

Chapter 2

THE UNSEALER OF SIN

WHAT IS COMMONLY represented by the woman's body? One of the gender differences attributed to the medieval body is its openness and closedness. The body seems to be more complete, whole, and integrated if it is closed. This closedness is also related to unchangeability. If your body is complete, then because of this completeness, you do not need to change or should not be changed. In the Christian tradition, the first woman's body was so open that she invited sin and its aftermath, including reproduction and death.

As we will see in the rest of this book, women were considered more attuned to receiving influences from outside their bodies and undergoing changes in their bodies as a result of these influences. On one hand, this can mean that the woman's body is weaker, less rigid, and less contained. But on the other hand, the permeability of a woman's body can also enable it to adapt to the environment, acquire what it needs, and dispose of what it has too much of. A woman's adaptability could serve as a woman's power to survive. Furthermore, this flexibility can represent the woman's ability to reproduce. Lastly, it can signify a woman's cooperation in saving the souls of others, because human beings can change their minds and redirect them towards God.

Flexible Eve, Rigid Adam

In medieval texts, Eve often represents fallen human nature and the body in general; however, Hildegard of Bingen sees the potential for human salvation in her, too. Granting that Eve was the first sinner against God's commandment, Hildegard emphasizes instead that Eve made it possible for human beings not only to be doomed to perish, but also to be saved through Jesus.

The differences between Adam and Eve that gave Eve this role began with their creation. Hildegard describes Adam's creation as follows:

When God created man, it was mud stuck together with water, from which the human being was formed. God sent into that form a fiery and airy breath of life. Man was formed from mud and water. The mud was made flesh from the fire of the breath of life and, from the air of that life-breath, the water

which stuck the mud together became blood. When God created Adam, the splendor of divinity shone about the lump of mud from which he was created. That mud, when the form had been brought forth, appeared with the outlines of limbs on the outside, and empty on the inside.¹

Here, Hildegard describes how God created Adam with the four elements that compose the universe: not only with mud (earth), but also with water, fire, and air (spirit or breath). At the same time, the four elements are gendered. Earth and fire are more masculine, while air and water are more feminine for Hildegard.² Although Adam is created with the four elements, earth and fire are more emphasized and are used to explain Adam's strength and greater sexual desire, which aligns with the traditional view that men have hot and dry natures. Eve is described as more airy and watery, also aligning with the medieval notion that women are cold and wet.

When Adam was created, just as when Eve was later created, the human body did not have any inherent flaws. Adam's bodily members and organs functioned properly. However, Hildegard describes how human beings were changed both physically and mentally after the first transgression:

God created the human being, and all animals were subject to serving him; but when man transgressed God's order, he was changed in mind and body. The purity of his blood changed to another type, so that instead of purity, it throws off the foam of semen. If the human had stayed in paradise, he would have continued in his unchangeable and perfect state. But these all changed after the transgression into another, bitter type.³

1 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 35. "Nam cum deus hominem crearet, limus per aquam conglutinator est, ex quo homo formatus est, misitque deus in formam illam 'spiraculum uite' igneum et aereum. Et quia forma hominis ex limo et aqua fuit, ex igne eiusdem spiraculi uite limus caro factus est, et ex aere eius aqua, per quam limus conglutinator est, sanguis effecta est. Cum enim deus Adam crearet, splendor diuinitatis massam limi, de qua creatus est, circumfulsit, et ita limus ille illata forma in liniamentis membrorum exterius apparuit et interius uacua." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §76, p. 71.

2 Sur, *Feminine Images of God*, 71.

3 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 28. "Deus ita creauit hominem, quod omnia animalia ad seruitutem eius subiecta sunt; sed cum homo preceptum dei transgressus est, mutatus est etiam tam corpore quam mente. Nam puritas sanguinis eius in alium modum uersa est, ita quod pro puritate spumam seminis eicit. Si enim homo in paradyse mansisset, in inmutabili et perfecto statu perstitisset. Sed hec omnia post transgressionem in alium et amarum modum uersa sunt." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §56, p. 59.

According to Hildegard, it was after the fall that human beings became vulnerable to sickness and phlegm: "Certain people suffer various illnesses from phlegm, which abounds in them. If the human being had remained in paradise, they would not have phlegm, whence many illnesses proceed, in their body. Their flesh would be unimpaired and without darkness (*livore*)."⁴ Once fallen, human bodies lost their integrity and became ulcerated and perforated, which invited illness into human bodies.⁵

While the fall changed the physical and psychological conditions of both Eve and Adam, it is interesting that Hildegard lays special emphasis on the adverse changes to Adam's seed in *Cause et cure*: "Partaking of evil, the blood of the sons of Adam transformed into poisonous semen, from which the sons of men are procreated."⁶ It seems that in Hildegard's *Cause et cure*, it was mostly Adam whose body changed after the sin and fall. Just before explaining Eve's evil deeds, Hildegard states that Eve's body was not changed as much because she was soft, having been born out of Adam's flesh, while Adam was created with earthly elements. Because Eve was created second and thus indirectly, her body was less affected by the fall:

After his first sleep, Adam's prophecy was true, since he had not yet sinned; later it was mixed with falsehood. And Adam, created from earth and roused by the elements, was changed, but Eve, created from Adam's rib, was not changed.⁷

4 Modified from Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 30. "Quod autem quidam homines diuersas infirmitates patiuntur, hoc de flecmate est, quod in ipsis habundat. Si enim homo in paradyso permansisset, flecmata in corpore suo non haberet, unde multa mala procedunt, sed caro eius integra esset et absque liuore." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §64, pp. 63–64.

