

Chapter 2

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN AND GENRE DIVERSITY

The Problem: Genre Dependency

One of my favourite things about going to a major medieval studies conference is the exhibition hall. I never get tired seeing a room filled with display after display of books in a variety of shapes, sizes, and colours, all of them promising to help me learn something new about the Middle Ages. From my first trip to the International Medieval Congress in Kalamazoo as an undergraduate, the “book room” always struck me as a terrific embodiment of my field and the work it was doing. But, the more that I think about it, I also have to admit that this very enjoyable spectacle of medieval scholarship is also a problem. After all, *Sad Ovid* is surrounded by a bunch of cool and interesting books, and they didn’t seem to be doing him any good. I think that’s because, from a public engagement perspective, all the books in those exhibition halls are basically the same.

Let me put it this way: the “book room” is the closest thing there is to visible, tangible evidence for “what medieval studies does.” There is, of course, a lot more to the field than just those books, but the “book rooms” make it clear that these books are the most important manifestation of the field’s work. So that means if you were going to, say, show that visible, tangible evidence to someone who wasn’t a medievalist, this is what they would see: mostly shelves and tables of books that, no matter their subject, invariably include complex, well-structured arguments; detailed overviews of scholarly conversations; a steady dose of academic jargon specific to a given field; and extensive notes featuring liberal amounts of original languages. In other words, these non-medievalists would see a bunch of scholarly publications. While I enjoy scholarly publications (and all their constituent parts) very much, they are not terribly exciting to anyone who isn’t a professional medievalist or on their way to becoming one. So, if a room full of scholarly publications is the best way for us to show off what medieval studies does to people outside the field, it’s no wonder we’re in such trouble.

I’ve now come to see that the book-filled exhibition halls I love so much are, in fact, a symptom of a structural roadblock holding medievalists back from doing better public engagement: Genre Dependency, a term I use to

describe our field's widespread prioritization and valorization of a single genre for sharing our collective knowledge and expertise with other audiences. Compared to the other structural roadblocks we talk about in this book, I think this might be the sneakiest one. In fact, I'd wager that most medievalists at any level don't realize it's a problem at all. I certainly didn't when I was in graduate school; at no point in my training did I ever think about sharing what I knew about medieval letter-writing in anything other than a monograph or journal article. Everything about the academic system—the advice I got from professors, the requirements for my degree (i.e., a dissertation), job talks, expectations for tenure portfolios, and, not least, what I saw in those exhibition halls when I went to conferences—made it perfectly clear that writing well-structured, thoroughly-researched, properly articulated studies that were approved by other expert scholars was the most important thing professional medievalists did. Full stop. Scholarly publications are, of course, terrific tools for taking deep dives into medieval culture that can reveal tons of useful information, and I want to avoid a future for the field in which they don't exist. But for that to happen, I'm convinced that we need to change the current situation, in which the field considers them the most important thing that exists.

In this chapter, I'll explain how this over-valorization of the scholarly publication is setting the field up for public engagement failure by limiting the ways in which audiences who aren't scholars can access the field. Against this, I'll discuss how medieval intellectuals took the opposite approach; namely, by giving equal value to any and all creative means by which they could express their expertise. Then, I'll discuss how I've seen the medieval approach in full force through the fortunes of the Newberry bookstore during an exhibition on the medieval and early modern roots of race.

When you really think about it, there's no reason why Genre Dependency should be a problem for medieval studies. There are countless possibilities for how medievalists *could* express their knowledge about the medieval past. Literally any means humans have developed to communicate is at our disposal, and there is no reason why any of those other options are better than any others. Yet in practice, it's clear that when we as a field imagine what medievalists do (or, perhaps better, *should* do), the esoteric scholarly monograph reigns supreme. That, after all, is precisely the genre of the dissertation, which every graduate student is expected to produce at the end of their training. After that, anyone fortunate enough to actually secure a job in academia, especially at R1 universities, knows perfectly well that their advancement to tenure depends largely, if not exclusively, on peer-reviewed, scholarly publications. And for those who *don't* secure those jobs,

the expectation to try and write monographs and articles remains. Again, it doesn't have to be this way. Professors could decide that genres other than the standard dissertation could demonstrate how well graduate students have mastered the required skills of the field, departments could decide that more creative and accessible formats could count for tenure, and independent scholars or medievalists at teaching colleges could be confident that their non-scholarly-publication work also counts as doing the work of a medievalist. But for the most part, none of these things happens nearly often enough. And for that, we have Genre Dependency to blame.

In part because it's so sneaky, this roadblock does more damage than many of us realize. First, it prevents us from building productive connections with non-academic audiences, because scholarly publications aren't terribly exciting, interesting, or valuable for people outside of academia, who don't typically have the time or skills necessary to get the most out of them. Second (and perhaps more dangerously), Genre Dependency creates the illusion that there is only one way to *truly* be a practicing medievalist: namely, to acquire a professional position that allows you to write scholarly publications, which is almost exclusively limited to the academic system itself (including museums and research libraries). That, in turn, makes the legions of PhDs who don't get those positions feel like they're no longer full participants in their field, because how could you call yourself a medievalist if you can't research and write monographs and journal articles?¹ Finally, and most damaging of all, Genre Dependency makes the idea of becoming a professional medievalist less appealing for many people; if you love the Middle Ages but hate the idea of writing a monograph, you're going to find something else to do with your life.

In other words, Genre Dependency is another factor that makes medieval studies seem irrelevant to so many potential stakeholders outside academia (and even quite a few within it); if the most visible and valorized expression of what medieval studies does strikes you as boring or inaccessible, then why bother supporting it at all? So, as much as I will always love going into an exhibition hall packed to the gills with medieval scholarship, if the field is to survive, we need to find a way to make sure that *other* visible expressions of medieval expertise are represented equally in that same room. That is, the field needs to make it clear that genres that audiences outside academia find accessible and desirable are celebrated and valued just as much as scholarly publications. We need, in other words, to leave Genre

1 Cacciapuoti and Keohane-Burbridge, "Introduction," 17.

Dependency behind, and embrace the possibilities that come with expressing our expertise using formats that people find compelling, interesting, and...dare I say it...fun. That can be a scary thing, to be sure, considering how long we've depended on the scholarly publication to define what we do. But I'm here to tell you that avoiding Genre Dependency is not at all new; in fact, it's downright medieval.

