

## **ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE**

### **FROM OLD KNOWLEDGE TO NEW PRACTICE THROUGH THE WOMAN'S BODY**

**THE POROSITY OF** the woman's body is not only found in medieval Western medicine but also in non-European medicine. In particular, folk medicine in premodern Korea manifests a belief that women receive needed energy or elements through their sexual/reproductive organs, due to those organs' openness. As in premodern Western medicine, the woman's body was understood as colder; consequently, women might need heat for managing general health and improving sexual/reproductive health. This understanding of the woman's body as colder and open seems to be shared between Korean traditional medicine and Hildegardian and other premodern European medicine.

Comparing Hildegard of Bingen's written voice with the cultural practices of Korean women demonstrates different methodological pathways for recovering women's contributions across diverse historical contexts. While Hildegard composed substantial written works on the basis of her own intellectual authority, although she received help from her male scribes, Korean women's cultural expression and writing did not receive the same authority and benefited from fewer opportunities to be considered scholarly. Korean women's own writings on medicine, in particular, have rarely survived. This contrast in documentary evidence necessitates different scholarly approaches: direct textual analysis in Hildegard's case versus interpretive reconstruction in the Korean context. Nevertheless, both investigations explore how women navigated patriarchal constraints while establishing their intellectual and cultural presence.

Particularly significant is how the concept of female bodily porosity, which is central to Hildegard's theological and medical understanding of women's reproductive and salvational roles, finds resonance across cultural boundaries. This porosity, which enabled women to receive, transform, and transmit both physical and spiritual elements in Hildegard's framework, offers a valuable interpretive tool for understanding Korean women's cultural mediations despite the patriarchal limitations they faced. Such trans-cultural perspectives help us to understand women's historical influence beyond conventional geographical and temporal boundaries, revealing how

female embodiment itself has served as a site of creative expression and spiritual transformation as healing.

Along these lines, I will conclude my examination of women's understanding and practice of their porous bodies by shifting focus to analyze a specific medicinal herb: mugwort, or *Artemisia vulgaris* in its scientific nomenclature, along with the literature and practices surrounding its use. The Korean medicinal use of mugwort provides a useful case study of how concepts of female bodily porosity transcend cultural and temporal boundaries. This cross-cultural example reveals important parallels to medieval European understandings while demonstrating how women actively utilized their bodies' perceived permeability as a therapeutic pathway, especially when they could not expect help from male physicians. Just as Hildegard reframed female porosity from vulnerability to salvational potential, Korean women's medicinal practices show how perceived bodily openness became an opportunity for self-directed healing rather than merely a marker of inferiority.

Mugwort is one of the most popular medicinal herbs in many regions, including Europe, North America, Asia, and elsewhere, because it can easily survive in uncultivated areas. Mugwort is pervasively accessible and extensively employed in traditional practices and contemporary applications across Asia and Europe.<sup>1</sup> It was also used by medieval women, and Hildegard and the authors of the *Trotula* mentioned and recommended it. Playing a central role in herbology across different cultures, this herb has been believed to help human beings, and particularly women with women's health issues, throughout history.<sup>2</sup>

It should be also noted that mugwort is often confused with other similar herbs. Its scientific name, *Artemisia vulgaris*, is frequently misapplied, and historical records from both Eastern and Western traditions demonstrate that this designation was attached to various herbs, typically belonging to the *Artemisia* genus, which comprises more than five hundred species.<sup>3</sup> In Korea as well, 쑥 (*Ssuk*), the Korean name for mugwort, has been

1 Abiri et al., "Towards a Better Understanding of *Artemisia vulgaris*," 403.

2 Toby et al., *Western Herbal Tradition*, 123; Ekiert et al., "Significance of *Artemisia vulgaris* L. (Common Mugwort)," 4415.

3 For example, the name "mugwort" has been applied to wormwort (*Artemisia arborescens*), absinthe (*Artemisia absinthium*), sagebrush, field sagewort or tall wormwood (*Artemisia campestris*), sea wormwood (*Artemisia maritima*), and so on. What can be more challenging for modern researchers and readers is that the *Artemisia* genus is also confused with the *Tanacetum* genus, including tansy, and

applied to different kinds of *Artemisia*. Therefore, I do not attempt to strictly distinguish mugwort from similar herbs when they are understood as the same and used for the same purpose.