5 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 31 "Et ideo caro eorum, ulcerata et perforata est. Quae ulcera et foramina quondam tempestatem et humectatem fumi in hominibus faciunt, de quo flecmata oriuntur et coagulantur, que diuersas infirmitates corporibus hominum inferunt." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §64, p. 64.

6 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 31. "Nam de gustu mali uersus est sanguis filiorum Ade in uenenum seminis, de quo filii hominum procreantur." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §64, p. 64.

7 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 38. "Post primum namque sompnum Ade prophetia eius uera fuit, quoniam nondum peccauerat, sed postea cum mendacio permixta est. Et Adam de terra creatus et cum elementis suscitatus mutabatur, Eua uero de costa Ade mutata non est." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §88, p. 77.

After suggesting that Eve's bodily state was less changed than Adam's, Hildegard seems to turn to a discussion of Eve's sin in the next section, but she does not say much about Eve's sin, only mentioning Eve's softness and her role as the mother of the entire human species:

Adam was virile from the vital force of the earth and very strong from the elements. Eve, from his marrow, was soft⁸ and had an airy, keen mind and a pleasant life, since the weight of the earth did not oppress her. Just as she came forth from a man, so all humankind proceeded from her.⁹

After this passage, Hildegard goes on to explain the complementary relationship between waking and sleeping, without mentioning Eve's evil deeds at all. According to the passage above, the primary feature distinguishing Eve from Adam is her softness, which Hildegard does not particularly blame her for. Rather, Eve's soft and delicate nature comes from Adam's marrow. Moreover, this softness and mild nature enabled Eve and her female descendants to have children.¹⁰

In the next section, on the other hand, about Adam's exile, Hildegard returns to the topic of Adam's sin and his changed state afterwards. Overall, it seems that Hildegard mentions Adam much more often than Eve when she explains the aftereffects of human beings' transgression against God's command. Before the transgression, the human body was able to maintain the right humoral balance. But after the transgression (Hildegard refers to Adam in particular here), people are changed: "Heat, humidity, blood, and flesh are changed into contrary phlegm in people after the transgression of Adam."¹¹

8 According to Paul Kaiser's 1903 Latin version, which has subheadings for each section, this part is introduced as "De Evae malitia," "Regarding Eve's malice," which was translated by Throop as "Eve's Disposition." However, the passage is mainly about the soft body of Eve; therefore, it is possible that "malitia" is a misspelling of "mollitia," which is "softness." Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegardis Causae et cures*, ed. Kaiser, 46; Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 38.

9 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 38–39. "Et idem Adam de uiriditate terre uirilil et de elementis fortissimus erat, Eua autem de medullis suis mollis fuit et aeream mentem ac acutam artem et deliciosam uitam habuit, quoniam pondus terre eam non pressit. Sed ut ipsa de uiro est educta, sic omne genus humanum ex ipsa processit." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §89, p. 77.

10 Sur, *Feminine Images of God*, 85.

11 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 42. "Calor enim ac humiditas <et> sanguis et caro propter transgressionem Ade in contraria flegmata in homine mutata sunt." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §97, p. 84.

It was Adam's transgression which brought darkness and shadows into the world.¹² In Hildegard's descriptions, Adam seems more responsible not only for his changed state but also for the whole world's mutation.

Even when Hildegard explains why Eve, not Adam, was the first sinner, she does not blame Eve for being a weak woman. It was God who created Eve in this way, and it was Adam who gave her softness and malleability from his own body:

If Adam had transgressed before Eve, the transgression would have been so strong and incorrigible that man would have fallen in such greatly hardened incorrigibility that he would neither wish, nor be able, to be saved. Because Eve transgressed first, it was able to be more easily nullified, since she was weaker than a male. The flesh and skin of Adam was harder and stronger than that of men now, because Adam was formed from earth, and Eve from him. After they produced children, flesh became always weaker and weaker, and thus it will be until the last day.¹³

According to Hildegard, human beings would not have had any chance for salvation if Adam had sinned first, because his rigidity would have made the transgression "incorrigible." This notion implies a negative side to his strength. In this logic, Eve's softness makes it rather fortunate for humankind that she sinned.¹⁴ Of course, Hildegard derives this contrast of hard-

12 "After Adam sinned, night began to be present, and all elements were overshadowed by great darkness; in this darkness, Adam was led into exile." Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 39. "Sed postquam Adam peccauit, nox adesse cepit, et omnia elementa magnis tenebris obtenebrata sunt, in quibus Adam in exilium istud deductus est." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §90, p. 78.