The Medieval Solution: Genre Diversity

This might seem an odd claim at first. After all, when we look at the visible manifestations of intellectual culture in medieval Europe, we find a lot of books, many of which are just as ordered, thoroughly-researched, and densely packed with sources and analysis as any scholastic publication today. Still, I believe that professional medieval intellectuals would have found present-day medievalists' Genre Dependency problem to be a bit odd, if not confusing. While a lot of them wrote a lot of long treatises, that genre didn't have the same dominance in their culture that the scholarly publication has in ours.

If we take a more comprehensive view of medieval intellectuals' work, it's clear that they had much less of an issue using their imagination when it came to sharing their expertise. Though much of their production comes down to us in the form of written texts, those texts were only one part of a rich culture of learning, reading, and instruction that also drew heavily on oral culture, the performing arts, visual art and architecture, music, nature, the memory arts, and plenty of other non-textual things.² Your standard intellectual in medieval Europe saw all these things as raw material that could be used to invent various pathways to higher understanding or experience of the divine, and there was no assumption that one genre of written text was the best route for all those pathways to travel through.³ On the contrary, when intellectuals were ready to share the results of that intense, imaginative work, everything was fair game: scholastic treatises of course, but also romances and other imaginative fiction, studies of nature, architecture, visual art, poetry, dramatic performances, and so much more.⁴ As opposed to Genre Dependency, then, medieval European intellectual culture was defined by Genre Diversity.

² Ohly, *Sensus spiritualis*.

³ Carruthers, *The Craft of Thought*.

⁴ Carruthers, ed., *Rhetoric Beyond Words*.

While many intellectuals probably felt most comfortable expressing their knowledge in just one genre or format, given what we know about the intellectual culture in which they participated, it's highly unlikely any of them would have thought, much less insisted, that there was one best genre for them to use when sharing their expertise. If we want to get past the roadblock of Genre Dependency, then, we need to start doing the same. And we should do that because, as we'll see more clearly in our model for this chapter, sharing one's knowledge in multiple genres and formats also creates multiple points of access for different audiences to not only receive that expertise, but also to *understand* it.

In what follows, we'll take a closer look at the practice of medieval Genre Diversity. We'll try to understand why medieval intellectuals felt it was important to express their knowledge in different ways, and, more importantly, how they attempted to do so. As we'll see, this was not a cut-and-dry process; authors and creators had to think carefully about what genres to use, and then work diligently to shape their content based on the requirements of whatever they chose. By seeing that in action, we can get a better sense of how medievalists today can start thinking about diversifying the ways in which we share our own expertise. Thankfully, we won't have to launch into an exhaustive overview of medieval European intellectual culture to do all of that. As it happens, all we have to do is turn to one especially remarkable medieval intellectual who, maybe more than anyone else, was determined to share her expertise in every possible way she could.

The Model: Hildegard of Bingen

If you ask me, Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) is the most extraordinary person from the entire European Middle Ages. Born to a free noble family in the German Rhineland, she entered the monastic life as a young girl, joining an enclosed community of nuns at the Benedictine monastery of St. Disibod in the upper Rhine, and eventually took over as *magistra* for this community when she was thirty-eight. Then, starting in about 1152 (when she was in her early fifties) everything changed. Hildegard became an instant celebrity, and began doing all kinds of things that were supposed to be impossible for women in her day: she wrote works under her own name, preached in public, defied and criticized high-ranking ecclesiastical and secular leaders, and founded not one, but *two* new convents after getting her enclosed community out of St. Disibod, serving as the *de facto*

abbess of the convent of Rupertsberg near the town of Bingen am Rhein.⁵ When she died in 1179, she was widely venerated as a saint throughout the German lands, and was finally elevated to sainthood and declared a doctor of the church in 2012.

How did she do all of this? Well, if you asked her, Hildegard would probably have told you that she didn't really have a choice. In fact, she probably would have told you that she, strictly speaking, didn't actually do any of it at all. In her telling, her incredible public career actually began around 1141, when, as she reported in her first visionary treatise, she saw "the incredible splendor of a heavenly vision" and heard "a voice from Heaven" commanding her to "speak these things that you see and hear, but do not write them in the way you, or any other person, want, but according to the will of the one who understands, sees, and ordains all things in the secrets of His mysteries" (*Scivias*, 3).⁶ From that moment on (though it took her awhile to go public with it), she was no longer a simple *magistra* of a small community of nuns in the Rhineland, but a transmitter of commands, messages, and instruction that came directly from God, in the form of what she described as "the Living Light" (*lux uiuens*). Hildegard was no ordinary medieval intellectual: she was a *prophet*. As many scholars have noted, this status was the key to her "staggering" accomplishments: it was the source of the drive and determination she required to achieve her goals, the protection she needed to do work that only highly-trained male clerics were supposed to be able to do, and an effective way to attract the attention of audiences far beyond (and, hierarchically speaking, far *above*) her local community.⁷

At first glance, this prophetic status might seem to disqualify Hildegard as a professional intellectual for contemporary medievalists to emulate. Indeed, she herself may well have completely rejected that idea. In her works, she consistently made a clear distinction between herself and the educated clerics, monks, and prelates of her day. Unlike them, she was "unlearned" (*indocta*); in fact, she insisted that the Living Light chose her specifically because she was "not well-versed in the Scriptures, nor instructed by any teacher on this earth" (*Scivias* 3.11.18:586). Scholars today agree with her

5 Overviews include Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light*; Kienzle et al., eds., *A Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*; and Bain, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Hildegard of Bingen*.

6 I'll be using the *Scivias* a lot in this chapter. Citations from it come from Adelgundis Führkötter's critical edition, and will include the book, vision number, chapter and page number from the edition (e.g., *Scivias*, 3.11.18:586).