In the history of medicine in the West, mugwort was named the “mother of herbs” and known for helping mothers just as their friends would help them.<sup>4</sup> It was used externally to treat wounds, gout, and leg fatigue and internally to treat fever.<sup>5</sup> Importantly, it was believed that it could expel unwanted entities from a woman’s body, such as menstrual blood, a dead fetus, or the placenta.

At the same time, mugwort is widely used in Asia, especially Korea. Mugwort has been historically and traditionally important in herbology, food, drink, and new drug development in Korea beginning in ancient times. This herb is used in many different ways in Korea and many countries in Asia. The most popular way is direct consumption. Mugwort can be taken alone or together with other food or drink. Known as a savoury, it is used as an ingredient in food. It can also be consumed as a beverage, either steeped as an herbal tea or ground into powder and mixed with other ingredients. Modern medicine has also recognized the value of this herb *and* used it to make cosmetics, health supplements, and air fresheners, as well as other medicinal uses. Recent studies have also investigated mugwort’s potential as an antiparasitic and antimalarial agent.<sup>6</sup>

And one of the popular ways of using mugwort in Korea is fumigation treatment, in which the herb is dried and ground to be used in moxibustion. Moxibustion is the use of heat and smoke to treat patients and is popular in Eastern traditional medicine, including in China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, and Mongolia. While many different materials can be used for moxibustion, mugwort has been primarily used, beginning with ancient Chinese medicine.<sup>7</sup> The foundational belief is that moxibustion can circulate *qi* (or *chi*) 氣,<sup>8</sup> “ris-

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the *Asteraceae* genus, which is believed to have similar characteristics of heat and could be substituted for mugwort. Even now, folk medicine does not particularly distinguish mugwort from similar herbs. Tobyn et al., *Western Herbal Tradition*, 125–26.

4 Black, *Medicine and Healing*, 221–22.

5 Ekiert et al., “Significance of *Artemisia vulgaris* L. (Common Mugwort).”

6 Kodippili et al., “Investigation of the Antimalarial Activity of *Artemisia vulgaris*,” 276–81.

7 Yoeli-Tlalim, *Reorienting Histories of Medicine*, 88.

8 In Confucianism, *qi* is understood as vital energy and the embodiment of *li*, encompassing the more material components of the universe. Yin and yang were

ing vapor,” so that it can deliver heat.<sup>9</sup> Moxibustion or moxa-cauterization can be traced in the manuscript tradition as far back as 168 BCE<sup>10</sup> and has played a prominent role in the field of Chinese medicine and Eastern Asian medicine influenced by it. However, it was not until the 1950s that this medical practice’s efficacy was examined in the “scientific” method of the West.<sup>11</sup> According to traditional medicine, there are several ways to introduce smoke into the human body. While moxibustion can be applied directly to the skin, practitioners typically recommend performing this treatment near affected body parts. Additionally, the body possesses certain openings or import points considered gateways for needed energy. The navel represents a popular location for moxibustion, while the cervical opening serves as an ideal site for this treatment in women, highlighting the porosity of the female body and specifically women’s reproductive organs.

Therefore, a particular method of fumigation treatment is recommended to women that is not practised on men in Korea. The basic logic is similar to other moxibustions in that it uses fumes, in particular mugwort smoke. The difference is that the smoke enters the woman’s body directly, through the vagina. Dried mugwort is placed in a pot or any container with an opening on the top. The container with mugwort is then placed under a chair or a similar piece of furniture, on which a woman sits without clothing on the lower part of her body, covering her body as a whole with a long garment so that the smoke cannot escape. When the mugwort is burned, it gives off fumes or smoke. Modern methods of mugwort fumigation also use steam instead of smoke. This treatment can be easily found in Korean saunas and Korean medicine clinics.