13 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 39. "Sed et si Adam transgressus fuisset prius quam Eua, tunc transgressio illa tam fortis et tam incorrigibilis fuisset, quod homo etiam in tam magna obduratione incorrigibilitatis cecidisset, quod nec saluari uellet nec posset. Vnde quod Eua prior transgrediebatur, facilius deleri potuit, quia etiam fragilior masculo fuit. Caro et cutis Ade et Eue fortior et durior fuit quam hominum nunc sit, quia Adam de terra formatus fuit et Eue de ipso. Sed postquam filios genuerunt, caro illorum semper et semper fragilior et fragilior facta est, et ita usque in nouissimum diem erit." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §91, p. 79. It should be noted that the Berndt and Moulinier Latin edition reads "Caro et cutis Ade et Eue" while Throop's translation only renders "[t]he flesh and skin of Adam," omitting Eve. This discrepancy arises because Throop bases her translation on Kaiser's edition, as she indicates in her introduction, where the text appears as "Caro et cutis Adae" without reference to Eve. See Hildegard of Bingen, *Hildegardis Causae et curae*, ed. Kaiser, 47.

14 Barbara Newman's suggestion that Jesus's humanity originated from Eve's

ness and malleability from physiological explanations: Adam was made of earth, and Eve was made of Adam's soft flesh. Eve's softness is thus not in itself a bad or particularly female feature, considering that this softness came from Adam.

Also, women were provided with a tremendous opportunity to take revenge on evil through their own bodies when the Virgin Mary bore the Saviour and sent him out into the world: "the ancient serpent was greatly terrified and astounded, because he had been wholly deceived by a woman—the Virgin."¹⁵ Whereas the first woman's malleable body allowed sin to enter humankind, the Virgin's porous body brought salvation to human beings by receiving the Holy Spirit, becoming pregnant, and giving birth to the Saviour. In this history of the Fall and Salvation, the woman's body is highlighted. It is the woman's body that receives sin and has the opportunity to nullify sin. The woman's body is like a garment that the Virgin Mary receives from the Saviour as a theophany, since her body has the ability to store him.¹⁶

Hildegard's positive depiction of female bodies in *Cause et cure* is unsurprising in light of her positive presentation of Eve in the first book of *Scivias*. In Vision Two of Book One, Hildegard presents her account of the Fall.¹⁷ One interesting thing about Hildegard's depiction of the Fall is the way that the original sin changed the entire bodily system of human beings. The beautiful bodies of human beings lost their peaceful state after

weakness in fact reinforces Ecclesia by compounding strength and weakness as well as divinity and humanity. Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 182.

15 This is Hildegard's exegesis of Revelation 12:13–14. Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works*, trans. Campbell, 286. "Quoniam [antiquus serpens] per mulierem, uidelicet uirginem, totus deceptus est." Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, ed. Derolez and Dronke, pt. 2, bk. 1, chap. 16, p. 284.

16 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 90–93.

17 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 73. "DEINDE VIDI uelut maximam multitudinem uiuentium lampadarum multam claritatem habentium, quae igneum fulgorem accipientes ita serenissimum splendorem adeptae sunt. Et ecce lacus multae latitudinis et profunditatis apparuit, os uelut os putei habens et igneum fumum cum multo foetore emittens, de quo etiam taeterrima nebula se extendens quasi uenam uisum deceptibilem habentem tetigit, et in quadam clara regione candidam nubem quae de quadam pulchra forma hominis plurimas plurimasque stellas in se continens exierat per eam afflavit ac illam eandemque formam hominis de eadem regione ita eiecit. Quo facto lucidissimus splendor eandem regionem circumdedit, et ita omnia elementa mundi, quae prius in magna quiete constiterant, in maximam inquietudinem uersa horribiles terrores ostenderunt." Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 2, chap. 73, p. 13.

the Fall. Before Adam and Eve picked the forbidden fruit, their bodies were perfect. When their bodies were perfect, they did not need to procreate. But because they were expelled from Paradise and eternal life, they began to need to have intercourse and have children. In the exegesis that follows this description, Hildegard explains it in terms of God's creation as well as the fall of Adam and Eve. Of course, Adam and Eve disobeyed God and thus committed the original sin, but Hildegard does not necessarily blame Eve for introducing sin to humanity, although she does not deny that it happened because of Eve's weakness. She concedes that Eve's weakness originated from God's deliberate creation, which begot women's weakness in general. Women are made softer so that they can receive semen from men. Women's weakness and softness are thus by God's design and absolutely necessary for generation.¹⁸

Because women were created in this way, their weakness, understood as necessary softness, was not something blameworthy. This could be another reason why Adam did not blame Eve, according to Hildegard, since Eve was born weak. Hildegard interprets the story of Adam and Eve as a model for why husbands and wives have to love each other, rather than blame Eve for the origin of sin. Even though Eve introduced Adam and all of his offspring to death and sin, her horrible mistake does not separate her from her husband. What else could make a husband leave his wife, if not this, Hildegard seems to ask. Hildegard thus turns the narrative of Eve's sin into one about marriage—a story of the love and bond between men and women.