7 Cf. Newman, "Visions and Validations," and Dronke, "Hildegard of Bingen," 144–201.

to a point—she likely did not have the same intensive course of study as her male contemporaries and her own Latin skills were a bit rough—but overall, it's clear that she was every bit the professional intellectual the learned (and exclusively male) clerics of her day were.⁸ Her duties as the *magistra* meant that she was expected to be able to read and write in Latin and know Scripture well enough to be able to explain it to her spiritual charges.⁹ More than that, though she didn't openly cite them, her work shows she must have known a good deal of theology as well, from the classic Church Fathers up to cutting-edge contemporary religious thinkers like Bernard of Clairvaux and Hugh of Saint-Victor.¹⁰

Most importantly for us, though, Hildegard's prophetic persona has a lot to teach us about cultivating Genre Diversity. In some ways, you could say that her entire public career depended on it. For all its unquestionably practical advantages, Hildegard primarily understood her prophetic status as a calling that *required* her to intervene in the world around her (hi there, Life of Service Conviction!), a world in which everyone (clergy, monks, nobility, peasants) had become increasingly lazy, distracted, and ignorant of the commands of divine justice.¹¹ Her mission, according to the Living Light, was to make a real difference in all of their lives: "Therefore burst out like an abundant spring and flow out with so much mystical knowledge," it commanded her, "that those who consider you contemptible because of Eve's sin *will be stirred up* thanks to this flood's irrigation" (*Scivias* 1.1.0:8, my emphasis). This commitment to action and reform set Hildegard apart from other medieval visionaries before and after her.¹² We can get a sense of that in a woodcut from a compilation of medieval visionaries printed in 1513, which includes Hildegard's first visionary treatise.¹³ Unlike the other visionaries (three men and two women), who simply behold their heavenly visions mostly empty-handed, Hildegard carries a book (representing her many writings) and a small model of an abbey church (representing the two convents she founded). This portrait

8 Dronke, "Hildegard of Bingen," 148–49.

9 Kienzle, *Hildegard of Bingen and her Gospel Homilies*, 30–35.

10 Ginther, "Hildegard of Bingen's Theology," 93.

11 Cf. Newman, "Introduction," 12, and Dronke, "Hildegard of Bingen," 146.

12 Cf. Newman, "Visions and Validations," 172–75; Van Engen, "Letters and the Public Persona of Hildegard," and Anderson, "The Context and Reception of Hildegard of Bingen's Visions," 190–95.

13 Hildegard of Bingen et al, *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum*, Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, A: 456.11 Theol. 2° (1).

reminds us that, even more than three centuries after her death, people still knew her as a visionary who *got stuff done* (Fig. 2).

Of course, as with any intellectual in her day, her writings were key to her success, and it's that body of work that now stands, in my humble opinion, as the best witness we have for the practice of medieval Genre Diversity. In them, Hildegard left one of the most diverse bodies of surviving work of any intellectual from the European Middle Ages. It includes a trilogy of long theological treatises, an unusually large collection of letters, a series of exegetical sermons, works of medicine and natural science, music, drama, and even a mysterious new language. The variety is astonishing all by itself, and Hildegard and her team took steps to ensure that future generations would recognize that.¹⁴

Towards the end of her life, she and a team of scribes, editors, and secretaries began work on an official, physical record of her dedication to Genre Diversity in the form of a manuscript codex containing of most of Hildegard's written work, now known as the *Riesencodex* (Wiesbaden, Hochschul- und Landesbibliothek RheinMain: Hs. 2). Planned with Hildegard's full participation and completed after her death, this volume was supposed to aid the inevitable effort to canonize her by providing a definitive record of the all the work she had done in the service of the Living Light. Though it doesn't include all of her works (her writings on natural science and medicine are noticeably absent), the manuscript makes clear that Genre Diversity was an essential part of that faithful service. In order, the *Riesencodex* includes a trilogy of visionary treatises (*Scivias*, *Liber vitae meritorum*, *Liber divinorum operum*), a letter to the prelates in Mainz demanding that they lift an interdict on her community (*Epistola ad praelatos Moguntinos*), a biography (*Vitae Hildegardis*), a large letter collection (*Epistolarium*), a series of exegetical sermons on the Gospels (*Expositio Evangeliorum*), a dictionary of the language she invented (*Lingua ignota*), a series of liturgical chants (*Symphoniae*), and a dramatic performance set to music (*Ordo virtutum*).¹⁵

In other words, the diversity of the *Riesencodex's* contents proves that Hildegard took her calling so seriously that she shared her prophetic message in practically every written or artistic genre she possibly could, something that was meant to be a sure sign of her sanctity. But for us, the contents

14 Schrader and Führkötter, *Die Echtheit des Schrifttums*.

15 <https://hlbrm.digitale-sammlungen.hebis.de/handschriften-hlbrm/content/titleinfo/449618>.

