>

In this letter, Hildegard still evokes the will of God, yet she also resorts back to her rhetorical techniques of minimization and illness as she writes, “poor though we are,” and “despite a grievous illness.”<sup>66</sup> The interdict was finally lifted in March of 1179, six months before Hildegard’s death, but not without the assistance of her friend Philip of Cologne who appealed as a witness on her behalf.<sup>67</sup> Despite her powerful prophetic persona, Hildegard remained integrally bound to the patriarchal structures of her time, and was ultimately unable to repeal the interdict through the force of her prophetic persona alone.

Living in a time when St. Paul’s decree, “I permit no woman to teach or exercise authority over a man; rather she is to remain silent,” was the de facto vision for women within the church, makes the rise of Hildegard’s prophetic persona both extremely remarkable while also accounting for the ways in which her persona failed.<sup>68</sup> By establishing herself as weak form of a woman, Hildegard was able to catapult herself into a supreme and fiery force. Hildegard was the first woman to be given explicit permission by the Pope to write and preach on theological matters, and successfully used her prophetic persona to digress from her male superiors on multiple occasions. However, Hildegard remained limited by the patriarchal doctrines of her day, both the tedious and delayed canonization process after her death, as well as the sharp crackdown on her convent during the interdict reaffirm that Hildegard was trapped within a fine net. All the liberties Hildegard gained were dependent on her own orthodoxy. Hildegard was given unprecedented autonomy, yet if she tried to step too far out of doctrinal and social orthodoxy her male superiors were always baited to relegate her to her true status as a *paupercula femina*

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<sup>65</sup> Hildegard von Bingen, “Hildegard to Christian, Archbishop of Mainz,” *The Letters of Hildegard, Vol. 1*, 80-81.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Flanagan, 182.

<sup>68</sup> Timothy 2:12-13 (NRSV).

*forma*. Few women have achieved both the breadth and depth of work and influence accomplished by Hildegard, a poor little form of a woman, who was often deeply ill, and had to swim upstream against an extremely patriarchal Church. Hildegard was *lux vivens et obscura illuminans*, a living light that illuminates what is hidden.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Constant Mews, "A Frail Human Being on Fiery Life," in *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard of Bingen and Her World*, ed. Barbara Newman (University of California, 1998) 55.

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