Because he [the Devil] knew that the susceptibility of the woman would be more easily conquered than the strength of the man; and he saw that Adam burned so vehemently in his holy love for Eve that if he, the Devil, conquered Eve, Adam would do whatever she said to him . . . [the Devil acted] by first misleading Eve, so that she might flatter and caress Adam and thus win his assent, since she more than any other creature could lead Adam to

18 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 77. "Sed sicut non paruo puero sed perfecto uiro, scilicet Adae, perfecta mulier data est, ita etiam modo, cum uir in perfecta aetate sua fertilis est, perfecta ei mulier coniungenda est, uelut cum arbor flores incipit emittere debita cultura ei adhibenda est. Nam de costa insito calore et suco Adae Eua formata est, ac ideo nunc de fortitudine uiri et de calore eius semen mulier concipit prolem in mundum producere. Vir enim seminator existit, mulier autem susceprix seminis est. Vnde et mulier sub potestate uiri manet, quoniam ut duritia lapidis ad teneritudinem terrae est, ita etiam et fortitudo uiri ad mollitiem mulieris est." Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 2, chap. 11, p. 77.

disobedience, having been made from his rib. Thus woman very quickly overthrows man, if he does not hate her and easily accepts her words.¹⁹

Hildegard here continues to highlight the love of Eve and Adam. Hildegard even suggests that the first human being's first transgression was due not only to Eve's weak nature, but also to Adam's strong love for Eve. This interpretation differs from that of some theologians, who locate the reason that Eve was deceived in her own weakness. For example, Peter Lombard, a theologian and Hildegard's contemporary, argues that Eve was deceived first due to her "less vigorous" rationality,²⁰ and that Eve's sin was more serious than Adam's due to her pride.²¹

According to Hildegard, Adam was deceived by the Devil because he loved Eve so much that he had to listen to her. Hildegard did not see his love as something for which Eve should be blamed. Rather, it was only natural that Adam loved Eve so much, because she was born from his own body. The Devil deserves the blame, then, because the Devil abused Eve's susceptibility and Adam's love.

For Adam could have blamed his wife because by her advice she brought him death, but nonetheless he did not dismiss her as long as he lived in this world, because he knew she had been given to him by divine power. Therefore, because of perfect love, let a man not leave his wife except for the reason the faithful Church allows.²²

19 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 77. "Quia sciebat mulieris mollietatem facilius vincendam quam viri fortitudinem, videns etiam quod Adam in caritate Eveae tam fortiter ardebat ut si ipse diabolus Euam uicisset, quidquid illa Adae diceret, Adam idem perficeret. Vnde et diabolus illam eandemque formam hominis de eadem regione ita eiecit: quoniam idem antiquus seductor Euam atque Adam de sede beatitudinis sua deceptione expellens eos in tenebras subuersionis misit. Quomodo? Videlicet Euam primum seduxit, ut ipsa Adae blandiretur, quatenus ei assensum praeberet, quia ipsa citius Adam quam alia creatura ad inoboedientiam perducere potuit, quoniam de costa illius facta fuerat. Quapropter mulier uirum citius deicit, cum ille eam non abhorrens uerba eius facile assumit." Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 2, chap. 10, p. 19.

20 Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 2 on Creation*, trans. Silano, dist. 21, chap. 1, p. 92.

21 Peter Lombard, *The Sentences: Book 2 on Creation*, trans. Silano, dist. 22, chap. 3, p. 100. Here, Lombard argues against Augustine, who said Eve's pride and Adam's pride were equal and therefore their sins were equal.

22 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 78. "Adam enim uxorem suam culpae posset quod ei consilio suo mortem intulit, sed tamen eam non dimisit quamdiu in hoc saeculo uixit, quoniam illam sibi per diuinam potentiam datam esse cognouit. Vnde propter perfectam caritatem non relinquit homo

What is interesting here is that Hildegard emphasizes the unbreakable bond of marriage, even in the story of the Fall. Although Eve's earlier transgression could be, and often was, used to support the idea that women should be subjected to men, Hildegard does not see it that way. Instead, Hildegard argues that Eve's behaviour did not make Adam blame or abandon her. For Hildegard, then, it was more important for Adam that Eve was given to him by God. The fact that Adam did not divorce Eve supports Hildegard's logic that husbands and wives should not leave their partners.

In Hildegard's interpretation of the creation story, the bond between men and women precedes women's subjection. Both her vision and Genesis explain that husbands and wives should love each other. But Hildegard also uses the story of Adam and Eve to explain why married people should not cheat on their partners—namely, because wives and husbands were born from the same body, just as Eve was created from Adam's body. Adam's affection towards Eve sometimes appears in medieval theology as a justification for why the serpent approached Eve first and why Adam had to listen to Eve. But Hildegard is unique in drawing from the story a moral lesson about why husbands and wives must have a strong bond.²³

Eve, Women, and Water

For Hildegard, the image of living water is central, especially since she uses gardens and plants literally and figuratively. For her, water is to be supplied and flow through a garden to grow plants. Moisture in the form of rain, dew, and fountains leads to *viriditas*, an important concept in Hildegard's theology and medicine. In her letter to an abbot who asked for her advice regarding his office, Hildegard gives him advice in the voice of God. Moisture is

uxorem suam nisi propter rationabilem causam illam quam sibi fidelis ecclesia proponit." Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 2, chap. 11, p. 20.