In contemporary folk medicine in Korea, home care kits are available, too. It is commonly acknowledged that no physicians or specialists are required, and even women themselves can perform the procedure. Mugwort fumigation is expected to supply needed elements, that is, heat, to women. At the same time, mugwort smoke is also believed to kill bacteria or other harmful microorganisms.

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produced out of *qi*, in complementary relations. The interaction, or even intercourse, between yin and yang, or the female and male powers, engenders the elements of the universe.

9 Unschuld, *Medicine in China*, 97.

10 Unschuld, *Medicine in China*, 93–94.

11 Liangyue, “Chinese Acupuncture and Moxibustion,” 74–75.

In addition, Korean women can use mugwort in their sanitary pads.<sup>12</sup> Produced by several Korean companies, sanitary pads containing mugwort are a clear example of how the woman's body is understood as cold, on the side of yin, according to folk and traditional medicine supported by Taoism. By containing mugwort or its extract, the pad is supposed to supply heat to the woman's cold body. Simultaneously, pads containing mugwort are also believed to cover the odour from menstrual blood, helping women to conceal their periods. Whether or not mugwort actually works to bring fertility to women, modern Korean women who use it are making efforts to manage their own reproductive health, not necessarily depending on doctors and other medical personnel, who are likely male. Mugwort is also currently used for both men's and women's skincare, generally advertising its good effects on the skin of women, but for reproductive/sexual efficacy, mugwort is recommended only to women, not men.

Interestingly, mugwort fumigation was also recommended by ancient Western physicians, just like mugwort moxibustion in Asian medicine. For example, Paulus Aegineta knew and recommended fumigatory treatment with mugwort, which seems very similar to the Korean treatment that is still popular among women.

In dealing with cases of sterility, our author says that when the mouth of the uterus is shut up, it must be opened by injections of aromatics and by using fomentation. Fumigations of the womb may be applied either by sitting on a proper chair, and receiving the vapours which arise, or by injections of hot water in which safe, mugwort, rue, cumin, pennyroyal, sweet flag, and the aromatic seeds, have been boiled.<sup>13</sup>

Here, mugwort is used in the form of smoke or in hot water. Both methods were believed to deliver mugwort to the uterus, where the woman suffers from infertility. The smoke or water was to be inserted into the woman's body, where it was believed to open the closed uterus, possibly with the heat that mugwort and hot water were considered to have. Different herbs used along with mugwort were also considered hot by nature. Beyond its gynae-

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**12** Youngjoo Lee 이영주. "Ilhoeyong saengridaeui doipgwa wolgyeonghaneun mom-e daehan insik-ui byeonhwa: 1960-1980 nyeondae Hanguk-ui gyeongu" 일회용 생리대의 도입과 월경하는 몸에 대한 인식의 변화 : 1960-1980 년대 한국의 경우 [The Introduction of Disposable Menstrual Products and the Change of Perception about the Menstrual Body], 1.

**13** McKay, *History of Ancient Gynaecology*, 228.

cological uses, mugwort was also worn by men and animals to drive away evil spirits.<sup>14</sup>

The *Trotula* also recommends to female patients a mugwort fumigatory treatment that is surprisingly similar to Korean women's way of using this herb. Again, this treatment uses mugwort smoke in the belief that it will enter the woman's vagina and reach the uterus. Fumigatory treatment can be performed through the nose and umbilicus for both women and men, but the application to the reproductive organs is only for women.<sup>15</sup> As described in the chapter on retention of the menses in the *Trotula*, medieval mugwort fumigatory treatment sends mugwort smoke to the lower part of the female patient so that her body can be exposed to it and can absorb the smoke.<sup>16</sup> Also, in the section "On Paucity of the Menses" in the same book, the author introduces another fumigation treatment, using ginger, laurel leaves, and savin. The method is the same. The practitioner is to prepare the herbs as powders and burn them in a pot while a woman "sits upon a perforated seat" in order to receive "the smoke through the lower members" to bring on full menstruation. Other herbs in addition to mugwort can be used with slightly different treatments: "Likewise, chickweed cooked in an earthenware pot and placed over [the belly] provokes the menses."<sup>17</sup>

In the medieval West, fumigation treatment was also used when the woman's womb was descended, the prolapse of the womb, which traces back to Roman medicine.<sup>18</sup> In the premodern period, many physicians believed that the womb could move within the woman's body, causing various health issues. The *Trotula* diagnoses that this descent of the womb could occur due to weak bodily members and abundant cold humours and could possibly be cured by a fumigatory treatment that was preceded and followed by many other cures.