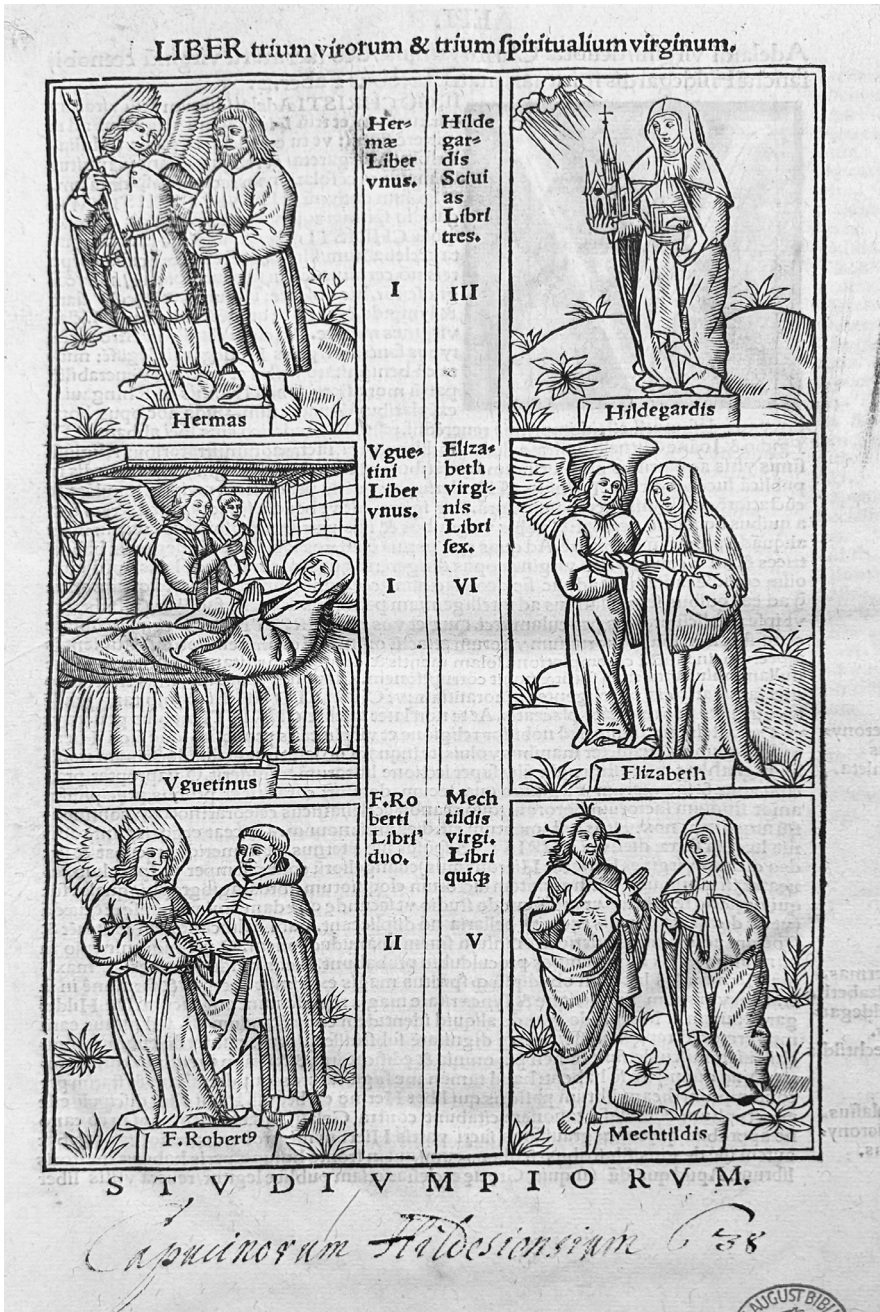


Figure 2. Hildegard displays the proof of her productivity on the title page woodcut for the *Liber trium virorum et trium spiritualium virginum*. Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, A: 456.11 Theol. 2° (1). Photograph by author. Courtesy of the Herzog August Bibliothek.

of the *Riesencodex* are also something else: a meticulously-curated record of her commitment to Genre Diversity. In it, we can understand the nuts and bolts of what Hildegard had to do to successfully get her message across in different formats, and how she understood the value of each one of those. After all, though medieval authors had a less-stringent sense of genre than we do today, they still understood that different formats had their own rhetorical characteristics and forms that determined how accessible they were to various audiences.¹⁶ Every text in the *Riesencodex* expressed Hildegard's prophetic message, but not always in exactly the same way. As we'll see, it's in those subtle yet unmistakable differences that we'll be able to make out a path leading away from Genre Dependency.

Approaching Hildegard's Genre Diversity

We'll need to start with Hildegard's prophetic message, because it was this that compelled her to practice so much Genre Diversity. Like virtually every other professional intellectual of her day, Hildegard's mission was ultimately about helping people get to heaven through understanding divine truths, though in concert with the more conservative strand of spiritual reform that was sweeping through the twelfth-century Latin Church. In particular, she was interested in upholding the spiritual structures that led humans to salvation by convincing people to adopt the beliefs and practices that embodied them in the world.¹⁷ For her, those were firmly rooted in the values of traditional Benedictine monasticism, and her prophetic mission was, in large part, dedicated to making sure those values were fully understood, appreciated, and practiced by clergy and laity alike. This, in a nutshell, is what she does in all her visionary work, including everything in the *Riesencodex*.

Now, although her message was very clearly orthodox and traditional (which is why she was able to talk about it publicly at all), Hildegard shared it in a way that was entirely her own, namely, by reading salvation history through the lenses of femininity and the materiality of Creation and explaining it with her unique poetic and literary abilities.¹⁸ Since we don't have time to go through every detail of Hildegard's mission here, we'll focus on just one monastic virtue that she felt her world very much needed: humility. This was one of the most fundamental cultural values in Christian religious life, includ-

16 See the various publications in the *Typologie des sources du Moyen Âge occidental* series from Brepols.

17 Fletcher, "Understand, Delight, and Obey," 242–98.

18 Cf. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, and Ginther, "Hildegard of Bingen's Theology."

ing (spoiler alert!) in the Benedictine order.¹⁹ Hildegard herself referred to humility as “the Queen of the Virtues” (*regina Virtutum*) multiple times throughout her writings, and many scholars have noted that the virtue was the bedrock of her entire prophetic persona.²⁰ Not surprisingly, promoting the widespread cultivation of humility was an essential part of Hildegard’s reform program, and it shows up consistently in all of her visionary work.

So how does humility show up in the texts of the *Riesencodex*? Again for the sake of time, we’ll focus on three that will give us a solid sense of how Hildegard shaped her expression of this cornerstone virtue in different ways. We’ll begin with Hildegard’s first visionary treatise, the *Scivias* (a contraction of *Scite vias domini*, or “know the ways of the Lord”). The *Scivias* consists of twenty-six visions arranged into three books of unequal length, which respectively deal with the Creator and Creation (six visions), the Redeemer (seven visions), and salvation history visualized as the construction of a building by the virtues (thirteen visions). This was the work that introduced Hildegard to the world, and was arguably her most important, so naturally it comes first in the *Riesencodex*. Next, we’ll look at the *Epistolarium*, a massive collection of over 390 letters written by Hildegard or addressed to her, one of the largest to survive from the twelfth century.²¹ The *Epistolarium* shows Hildegard as a prophet in action—instructing, consoling, and criticizing individuals from all throughout the social and ecclesiastical hierarchies, usually through visions or in the voice of the Living Light.²² Finally, we’ll look at the *Ordo virtutum* (The Order of Virtues), a musical drama that Hildegard composed at about the same time she was finishing the *Scivias* in the early 1150s.²³ This piece, the only surviving medieval musical drama whose author/composer we know, tells the story of the Soul (*Anima*), who falls away from the spiritual life through the Devil’s seductions, but comes back again through the assistance of the personified Virtues. Taken together, these three distinct expressions of what Hildegard knew—treatise, letter, and sung drama—helped multiple audiences see and

19 RB 1980, 32–38.

20 Cf. Dronke, “Hildegard of Bingen,” 90–91 and Newman, “Sybil,” 19.

21 Evidence from the *Epistolarium* is from Lievan van Acker and Monika Klaes’s three-volume edition of the *Epistolarium*; the citations will include the letter number, volume of the edition, and page number (e.g., Ep. 18r, 1:54).