23 It seems that Adam and Eve's strong bond was emphasized more after the Reformation. Kathleen M. Crowther examines German plays and poems in the Protestant Reformation to show that Adam and Eve's partnership began to be emphasized as a new ideal type of family, partly objecting to the Catholic ideal life of celibacy. See Crowther, *Adam and Eve in the Protestant Reformation*. In the *Glossa ordinaria*, on the other hand, it seems Eve's subordinate status was emphasized rather than Adam and Eve's mutual love. However, Hildegard does not deny that women were subjected to men due to Eve's first transgression.

opposed to bitterness, while wisdom is opposed to grossness and viridity is opposed to labour.²⁴

But you, O friend of the grace of God, you have a garden of people, in which as the representative of Christ you seek to plant many wholesome desires and good works. And through the power of His gifts, the grace of God pours out His dynamic good will upon those desires and those works, and causes the garden to grow green through the dew and the rain of the fountain of living water.²⁵

For Hildegard, virtues are the plants of God, and the plants need to be watered. Women can fulfil this duty, in part because their bodies are wetter, according to medieval physiology. But their knowledge can also contribute to their power, as Sweet notes when discussing the importance of the garden and the gardener in Hildegard's medicine and theology.²⁶ The gardener is Hildegard, who collected healing knowledge to cure people with herbs, as many women did.

On the other hand, the Virgin Mary is often referred to as an ever-flowing fountain and a sealed garden, which is not far from the watering image. In his exegesis of the Song of Songs, Honorius of Autun, a theologian and Hildegard's contemporary, explains that the Virgin Mary was the fountain who received and emitted Jesus through her body: "As the Jordan flowed from the mountains, he who consecrated the font of baptism for the world flowed from her womb."²⁷ The image of the fountain is strongly tied to Hildegard's emphasis on baptism. As Newman says, "[t]he womb" of the Church is the baptismal font, fertilized and sanctified by the Spirit—an act dramatically symbolized at the consecration of the font, when the paschal candle is plunged into the water.²⁸

The image of the fountain is not just limited to the Virgin Mary, however, and Newman also points out the importance of fountains in Hildegard's understanding of women.²⁹ For example, in her response to Archbishop Hillinus of Trier, who was seeking her comforting words, Hildegard refers

24 "Hildegard to Adam, the Abbot," in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 85r/b, 1:195.

25 "Hildegard to Adam, the Abbot," in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 85r/b, 1:195.

26 Sweet, *Rooted in the Earth*.

27 Honorius, *The Seal of Blessed Mary*, trans. Carr, 51.

28 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 189.

29 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, 98.

to women as fountains when encouraging him to perform his office in this “squalid, womanish time (*squalidum tempus muliebris*).” Even when man has more strength, “woman is a fountain of wisdom and a fountain of plenty of joy, which parts man brings to perfection.”³⁰ Both Hildegard and Hillinus acknowledge Hildegard as being a woman and weak. And at the same time, both know that her weakness becomes a strong point.³¹ While women are weak, this weakness makes it possible for women to be filled with sacred knowledge and joy, drawing them towards perfection. Even the first woman, Eve, was compared to a fountain in relation to Adam.³²

Virginity: Sealed vs. Porous

The weak body is also associated with porosity. Its weakness means that it is breakable and something that can be invaded. In medieval Christianity and medicine, this porosity caused by weakness was treated negatively. It was the sign of imperfection, always receiving and sending out something. This weak, porous image also applies to the Hildegardian physiology that women are more susceptible to health issues related to sexual activities and reproductive processes.³³ But even when the woman’s body was generally considered weak and porous, there were different levels of porosity. And it was often supported by the physical state of virginity. Especially when the woman’s sexual experience was described as “rupture,” the virginal body was the one which was relatively less porous. And the virginal body of Mary before and after giving birth to Jesus was more tightly sealed.

30 Modified from “Hildegard to Hillinus, Archbishop of Trier,” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 26r, 1:88. “Mulier autem est fons sapientiae et fons pleni gaudii, quas partes vir ad perfectum ducit.” Hildegard of Bingen, *S. Hildegardis Abbatisae Opera omnia*, ed. Migne, chap. 13, p. 167B.

31 “It has pleased the wisdom of God, which chooses ‘the weak things of the world that he may confound the strong’ [I Cor 1.27].” “Hillinus, Archbishop of Trier, to Hildegard,” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 26, 1:87.

32 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 111. “Magna autem dilectio, que in Adam erat, cum Eva de ipso exiuit, et dulcedo soporis illius, qua tunc dormiuit, in transgressionem eius in contrarium modum dulcedinis uersa est. Et ideo, quia uir hanc magnam dulcedinem in se sentit et habet, ut ‘ceruus ad fontem,’ sic ipse uelociter ad feminam currit et femina ad ipsum in similitudine horrei aree, que multis ictibus percutitur et ad calorem perducitur, cum grana in ea excutuntur.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §283, p. 176.