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**14** Armstrong, "Mugwort Lore," 22.

**15** Fumigation treatment was also used in the Roman treatment for phrenitis, using wool. Black, *Medicine and Healing*, 98.

**16** Fumigatory treatment was also used to check a woman's fertility. In premodern medicine, it was believed that fumigation was useful in that the smoke could reach the troubled woman's womb directly. If the fumes did not pass into the woman's body, especially the vagina and the womb, it means that her body was blocked and possibly unable to have a child. Evans, "Female Barrenness, Bodily Access and Aromatic Treatments," 424–43.

**17** Green, trans., *The Trotula*, 79.

**18** Pliny the Elder recommends fumigation with wool in the case of the womb's prolapse. Black, *Medicine and Healing*, 99.

Then let there be made for them a steambath, which works very well. For Dioscorides prescribes that there be made for them a steambath of box wood placed in a pot upon live coals, and let the woman, covered on top, sit on it, and let her receive the smoke inside [her vagina].<sup>19</sup>

Although the efficacy is different, the fumigation treatment is conducted in the same way. Instead of mugwort, burning coals are used. The interesting thing is that this treatment is believed to help patients only when their pain is caused by coldness of the body. If cramps are caused by excessive heat, the treatments are different, because the pain comes from the womb being immoderately dry and hot.<sup>20</sup> From the fact that coals can be used instead of mugwort in this treatment, we can reasonably infer that the fumes were believed to convey heat and that the fumigatory treatment can transmit the fumes and their heat.

Where mugwort is concerned, it should be noted that this herb was regarded as having heating properties in medieval Western medicine, just as in the Korean pharmaceutical tradition. Medieval European writers classified mugwort as an herb with a hot nature. Hildegard was no exception, similarly categorizing mugwort as “very hot” in her *Physica*, recommending it for warming a “cold stomach” just as Korean medicine prescribes it to balance women’s cold nature. This parallel classification across distant medical traditions suggests a remarkably consistent conceptualization of both herbal properties and female bodily needs.

Mugwort (*biboz*) is very hot, and its juice is of very great value. If it is cooked and eaten as a puree, it heals ailing intestines and warms a cold stomach. But, if someone eats or drinks something which has given *them* pain, then *they* should cook and eat warmed mugwort with meat or lard, or as a puree, or with any other condiment. It will attract the rotten matter which was in the previously ingested food or drink, and chase it away. If bad humors gather in some part of the body, flowing out from broken skin where there is no poisoned wound, the person should take mugwort and express the juice. To the juice *they* should add a smaller amount of honey. *They* should spread this on the afflicted area, then cover it with egg white, and tie it with a cloth. *They* should do this until *they are* better.<sup>21</sup>

**19** Green, trans., *The Trotula*, 87–89.

**20** Green, trans., *The Trotula*, 157.

**21** Modified from Hildegard of Bingen, *Physica*, trans. Throop, 56. In the English quotation block, I use italics to indicate modifications I have made to the pronouns used in the English translation cited. However, the following Latin passage preserves the italics as they appear in the original manuscript: “*Biboz* [*Artemisia ed.*] valde calida est, et succus ejus valde utilis; et si coquitur et in *muse* comeditur, infirma

Due to its hot nature, mugwort was understood to cure symptoms caused by excessive coldness, especially gynaecological issues. This belief is also seen in premodern Western academic medicine, but in this context, women developed their own ways of taking care of their bodies, including midwifery, which was often dismissed in the written male medical tradition.

