



THE MEDIEVAL WOMB

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN'S VIEWS ON THE FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE BODY

by

MINJI LEE

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PREFACE

WHILE I WAS in graduate school, I suffered greatly with my menstruation. From my undergraduate years, I had wanted to study this subject. Occasionally, people asked why I was studying menstruation, especially in South Korea, where discussing it openly was uncommon. Jokingly, I answered that it was due to my PMS—though in retrospect, I should have consulted an ob-gyn rather than making light of my condition.

My first scholarly encounter with menstruation came in 2007 during an anthropology of religion class, where we read Marla N. Power's "Menstruation and Reproduction: An Oglala Case."¹ Power critiqued earlier anthropological approaches in which many (male) authors interpreted menstruation negatively across cultures. Through her analysis of the Buffalo ceremony—a puberty ritual for girls experiencing their first menstruation in the Oglala tribe of North America—she demonstrated that these rites did not necessarily convey negative interpretations of women's menstruation. Power implied that menstruation cannot be reduced to a single concept of pollution.

This article illuminated for me not only that menstruation and women's bodily functions could hold multiple meanings, but also that there existed a strong interdisciplinary need to understand women's bodies in religious studies. What struck me was not simply that a scholar discussed menstruation—a topic normally deemed "private" and "sexual"—but that women's menstruation could be embedded with various cultural meanings beyond taboos. Power's study profoundly influenced my desire to explore how women's bodies have been interpreted throughout religious history.

My own physical suffering was considerable: heavy flows, extreme premenstrual syndrome. With one week of PMS followed by a week of menstruation, I spent half my life in discomfort. I blamed my female body with its womb, especially as my male colleagues seemed unburdened by such afflictions. I failed to recognize that my body was sending an important message that my lifestyle—insufficient sleep, no weekends, long hours in the graduate office, constant stress—was unsustainable. In Hildegardian terms, my body was manifesting symptoms of imbalance. By the time I took a leave from my graduate program, I was menstruating twice monthly, each time with such profuse bleeding that no sanitary product sufficed even for an hour.

1 Power, "Menstruation and Reproduction," 54–65.

During my semester away, I consulted a physician who was my mother's friend and a devout Catholic. She had visited European pilgrimage sites and offered not only medical treatment but also counselling and spiritual guidance. Naturally, I seized the opportunity to discuss my dissertation topic. Though she might not have agreed with all my perspectives, she listened attentively. One day, she mentioned having heard from God and seeing a fountain in her dream. This reference to a "fountain" startled me, as I had just begun discovering this imagery in Hildegard's *Cause et cure* and *Scivias*. While it would have been gratifying to have my understanding of Hildegard confirmed by the doctor's vision, establishing my interpretation with scholarly certainty required years of additional research.

What remained absolutely clear throughout my graduate studies was the consistent presence of women who supported me through various health issues. My friend C supplied cranberry juice when I suffered from cystitis during a visit to Taiwan. My childhood friend M sent dried mugwort tablets from South Korea when my menstruation would not cease. Y shipped various health supplements, lamenting the inadequacies of American health-care. These women's assistance helped me envision Hildegard's era, when women necessarily supported one another in the absence of modern medicine. This book represents my attempt to express gratitude to these women.

I am deeply indebted to my advisors and professors at Rice University as well as Seoul National University. Where else could I have discovered such a perfect topic within religious studies? Particular thanks go to my exceptional Ph.D. advisor, Claire Fanger. I am grateful for everything you offered, including our shared experience of sampling mugwort tea. I learned immensely from you and cherish our times writing, eating, and enjoying coffee and tea together.

I appreciate my parents. As the daughter of a church minister and a nurse, with a pharmacist sister, it seems almost inevitable that I would become a joint professor in the Department of Religion and Medical Humanities at Montclair State University. The Religion Department and the College of Humanities and Social Science at Montclair generously supported work on this book, including its Open Access publication. I am grateful to my dear colleagues at Seoul National University, Rice University, and now Montclair State University. Thanks also to P for persistently encouraging me to transform my thesis into a book. Finally, I thank every woman who helps and cares for herself and others. This book exists because of your labour, whatever form of care you have provided to the world.