33 Cadden, “It Takes All Kinds,” 171.

Sarah Salih examines the complexity of meanings and practices attached to the virginal body in the Middle Ages. In her *Versions of Virginity in Late Medieval England*, Salih introduces different levels of virginity. She argues that virginity can be achieved through an invincible precondition, communal life, and re-imagined physical states.³⁴ For example, the Virgin Mary's undoubted integrity needs to be approached differently than Hildegard and her nuns' monastic virginity. While the Virgin Mary's keeping of her virginity before, during, and after giving birth to Christ is impossible to achieve for other women, her existence and presence in the Christian tradition opened the gates for Christian women to be centred in Christian traditions and discourses regarding the body.

Medieval Christianity emphasizes the Virgin Mary's fertile and pure body as a sealed fountain. Mary's virginal body is often referred to as closed and sealed against evil, sexual activity, and any form of sin. For example, Origen relates the closed body of the Virgin Mary to the closed gate in Ezekiel³⁵ in order to support her virginity from the more profound authority of Hebrew Scripture.³⁶ But even the most sealed woman, the Virgin Mary, has a certain level of porosity. While she is known to have had no physical contact with men, she certainly received the Holy Spirit in her body. In Marian devotion, her body is understood as sealed against the male seed but touched by the Holy Spirit. Although the body of the Saviour's mother should be sealed, it should also be open to receive the Holy Spirit and store it until the child's delivery. Honorius of Autun, Hildegard's contemporary theologian, praises the sealed nature of Mary's body in his exegesis of the Song of Songs,³⁷ a biblical book that, despite its complicated symbolism and meanings, provides an important opportunity for women to be the centre of its allegorical interpretations.³⁸ However, at the same time, Honorius focuses on Mary being a sealed "fountain," suggesting that things flow in and out of her despite the

34 Salih, *Versions of Virginity*, 1–2.

35 "Then said the LORD unto me; This gate shall be shut, it shall not be opened, and no man shall enter in by it; because the LORD, the God of Israel, hath entered in by it, therefore it shall be shut." Ezekiel 44:2–3.

36 Rubin, *Mother of God*, 55.

37 Honorius, *The Seal of Blessed Mary*, trans. Carr, 51–52.

38 McAvoy has focused on the symbolism of the garden in explaining the importance of women and their wombs as represented in the Song of Songs. See "Chapter One: Out of Eden: The Framing of Eve" in McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden*.

seal. Similarly, the Virgin Mary was referred to as the window of heaven, which can receive the “sun of justice shone into the house of the world.”³⁹

Miri Rubin also emphasizes the Virgin Mary’s Annunciation scene and points out the characteristics of Annunciation scenes.⁴⁰ The Annunciation usually happens in a closed room where the Archangel Gabriel delivers the news. This enclosed space, however, has windows through which a dove, signifying the Holy Spirit, sometimes enters. While the windows might have various shapes and positions, some important illustrations show that the Virgin Mary receives the Holy Spirit through the window. These depictions represent the various levels of permeability that characterized even the most closed woman. The woman’s body cannot be completely sealed off even when she keeps her virginity. When women keep their bodies virginal, they are closed to men while they are still open to the Holy Spirit.

Woman as Vessel

Hildegard represents the woman’s body as a vessel, permeable to different fluids and able to contain a foetus as well as semen; her *Scivias* also represents the womb as a vessel, but one permeable to spiritual substances and able to contain souls. Admittedly, the idea of the physical vessel is to some extent applicable to males as well. For example, Hildegard depicts human bodies in general as containers in Vision Four of Book One of *Scivias*, where she describes the souls and bodies of human beings:

And behold! I saw on the earth people carrying milk in earthen vessels and making cheeses from it; and one part was thick, and from it strong cheeses were made; and one part was thin, and from it weak cheeses were curdled; and one part was mixed with corruption, and from it bitter cheeses were formed.⁴¹

Here Hildegard describes the human figures in her vision as holding vessels full of milk, which she goes on to explain represents the “human seed.” Indeed, in her exegesis of this vision, Hildegard draws an analogy between human conception and the process of milk being turned into different cheeses.

39 Honorius, *The Seal of Blessed Mary*, trans. Carr, 209.

40 Rubin, *Mother of God*, 342–45.

41 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 109. “Et ecce uidi in terra homines in uasis suis lac portantes et inde caseos facientes, cuius quaedam pars spissa fuit, unde fortes casei facti sunt, pars quaedam tenuis, de qua debiles casei coagulate sunt, et pars quaedam tabe permixta, de qua amari casei effecti sunt.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 4, p. 61.