22 Cf. Ferrante, “Correspondent,” and Fletcher, “Reading Hildegard of Bingen’s Letters.”

23 Citations from this text are pretty straightforward; they simply reference the page number in Peter Dronke’s critical edition.

understand the concept of humility in three unique ways.²⁴ To put it briefly, the *Scivias* gives us a deep expression of humility that is supposed to be *contemplated*, the *Epistolae* gives us a direct expression that is supposed to be *heard* and *obeyed*, and the *Ordo* gives us an embodied expression that needs to be *felt*.

Seeing Humility in Hildegard's Work

Let's start with the *Scivias*, which presents humility through the esoteric, highly structured, and dense genre of the theological treatise. Humility is found all over this work, but nowhere more clearly than in the eighth vision of the third book. This vision describes a great pillar Hildegard saw on the south side of the great building of salvation, which represented the humanity of the incarnate Son of God. Going up and down the pillar were "all the virtues of God" happily carrying stones to build the building. Seven virtues, standing for the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit, stood out from that multitude, and of these, Humility was "the first one." Accordingly, she has the most elaborately-detailed appearance: unlike the other Virtues described in the vision, Humility "wore a woman's veil on her head and a robe of transparent crystal" and "a golden crown with three high prongs that was covered with most precious green and red gems and many shining white pearls. On her chest she also had an incredibly bright mirror, in which the image of the incarnate Son of God appeared with wonderful clarity" (3.8.0:478–79). In addition to this, Humility is also the first Virtue to speak to Hildegard, describing herself as "the pillar of humble minds and the destroyer of prideful hearts" (3.8.1:479).

The concept of humility comes across rather differently in the *Epistolarium*, which, as we've already seen with Peter Damian, had a completely different rhetorical focus. Instead of dense arguments and piles of citations, letters demanded a more concise, focused, and personalized approach to sharing information. And yet, Hildegard and her editors wanted to make it clear that her letters were even *more* personal than others. They do so by including a substantial number of Hildegard's direct responses to incoming letters (the edition even marks these letters with a small "r"), thereby giving the reader a clearer sense of how she interacted with her audiences.²⁵ Accordingly, since each of the letters in Hildegard's collection was written for a particular individual or group, there is not the same degree of unity

²⁴ Zátónyi, *Vidi et intellexi*.

²⁵ Van Acker, "Der Briefwechsel der heiligen Hildegard."

in terms of format or content across the letters as there is in the *Scivias*. That said, it's clear we're still talking about the same virtue here: humility in the letters remains the "first flower" of the spiritual life, and practicing it in the world helps to build "the living tabernacle in the heavenly Jerusalem" (Ep. 262, 3:11). What's different is *how* we see humility expressed. True to the action-oriented epistolary genre, instead of a personification like in the *Scivias*, the "queen of virtues" appears much more often in the *Epistolarium* as a *modifier*, that is, the way in which Hildegard's recipients were supposed to do whatever the Living Light commanded. A lot of the time, humility works as an adverb, like when Hildegard explained to Abbot Adam of Ebrach that "Whoever relies on humbly (*humiliterate*) practicing the virtues... will have the grace of God" (Ep. 85r/b, 1:208). At other times, we find humility as an adjective used to describe the other virtues critical to Hildegard's reform program, like when a prior learned that the sacraments needed to be administered "with humble obedience" (*cum humili obedientia*) (Ep. 84r, 1:195–96). Regardless of what part of speech it was, we tend to see humility in short, direct commands and/or instructions, usually following imperative commands (e.g., *audite, intelligite, cauete, resiste, disce*). Humility also comes out in the *Epistolarium* through its absence; in many letters, Hildegard advocates for more humility by stressing that its opposite vice, pride (*superbia*), is the cause of whatever problems Hildegard's correspondents are experiencing. A particularly good example comes from a letter to Archbishop Henry of Mainz, in which the "Spirit of God" told the archbishop (and other prelates besides) that "your cursed, malicious, and threatening words are not heard by anyone, for in this way your staffs, raised up in haughty pride, do not stretch out towards God, but to the disgraceful punishments of your presumptuous desires" (Ep. 18r, 1:54).

We find a bit of a different situation in the *Ordo virtutum*, which, unlike the other two works, was meant to be a physical, multimedia performance. Here again we see humility as a personified figure, and one of the main characters in the drama, to boot. Considering how they were completed at the same time, it's no surprise that the presentation of Humility in the *Ordo* has some strong resonances with the *Scivias*.²⁶ Unlike the treatise, though, Humility is much more visible here, which is something we should expect in genre that was originally supposed to be literally staged. Though she isn't always the focus of the action, at no point in the performance would the audiences *not* see Humility on stage doing something. Even when she is not

26 Fassler, "Allegorical Architecture."

the centre of attention, like at the beginning and end of the play, audiences would have seen her standing and singing with the other Virtues. But overall, there's no question that Humility is the leader of the group. When the Devil taunts the virtues after the Soul leaves the stage to enjoy the world, she is the one who responds: "I and my soldiers know exactly who you are: that ancient dragon who wished to fly above the Most High, but God himself cast you into the abyss" (509). From there Humility takes centre stage for most of the rest of the action, identifying herself as "I, Humility, Queen of the Virtues" (*Ego, Humilitas, regina Virtutum*), and calling on the other Virtues to join the effort to resist the Devil and bring the Soul back home (509). And, when the dishevelled and suffering Soul returns to the stage, seeking forgiveness and repentance, guess who she calls on first? "And o true medicine Humility, come to my aid...Now I run to you, so that you may take me up" (517). Finally, it's Humility who calls the Soul to her and commands the Virtues to bind the Devil, even throwing in some good encouragement along the way ("Bind that Devil, o illustrious Virtues!") (519).