The persistence of mugwort in contemporary Korean women's health practices demonstrates how ancient ideas about female bodies endure and are adapted across centuries, much as Hildegard's positive reframing of female porosity continued to influence medieval European understandings of women's reproductive health. When examined across cultural boundaries, these parallel traditions demonstrate both convergences and divergences that invite fresh analytical approaches. The temporal and conceptual irregularities that emerge within a comparative framework generate productive tensions that allow scholars to formulate more nuanced research questions and reach innovative conclusions about women's bodily knowledge.<sup>22</sup> In both cases, women transformed potentially limiting conceptions of their physiology into pragmatic healing practices.

This project opened with a discussion of medieval medical traditions in Europe that described women's bodies as having qualities of coldness and that viewed women's bodies as more porous, permeable, and breakable than men's bodies. Female physiological cycles (menstruation) and shapes (the womb's concave appearance) seemed to support these ideas. The book then moved from the reception of female biology to discuss religious accounts that represent women's physical porosity allegorically. Medieval theology and church teachings both praised women (for their humility, as in the Virgin's pregnancy) and condemned them (as easily breakable and transgres-

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viscera sanat, ac stomachum frigidum calefacit. Sed et si quis comederit aut biberit, unde dolet, tunc aut ex carnibus, aut cum sagimine, aut in *muse*, aut in aliquo alio condimento et temperamento *biboz* coquat et comedat, et putredinem hanc quam in prioribus cibis aut potibus ille sibi attraxit aufert et fugat. Sed et si troffo, et mali humores, rupta cute absque venenato ulcere in aliquo loco corporis humani coadunati effluunt, homo ille artemisiam accipiat, et exprimat, et eidem succo mel addat, ita ut succus artemisiae mel excedat, et sic locum doloris perungat. Mox etiam clarum de albugine ovi factum superilliniat, et panno desuper liget. Et hoc tam diu faciat dum sanetur." Hildegard of Bingen, *Physica*, bk. 1, chap. 107, in Hildegard of Bingen, *S. Hildegardis Abbatissae Opera omnia*, §§1171–72.

**22** On new approaches and new conclusions in comparative research on understanding women's culture, see McAvoy and Niebrzydowski, "Introduction: Medieval Women's Literary Cultures," 13.

sive, as in Eve's actions in Paradise), which lent support and authority to the physiological ideas, theories, and knowledge about women of the time.

In the theological understanding of physiology, which was related to the appearance and function of women's reproductive bodies, women were often referred to as vessels, in the religious sense that women could relatively easily be filled with holy or evil spirits. This notion of women as porous vessels is also related to Eve, who was the first woman and the unsealer of sin. The most visible symptoms of women's porous bodies, namely menstruation and childbirth, however, were often treated as pollutants and were even used to justify limits on women's activities.

In contrast, Hildegard of Bingen discovered possibilities of purgation and salvation in the woman's porous body. In her medical book, *Cause et cure*, she interprets women's permeable bodies, especially the womb, as capable of flexibility and correct balance. Interestingly, in her theological work *Scivias*, Hildegard uses this strong understanding of women's physical permeability to present Ecclesia's capacity for purging souls and giving humanity new life. Her positive depictions in her spiritual writings are deeply indebted to her gynaecological knowledge and were bolstered by her understanding of the womb and women's reproductive processes as purgative and redemptive, rather than polluting and inferior.

This book is not an all-encompassing study intended to discover the hidden history of the woman's body and understandings of it. Rather, it is a starting point for suggesting new approaches to broaden an important step in understanding women's health. When the definition and application of medicine are widened to incorporate women's own practices to take care of their bodies, increase their fertility, and eliminate health issues, women become better able to manage their own bodies.

The shared belief that the woman's body is porous and permeable, common in many cultures, was seen as an opportunity by some women. For Hildegard, menstrual flow, pregnancy, and childbirth show the woman's possibility to purge, heal, and save humankind, based on the beauty of weakness. Just as many medieval European gynaecological writings prescribe treatments to women using their body's porosity, traditional Korean women also find ways to heal their reproductive issues by absorbing mugwort fumes through their vaginas, believed to be open.