*You see also on the earth people carrying milk in earthen vessels and making cheese from it; these are the people in the world, both men and women, who have in their bodies human seed, from which the various races of people are procreated. One part is thick, and from it strong cheeses are made; for that strong semen, which is usefully and well matured and tempered, produces energetic people, to whom brilliant spiritual and bodily gifts are given by their great and noble ancestors, making them flourish in prudence, discretion and usefulness in their works before God and Man, and the Devil finds no place in them. And one part is thin, and from it weak cheeses are curdled; for this semen, imperfectly matured and tempered in a weak season, produces weak people, who are for the most part foolish, languid and useless in their works in the sight of God and the world, not actively seeking God. But also one part is mixed with corruption, and from it bitter cheeses are formed; for that semen is basely emitted in weakness and confusion and mixed uselessly, and it produces misshapen people, who often have bitterness, adversity and oppression of heart and are thus unable to raise their minds to higher things.*⁴²

Hildegard makes it clear through her explanation of this vision that people with their seed are like vessels holding milk: from the nature of each one's milk, different kinds and qualities of people can emerge. The important feature of this vision is that Hildegard represents the human bodies of both sexes as vessel-like containers of essential reproductive materials. Whether man or woman, each person has a body like a vessel containing their differently decocted seed, each with its own nature like different cheeses.

42 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 118. "Vides etiam in terra homines in uasis suis lac portantes et inde caseos facientes: qui sunt in mundo homines, tam uiri quam mulieres, in corporibus suis humanum semen habentes, de quo genus diuersorum populorum procreatur; cuius quaedam pars spissa est, unde fortes casei fiunt: quia semen illud in fortitudine sua utiliter et bene coctum et temperatum strenuos homines producit, quibus etiam magna claritas tam spiritualium quam carnalium donorum in magnis patribus et in altis personis tribuitur, ita quod in prosperitate prudentiae, discretionis et utilitatis in operibus suis et coram Deo et coram hominibus perspicue florent, quoniam diabolus in eis locum suum non inuenit. Et pars quaedam tenuis de qua debiles casei coagulantur: quoniam hoc semen in teneritudine sua inutiliter semicoctum et semitemperatum teneros homines educit, ita quod isti multoties stulti, tepidi et inutiles tam apud Deum quam apud saeculum in operibus suis sunt, quia Deum strenue non quaerunt. Sed et pars quaedam tabe permixta est, de qua amari casei efficiuntur, quia semen illud in debilitate permixtionis nequiter eductum et inutiliter commixtum informes homines efficit, ita quod illi saepe amaritudinem, difficultatem et oppressionem cordis habent, unde mentem suam multoties ad superiora leuare non ualent." Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 13, pp. 75–76.

However, when Hildegard comes to the female process of childbirth, she emphasizes the womb as a vessel capable of containing more than just fluids or physical substances. The process of the ensoulment of any embryo involves a kind of spiritual transfer because the independent life of the body only begins when the soul enters the embryo. It is clear that Hildegard sees this as a divine process, and the soul when it enters the womb is in a divinely pristine state, as her exegesis indicates:

And you see the image of a woman who has a perfect human form in her womb. This means that after a woman has conceived by human semen, an infant with all its members whole is formed in the secret chamber of her womb. And behold! *By the secret design of the Supernal Creator that form moves with vital motion;* for, by God's secret and hidden command and will, fitly and rightly at the divinely appointed time the infant in the maternal womb receives a spirit, and shows by the movements of its body that it lives, just as the earth opens and brings forth the flowers of its use when the dew falls on it. *So that a fiery globe which has no human lineaments possesses the heart of that form;* that is, the soul, burning with a fire of profound knowledge, which discerns whatever is within the circle of its understanding, and, without the form of human members, since it is not corporeal or transitory like a human body, gives strength to the heart and rules the whole body as its foundation, as the firmament of Heaven contains the lower regions and touches the higher.⁴³

In this passage, Hildegard echoes in ecstatic terms her description of ensoulment in *Cause et cure*. The pristine soul, envisioned as a fiery globe as it enters "the secret chamber" of the womb, performs the mystery of its life-giving function, animating the members and touching the brain. In this way, the womb becomes almost a holy of holies, a sacred container. Having a

43 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 119–20. "Sed quod uides quasi mulierem uelut integram formam hominis in utero suo habentem: hoc est quia postquam femina humanum semen conceperit, in integritate membrorum suorum infans in abdito cubiculo uentris ipsius formatur. Et ecce per secretam dispositionem superni conditoris eadem forma motum uiuidae motionis dat: quoniam cum in secreta et occulta iussione et uoluntate Dei infans in materno utero congruo et recte diuinitus disposito tempore spiritum acceperit, motu corporis sui se uiuere ostendit, uelut terra se aperit et flores fructus sui profert cum ros super eam ceciderit, ita quod uelut ignea sphaera nulla lineamenta humani corporis habens cor eiusdem formae possidet: quia anima in igne profundae scientiae ardens diuersas res circuitu suae comprehensionis discernit nec formam humanorum membrorum habens, quoniam ipsa nec corporea nec caduca quemadmodum corpus hominis est, cor hominis confortat, quod quasi fundamentum corporis existens totum corpus regit, uelut firmamentum caeli inferiora continet et superiora tegit." Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 16, pp. 77–78.

womb, women are thus represented as permeable to the divinely pure substance of the soul as well as the normal fluids of blood and semen.