Understanding Humility in Hildegard's Works

From this quick overview, it's clear that we're dealing with three distinct expressions of the same virtue, each of which creates a different pathway for the viewer/reader/listener to *understand* humility and its significance. Let's go back to the treatise first. Seeing Humility is very easy in the *Scivias*, but understanding it is another matter. Like any divine vision received by a prophet, this presentation of humility is not supposed to be clear-cut; the visual and textual symbolism can be very confusing at first glance, something that Hildegard's medieval readers noticed (e.g., Ep. 244, 2:524). Readers would have to do a particular kind of work to understand what Humility is doing in this vision: exegesis, the slow, meticulous parsing of a source in order to reveal the meanings hidden beneath the surface of a text or object. To put it another way, expressing humility through a treatise means that the reader will have to do *a lot* of work to understand it. Every vision in the *Scivias* is set up in a way that encourages this kind of engagement: first we get a careful, detailed description of what Hildegard saw, and then a thorough and methodical explanation of the spiritual meaning of each element of the vision, all the while bringing in references to Scripture, hagiography, parables, and other sources as necessary. Humility actually starts this exegetical process herself in *Scivias* 3.8, proclaiming right away that "Whoever wishes to imitate me, desiring to be my child and yearning to embrace me as a mother, by completing my work with my help, they will step onto the

foundation and peacefully make their way up to the highest things" (479). Reading on a bit, we learn that Humility's instructions mirror the significance of Christ's humanity (represented by the pillar), which laid out precisely how individuals could make their way to a holy life (495). More details come when the Living Light explains the meaning of Humility's appearance. The veil and crystal-like mantle she wears symbolizes how she "humbly wears the chain of subjection to God, and with heavenly concern strikes down the haughty devil" (3.8.17:503). She wears a gold crown because she "first manifested the Savior" in the Incarnation, and its other features respectively symbolize important points of Christological doctrine, namely the Trinity (the three prongs), Christ's ministry (the green gems), Christ's passion (the red gems), and the resurrection and ascension (white pearls). And finally, the mirror she wears is a reminder of how God is reflected in all Humility's works, thereby making her the "most solid foundation of all good works that men do" (3.8.18:505–6).

Understanding humility takes a lot less work in the *Epistolarium*, which is exactly what medieval letters were supposed to do. Like Damian's "nails and goads," letters were designed to make people *do* things, and that's what we find in her letter collection. As we've seen, the virtue doesn't appear as a personified virtue, so much less exegesis is required to understand it when Hildegard invokes it. Instead, the format here is what I would call *personalized* instruction about why humility matters. To give us a better idea of how this works, let's focus on a particular situation that people repeatedly brought to Hildegard's attention: what to do when the leader of your spiritual community is being too harsh.²⁷ This, of course, had been a problem since the early days of Christian monasticism, but it was becoming more prevalent in the twelfth century, when the foundation of new monastic orders offered monks and nuns more options for their spiritual life. So, if one form of monastic life wasn't working for you (say, because your abbot was too strict), you could just choose another one. Hildegard, however, wasn't having it. In her responses to these queries, she was adamant that God had intentionally placed everyone into a specific spot in the spiritual hierarchy, and no one was allowed to disrupt the divine plan by doing something else.²⁸ According to the letters, humility was key to maintaining that order. For example, the Living Light reminded a monk named Berthold that

27 Ferrante, "Correspondent," 94–99, and Fletcher, "Reading Hildegard's Letters," 118–19.

28 Fletcher, "'Understand, Delight, and Obey,'" 289–96.

he was required to “humbly obey [his abbot] as much as you are able,” even if his demands seemed harsh (Ep. 218, 2:478). At other times, Hildegard tried to show how using humility could help improve the situation in a strict monastery, such as in the script she offered to a congregation of monks suffering under a harsh abbot: “humble yourself before him in humble devotion, saying, ‘Father, Father, we cannot bear this, and we pray you will spare us from this...’” (Ep. 59, 1:141). That said, Hildegard was not about to just let abbots and abbesses do whatever they wanted; they also had to “ensure that all of your works are done in true humility” to make life easier for their spiritual charges (Ep. 118, 2:291). In all these cases, guided by the rhetorical requirements of the letter form, Hildegard attempted to convince her recipients that they could make their spiritual troubles go away if they started being humble *right away*.

We find the easiest (relatively speaking) path to understanding humility in the *Ordo virtutum*, even though we’re again dealing with a female personification whose appearance and personality were heavily informed by, if not outright copied from, the *Scivias*.²⁹ But even with those similarities, the *Ordo*’s viewers experienced humility in an entirely different way. I say that because, unlike in the treatise or any of the letters, the *Ordo*’s viewers see Humility in the flesh, standing before them as a living, breathing, moving, and singing person. The drama format allowed Hildegard to “embody” the virtue in the drama, thereby making its invisible spiritual function (as the foundation of all other virtuous activity) visible for the audience, which more than makes up for the general lack of detail about Humility and her qualities in the actual text of the work.³⁰ Instead of contemplating dense descriptions of how humility was the divine antidote to the pride that caused the fall of Lucifer and Mankind, the *Ordo*’s viewers saw Humility snapping back at the Devil’s taunts and enthusiastically commanding Victory to “run with your troops and together bind this devil!” (517). Similarly, instead of receiving short direct reminders that humility was the key to a successful spiritual life, the viewers would see the Queen of Virtues compassionately welcoming back, and possibly even physically embracing, the forlorn Soul after its disastrous time in the world: “O miserable daughter, I, the great healer, wish to embrace you, because you have suffered harsh and bitter wounds” (517). In short, the *Ordo virtutum* is primarily interested in bringing the virtue of humility to life, in order to make an instantly legible model that viewers

29 Cf. Fassler, “Allegorical Architecture” and Meconi, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 19–26.

30 Altstatt, “The *Ordo virtutum* and Benedictine Monasticism.”

could imitate, in precisely the way that monastic superiors were supposed to be living models for their subordinates.³¹

Creating More Access through Genre Diversity

So, after this very short overview, what can we say about Hildegard's Genre Diversity? Broadly speaking, I think it's clear that this particular approach was essential for helping a variety of audiences hear and be transformed by her prophetic message. The *Scivias* is the most obviously prophetic presentation; here we see a meticulously detailed but enigmatic personification that resists simple understanding, and thus must be explained bit by bit. In the letters, on the contrary, humility shows up mostly as a modifier (adverb or adjective) in concise, direct commands and explanations that advocate for certain types of human actions. Then, in the *Ordo virtutum*, we literally see Humility in an embodied performance that interacts with other characters and physically does a lot more things (singing, rebuking, consoling, and commanding).

None of this was by accident, of course. The different expressions of humility we see here were rooted in the particular rhetorical characteristics of each genre Hildegard used. The *Scivias*, unique as it was, clearly drew on two staple genres of Christian theology: the commentary and the *summa*. We can see the former in the format of the visions in *Scivias*, which set forth a base text (in this case, her vision instead of a Biblical passage) followed by a comprehensive, well-sourced explanation of that text's hidden meaning(s).³² We see the latter, the cutting edge of theology in the twelfth century, in the *Scivias*'s ambition to systematically explain the nature of everything in the world and salvation history through a highly-ordered, progressive presentation of material.³³ In Hildegard's day, commentaries and *summae* were the best genres for supporting deep dives into any theological or religious topic, and they both demanded considerable time, effort, and outside knowledge to fully understand.