While it is true that many "womanly" diseases were understood as limited to sexual and reproductive issues, it is still valid that many women suffered from them. And many issues were explained through their lack of heat, something already prevalent in the understanding of sex/gender differences in premodern European and premodern Korean cultures. Menstruation,

which is directly related to women's fertility, depends on the balance of heat and coldness. In general, menstruation retention is explained by cold wind in Asia and excessive coldness in Europe.

At the same time, women could find cures for themselves or from other women. While they could ask for professional help from male physicians, they could also use mugwort, which could be easily found in their neighbourhood or fields, and apply its fumes to their reproductive organs. If a woman's body was sick or infertile due to a lack of heat, they could supply the needed heat. The fumes will enter their bodies through the openings of the reproductive organs that were already assumed to exist. In this way, porosity becomes an opportunity for healing.

It should be noted that Hildegard of Bingen emphasized that she herself was porous. Hildegard of Bingen was also a woman, and she commented on her own weak nature and porous body. She was called a "fragile vessel" by her biographers. She called herself "unlearned." Her demure presentation of her own gender also appears in her letters.

As always, however, Hildegard of Bingen turned her weak points into strong points. Hildegard recorded the *Scivias* in order to remind male theologians and priests that they were not obeying God's will. Hildegard referred to her time as an "effeminate age" many times in her letters,<sup>23</sup> signalling her sense that the men of her time had lost their way: "Wisdom cries out, saying: The present time is a squalid, womanish time."<sup>24</sup> And that is why she considered women in the vanguard of God's work: "This time is a womanish time, because the dispensation of God's justice is weak. But the strength of God's justice is exerting itself, a female warrior battling against injustice, so that it might fall defeated."<sup>25</sup> This idea was also discussed by Elizabeth of Schönau, Hildegard's spiritual friend and protégée, who presented it more directly in her *Liber visionum*, pointing to the female prophets of the Old Testament for support.

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**23** Baird and Ehrman, "Introduction," 12.

**24** "Hildegard to Hillinus, Archbishop of Trier," in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 26r, 1:88. Hildegard did not use the "effeminate age" as a positive characterization but as a negative one, sarcastically, as Barbara Newman elaborates. However, at the same time, Hildegard used this term to justify the existence of women leaders because authoritative men have already become "effeminate." Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 239.

**25** "Hildegard to the Prelates at Mainz," in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 23, 1:79.

People are scandalized that in these days the Lord deigns to magnify his great mercy in the frail sex. But why doesn't it cross their minds that a similar thing happened in the days of our fathers when, while men were given to indolence, holy women were filled with the Spirit of God so that they could prophesy, energetically govern the people of God, and even win glorious victories over Israel's enemies? I speak of women like Hilda, Deborah, Judith, Jael, and the like.<sup>26</sup>

Teaching and preaching God's words were first and foremost men's duties. However, since they were neglecting their duties, God wanted this weak woman, Hildegard, to be his prophet, to spread his message, and to correct men's misbehaviour. Hildegard placed herself in a genealogy of prophets descending from the Old Testament, who had also challenged authority by proclaiming that their religious leaders were not listening to God. Moreover, this reversal of conventional power dynamics was also applicable to Jesus, who chose to become a weak and lowly human being to save humanity. "But God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the things which are mighty; And base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nought things that are: That no flesh should glory in his presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27–29).

While medieval theology taught that Mary was the holy window of salvation who received the Holy Spirit, and Ecclesia represented the female body's ability to cleanse sin from people's souls, Hildegard was God's messenger, who received his words in visions, put them into writing, interpreted the female body in a positive light, and represented women's reproductive role as salvational, purgative, and God-like.

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**26** Translation from Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 39. "Hoc illos scandalizat, quod in his diebus plurimum in sexu fragili misericordiam suam dominus magnificare dignatur. Sed cur in mentem non venit, quoniam simile factum est in diebus patrum nostrorum, quando viris socordie deditis, spiritu dei replete sunt mulieres sancte, ut prophetarent, populum dei strenue gubernarent, sive etiam de hostibus Israel gloriose triumpharent, quemadmodum Olda, Debora, Judith, Jahel, et huiusmodi?" Elizabeth of Schönau, *Liber visionum secundus I*, ed. Roth, bk. 2, chap. 1, p. 40.