As we have seen, Hildegard also describes the human body in *Cause et cure* as a container of the soul. In *Scivias*, she places this concept in the context of the whole process of creation and embodied human experience:

The Law is ordained for human salvation, and the prophets show forth the hidden things of God; so also human senses protect a person from harmful things and lay bare the soul's interior. For the soul emanates the senses. How? It vivifies a person's face and glorifies him with sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch, so that by this touch he becomes watchful in all things. For the senses are the sign of all the powers of the soul, as the body is the vessel of the soul. *How? The senses close all the powers of the soul.* What does this mean? A person is recognized by his face, sees with his eyes, hears with his ears, opens his mouth to speak, feels with his hands, walks with his feet; and so the senses are to a person as precious stones and as a rich treasure sealed in a vase. But as the treasure within is known when the vase is seen, so also the powers of the soul are inferred by the senses.⁴⁴

This vision presents the body as the vessel of the soul. A person engages with the world by using their eyes, mouth, hands, and feet. This is only possible because the soul sits in the body. The soul in turn receives sensory input through the bodily members, enabling consciousness and judgment. Hildegard describes the soul in the body as being like precious stones in a sealed vase (or container). According to Hildegard, when you see a sealed vase, you assume that there are jewels inside, because a vase is supposed to contain and protect a valuable thing. Likewise, if you see a human body, you can expect it to contain the precious treasure of a soul.

44 The Latin in the footnote has “Quomodo? Sensus omnes uires animae claudit” which is missing from the English translation. I have added this omitted passage in italics: “Therefore, I placed my translation in italic: “How? The senses close all the powers of the soul.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 123. “Lex ad salutem hominis posita est, et prophetae occulta Dei manifestant, sic et sensus hominis quaeque nociua ab homine depellit et interiora animae denudat. Nam anima sensum expirat. Quomodo? Ipsa hominem uiuente facie uiuificat et uisu, auditu, gustu, odoratu et tactu glorificat, ita quod homo sensu tactus peruigil in omnibus rebus fit. Sensus enim signum omnium uirium animae est, sicut et corpus uas animae est. Quomodo? Sensus omnes uires animae claudit. Quid est hoc? Homo in facie cognoscitur, oculis uidet, auribus audit, os ad loquendum aperit, manibus palpat, pedibus ambulat et ideo sensus est in homine uelut pretiosi lapides et ut pretiosus thesaurus in uase signatus. Sed ut uas uidetur et ut in eo thesaurus scitur, ita etiam in sensu ceterae uires animae intelleguntur.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 24, p. 83.

Hildegard believed that the body became a container for the soul while in the mother's womb. When a woman receives a man's semen and holds it until it comes into contact with the menstrual materials, the womb becomes a container for the foetus. More importantly, the womb's shelter helps the developing foetus become a container for the soul made and implanted by God. In explaining this process, Hildegard emphasizes how the womb always serves as a container for something slightly miraculous, even in ordinary childbirth. This image of the womb as a vessel for something divine is an important motif throughout *Scivias* and Hildegard's theological understanding of human beings, as it represents her sense that the womb always mediates the flow of life by receiving and emitting a soul. Hildegard treats all kinds of flow associated with birth as essentially divine and vital:

For as Man was born in the flesh when divine power created him in the form of Adam, so the Holy Spirit revives the life of the soul by the pouring out of water; It receives into Itself the spirit of the person, restoring him to life, as he is first brought into life on a wave of blood when he comes out of the vessel of the body. And just as a human form is then lovingly formed and called human, so now the soul of the person is vivified in water before the eyes of God, so that God knows that he is an inheritor of life.⁴⁵

In this passage, Hildegard describes baptism as analogous to birth: the flow of water is analogous to the flow of blood during childbirth as the baby exits the vessel of the womb. Here God's grace and a mother's delivery of her child are drawn together as parts of a single sacred process.

These examples suggest that in *Scivias*, Hildegard depicts the human body, and a woman's body in particular, as an important vessel for the soul. Of course, according to Hildegard, the most perfect example of the body as a vessel is the Virgin Mary, who conceived and bore Jesus in her womb. However, in all cases, this positive description of the human body as a vessel is strongly connected to Hildegard's depiction in *Cause et cure* of the body as the container of the soul. Grounded in her medical knowledge, Hildegard presents a positive, and even sacred, image of the womb as bringing forth

45 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 181–82. “Nam sicut homo nascitur ex carne, diuina potestate in forma Adae illum creante, ita Spiritus sanctus recuperat uitam animae per inundationem aquae, cum ipsa spiritum hominis in se accipit eum resuscitans ad uitam, ut prius in unda sanguinis suscitatus est, cum in corporali uasculo manifestatus est. Vt enim forma hominis tunc amabiliter formatur, ita quod homo dicitur, sic spiritus hominis ante oculos Dei nunc in aqua uiuificatur, ita quod eum Deus ad hereditatem uitae nouit.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 2, bk. 3, chap. 30, p. 153.

not only the miraculous souls and bodies of all children, but also human salvation through the body of Jesus.

Hildegard's understanding of Eve and Mary demonstrates that the theological narrative of sin and redemption is deeply rooted in physiological characteristics. Eve's initial flexibility and Mary's receptive virginity both exemplify how bodily vulnerability creates spiritual potentials. Through her close theological and medical examinations, Hildegard challenges the traditional medieval view of female bodies as inherently problematic, instead recasting their porosity as divinely purposeful.