That level of engagement, however, did not fly with medieval letters. Twelfth-century intellectuals understood perfectly well that letters, even the ones that deal with theological matters, had to make their point as concisely as possible, so that they would have the best chance of convincing

³¹ Von Moos, *Geschichte als Topik*.

³² Newman, "Visions and Validations," 24.

³³ Cf. Newman, "Introduction," 23, and Ginther, "Hildegard of Bingen's Theology," 88.

their addressee to think or do something. They were okay with sacrificing that level of detail, though, because doing so allowed them to create a direct, almost tangible connection with an individual recipient, which could significantly heighten a letter's persuasive ability.³⁴ Based on the incoming correspondence in Hildegard's collection, this fundamental aspect of the medieval epistolary genre made Hildegard's letters especially desirable, because they could create a personal connection to the Living Light itself.³⁵ The goal here was not to give these audiences something that they would need to diligently contemplate (though they could do that, too), but something that would quickly and decisively convince them to base all their thoughts and actions on humility.

The *Ordo virtutum* represented something else entirely: a full-fledged multimedia experience incorporating the visual (costumed actors moving around) and the aural (music and spoken words).³⁶ This was precisely the sort of thing that occurred in all Latin Christian worship services, which combined a variety of forms of artistic expression in order to bring people into the different religious ceremonies.³⁷ By Hildegard's time, a number of performances that represented certain parts of the liturgy had been developed to highlight the historical and theological connections to particularly important moments in salvation history, and the *Ordo* fit snugly into this larger tradition.³⁸ This is also why the music mattered; as many scholars have noted, Hildegard used musical performances as a way to emphasize different "invisible" things in more approachable ways, such as when Victory announces the successful binding of the devil with what Margot Fassler calls "an unusually high *Gaudete*."³⁹ In that sense, the *Ordo* used art as a way to *move* its viewers to imitate Humility through their emotional responses, more so than their intellectual ones.

So why did Hildegard bother with all this? Why not just talk about humility in her visionary treatises and be done with it? Hildegard understood that each of these expressions of humility, shaped as they were by the rhetorical nature of their genre, would be particularly (though not exclusively) useful for specific audiences. I think it's safe to say that the *Scivias*

34 Fletcher, "Rhetoric, Reform, and Christian Eloquence," 73–74.

35 Van Engen, "Letters and the Public Persona," 416–17.

36 Enders, "Visions with Voices."

37 Heffernan and Matter, eds., *The Liturgy of the Medieval Church*.

38 Rankin, "Liturgical Drama."

39 Fassler, "Allegorical Architecture," 221–22.

was designed to speak to experts, that is, professional intellectuals who had the time and the skills to work through complex, lengthy, systematic presentations of material that treatises and commentaries offered. In fact, we learn in the first vision of the *Scivias* that it was precisely *this* group that was failing to do their jobs properly, so Hildegard packaged the command for them to shape up in a format that was quite familiar to them (1.1.0:8). Letters, on the contrary, could be adapted to fit the needs of any kind of audience, and Hildegard took full advantage of that fact to tailor her prophetic message specifically for individuals who asked for them (along with some who didn't). It also allowed her to make sure that the mysteries unveiled in the treatises like *Scivias* actually reached the individuals who most needed to hear them, but in the shorter, more personalized, and more convincing presentation that the letter form offered.⁴⁰ For its part, the *Ordo* probably had the smallest, most circumscribed intentional audience of them all: Hildegard's community of nuns at the Rupertsberg. The number of parts in the play correspond exactly to the number of nuns Hildegard had with her at the convent in 1152, and the considerable differences in the length and complexity of the characters' parts suggests strongly that they were written for specific singers.⁴¹ The *Ordo* gave these viewers an introduction to humility that was especially tailored to their needs; indeed, the Soul's complaints about the difficulty of the spiritual life probably sounded a lot like what young and inexperienced nuns might have said early in their spiritual career. The expression of a key monastic virtue like humility through a sung drama would have been an effective way to get the importance of this virtue across to people like these young nuns, who didn't yet have the training to work their way through a longer, denser presentation like in the *Scivias*.

In a nutshell, Hildegard's multi-faceted approach to teaching others about humility explains why Genre Diversity was so important to her mission. The best way to ensure that everyone heard and understood her prophetic message of reform was to share that message in as many ways as possible. On practical level, that would help her "stir up" a variety of audiences by giving them formats that suited their interests and capabilities, but it would also allow her to express the divine truths she saw more fully and comprehensively. After all, the three expressions of humility here are not *exclusive*, but *complementary*; anyone who read all these works would have a much more complete understanding of the spiritual importance of humil-

40 Fletcher, "Reading Hildegard's Letters," 112.

41 Meconi, *Hildegard of Bingen*, 23.

ity than if they had read only one. But she also must have known that only a very few readers would have been able to read everything she wrote, so she made sure that each individual work was able to fulfil her prophetic mission on its own. That, in short, is why all of these texts are in the *Riesencodex*; she and her editors wanted everyone who saw this volume to understand that each of these genres were valuable for her prophetic career. In other words, the *Riesencodex* loudly proclaims that pursuing Genre Diversity was what being a prophet was all about.

Embracing Genre Diversity

But what does Hildegard's approach to Genre Diversity do for us? I'm certainly not suggesting that all medievalists become prophetic polymaths like she was. But, like her, I think we need to more loudly advocate for expressing our expertise about the Middle Ages in formats beyond the monograph, journal article, or even the classroom. Hildegard helps us understand that there are plenty of options out there that can share our knowledge about the Middle Ages just as well as—and, in some cases, *better* than—traditional scholarly publications, because they can create exciting opportunities for audiences who aren't professional scholars.

As a way to make this idea more concrete, I'd like to share a small but illuminating experience of the benefits of Genre Diversity that I had in the winter of 2024. In the preceding fall (2023), the Newberry hosted *Seeing Race Before Race*, a gallery exhibition exploring race-making from the Middle Ages up to 1800 that I had the honour to co-curate. This exhibition was the first exhibition at the Newberry (so far as I know) that presented medieval and early modern books, documents, and visual art from the Newberry collection through the lens of critical race studies. It was, in other words, an opportunity to engage traditional Newberry audiences (which tend to be older and wealthier) in an unfamiliar yet urgent topic as well as audiences (especially communities of colour) who had not previously felt welcome in Newberry spaces or, for that matter, the field of medieval or early modern studies.

With all that in mind, my co-curators and the Exhibition Department at the Newberry were eager to think of as many ways to engage those different audiences as we could. That included public programming, a digital resource, an exhibition video, and a professional development workshop for teachers. But perhaps the most important of these "assets" was an exhibition catalogue co-edited by Dr. Noémie Ndiaye and Dr. Lia Markey, *Seeing Race Before Race: Visual Culture and the Racial Matrix in the Premodern World*,

which featured contributions from a wide range of medieval and early modern scholars (including graduate students), curators, and librarians. From the beginning, everyone on our curatorial team agreed that this wasn't going to be your typical academic catalogue; our main goal was accessibility. But in order to get it, we knew we'd have to do more than just ask all our authors to avoid using academic jargon.

Without ever using the term, we turned to Genre Diversity. Alongside the typical features of an exhibition catalogue (analytical essays, item-level descriptions, and *lots* of images), *Seeing Race Before Race* included brief "Notes from the Field" about critical race studies in the respective worlds of libraries, museums, and theatres (41–49, 129–34; 183–88); an interview exploring the connections between premodern critical race studies and Indigenous Studies (217–28); and, one of my personal favourite additions, a glossary of the various technical and field-specific terms used throughout the book (229–34). By adding these decidedly *less*-scholarly genres and formats, we hoped that the catalogue would be able to bring the story of race-making before 1800 to people who didn't already have PhDs in medieval or early modern studies: people like retired professionals, self-proclaimed lifelong learners, activists, and students, especially undergraduates and high schoolers.

The catalogue came out in April 2023, in plenty of time for it to take a prominent spot in the Newberry Bookshop before the show opened the following September. Well before that time, however, the Newberry's incomparable bookshop manager, Jennifer Fastwolf, had been hard at work curating a selection of other books, ephemera, and swag to sell that would fit with the theme of the exhibition. Naturally, that selection included a substantial number of scholarly publications on premodern critical race studies from some of the best and brightest minds in the field: Olivete Otele, Noémie Ndiaye, Cord Whitaker, Jonathan Hsy, and plenty more. I remember the thrill I had walking into the bookshop on the day the exhibition opened and seeing all those titles sharing the same shelf-space. It was exceedingly familiar; in fact, it was exactly the same kind of feeling I get whenever I walked into the exhibition hall at Kalamazoo or the Medieval Academy's annual meeting. Throughout the run of the show, I'd occasionally wander into the bookshop to get that feeling again, and to revel in the fact that so much great work was being made available to Newberry audiences.

A few months after the exhibition closed, we all gathered for a debrief meeting, where we discussed all sorts of data, feedback, and other measurable reactions to the show, including Jennifer's report from the bookshop. There was, thankfully, a lot of good news. She reported hearing "positive

feedback” about the show and the books available for sale, and it seemed that “good questions” were being asked, which was what we wanted. Unfortunately, though, none of that translated into robust sales for the majority of her carefully curated shop selections; all the “academic titles” available failed to move the needle with bookstore patrons, and most of the copies ordered for the show were sent back unsold. All the academic titles, that is, except our exhibition catalogue. Unlike the other books, *Seeing Race Before Race* sold “extensively” in the bookshop, to the point that Jennifer had to order more of them halfway into the show’s run to meet the demand. This wasn’t limited to the Newberry either; the entire first print run of the paperback version of the catalogue sold out before the end of the year, which was pretty remarkable considering it was also available open-access online.

Small-scale though it was, this experience was a ringing endorsement for the benefits of Genre Diversity. The catalogue was and is not, of course, an inherently *better* study of medieval and early modern race than any of the outstanding, award-winning scholarly titles Jennifer collected, but it was, without question, the *least academic-looking thing on that shelf*. When people opened it, they found more than just page after page of careful analysis, elegant academic prose, and extensive notes. Instead, they found multiple familiar formats (Interviews! Notes! Glossaries!), texts that were shorter and more manageable than they might have expected, and lots and lots of beautiful and interesting images to look at. And what’s more, since many of those people saw the catalogue *after* visiting the exhibition itself, the book promised something that the other books on display couldn’t: the opportunity to hold on to (or learn more about) the experience they had just had engaging with real, honest-to-goodness medieval and early modern books and other objects. That is why the catalogue sold as well as it did.

Now, to be sure, nobody got rich off the success of the *Seeing Race Before Race* catalogue. But still, the fortunes of the Newberry Bookshop in the fall of 2023 have a lot to tell us about how Genre Diversity needs to be enthusiastically celebrated and promoted by medieval studies. For me, the catalogue’s popularity confirmed that so-called “non-specialist” audiences are willing to spend their money on studies of medieval culture (or other academic topics), so long as those studies offer enough points of access for them to get into it. As we learned in the Bookshop, it wasn’t enough for the academic titles to be prominently displayed for the public or thematically aligned with a successful gallery exhibition: the scholarly publication format (along with the typically high price point) put up too many roadblocks between the customers and the content that they were obviously interested in. The catalogue, on the other hand, offered more opportunities for learning about

race in a much more accessible way (and at a much more reasonable price), so it's only natural that many more people were willing to buy it.

That experience taught me that all it takes to elevate Genre Diversity to forefront of medieval studies is to recognize the simple truth that scholarly publications, as good as they are, can't do everything. There are so many exciting, interesting, and urgent lessons and truths in medieval culture that can and will come across more effectively in other ways. And, like Hildegard, we should realize all the ways in which we share our knowledge of the medieval past are part of the same project. That is, sharing medieval content in a YouTube video, comic book, podcast, or humorous T-shirt is a part of the "good work" we do in our monographs and articles, because those genres can do things and engage people in ways that scholarly publications aren't designed to do. What's more, that makes them just as valid options for sharing expertise about medieval culture as monographs are.

That's why I'm convinced that the more we champion Genre Diversity, the stronger our field will become. When that day comes, the exhibition halls at conferences will look a lot different, because they will give just as much pride of place to movies and TV series, comics and cartoons, works of visual art, novels and short story collections, poetry, music albums, and social media channels as they currently do to scholarly publications. When that day comes, I'll feel even better about those halls, because I know what I see there is visible, tangible proof that we, like Hildegard, are doing our job as best as we possibly can.

