

FEMALE POROSITY AND SACRED FLOW

FROM EVE AND MARY TO HILDEGARD OF BINGEN

HILDEGARD OF BINGEN was an extraordinary figure whose life embodied the very porosity that she attributed to the female body in her medical and theological works.¹ Born into a noble family in 1098, she was dedicated to the Church as the age of eight as a tithe to God—the tenth and last child of her parents. This early surrender made her physically and spiritually permeable to divine influence from a young age. She claimed to have experienced visions since early childhood, though she initially kept these experiences hidden. As she later wrote, “From my earliest childhood, before my bones, nerves, and veins were fully strengthened, I have always seen this vision in my soul, even to the present time when I am more than seventy years old.”² Although she started to publicly share her receipt of visions when she was in her forties, her hagiography asserts that she was so open to visions from God that she even received visions before being born.³ In other words, she was open to God’s messages even in her mother’s womb.

Hildegard was sent to live with Jutta of Sponheim, a female hermit, at the age of eight, and they entered an enclosure belonging to the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg with two other women on November 1, 1112. Under Jutta’s guidance, Hildegard learned to read Scripture, particularly the Psalms, in Latin. Despite her claims of being “unlearned” and “simple,” Hildegard clearly received a substantial education. After Jutta’s death in 1136, Hildegard became *magistra*, mother, and abbess to the women at Disibodenberg while her community was growing. In this transitional role, Hildegard’s first significant act of spiritual and physical boundary-crossing appeared, which would then continue throughout her life.

In 1141, at the age of forty-two, Hildegard had a pivotal mystical experience that transformed her relationship to her visions. She described this moment as one of profound physical permeability: “Heaven was opened

¹ For more information about her life and its sources, see Embach, “The Life of Hildegard of Bingen,” 11–36.

² *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, ed. Klaes, 3.

³ Newman, “Hildegard and Her Hagiographers,” 19.



Figure 1. "Hildegard with Flaming Light of Fire."
 In Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias Codex*, pt. 1, vision 1, fol. 1r, ca. 1175.
 Original lost, hand-copied on parchment, ca. 1930. Rudesheim-
 Eibingen, St. Hildegard's Abbey. Courtesy of St. Hildegard's Abbey.

and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame.”⁴ This divine illumination and word literally flowed through her bodily boundaries, entering not just her mind but her heart and breast as well. In her portrait along with her secretary Volmar in the manuscript of *Scivias*, she is receiving a flame directly to her head, observed by Volmar.

According to Margot Fassler, this portrait is unique, with imagery not seen in other authors’ portraits.⁵ And the illustrations that depicts her writing all share a presentation of her as porous and therefore a vessel of God’s visual and verbal messages. Her own emphasis on being “uneducated,” although it seems that it was a part of her humility *topos*, has the effect of making her the vessel of God’s messages. The notion that religious women served as “vessels” for God was often accompanied by a *topos* that women ultimately had no choice but to let the words of God pour out from them. Hildegard repeatedly insisted that she was so uneducated that there was no way she could have just been pretending her knowledge originated from God, something that can be also found in the lives of other female saints in the Middle Ages. It meant that she should be open to receive and at the same time to spit out God’s words.

After receiving a divine command to “[s]ay and write what you see and hear,” Hildegard initially hesitated to follow this instruction. Her reluctance was overcome when her body manifested her spiritual struggle,⁶ something that can be found in the experience of other mystical women such as Angela of Foligno and Catherine of Siena. This pattern, using bodily illness to communicate divine displeasure, became a significant strategy in Hildegard’s life, demonstrating how her physical body functioned as a medium between earthly and divine realms. With Bernard of Clairvaux’s help, Hildegard received permission from Pope Eugenius III to record her

4 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 59. “Maximae coruscationis igneum lumen aperto caelo ueniens totum cerebrum meum transfudit et totum cor totumque pectus meum uelut flamma non tamen ardens sed calens ita inflammauit.” Hildegard of Bingen, “Protestificatio veracium visionum a deo fluentium,” *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, 3–4.

5 Fassler, *Cosmos, Liturgy, and the Arts*, 67.

6 “In the meantime, because I have kept silent about this vision, I have been laid low, bedridden in my infirmities, and am unable to raise myself up.” “Hildegard to Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux,” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 1, 1:28.

visions.⁷ This papal approval allowed her to cross the gendered boundary that typically prevented women from working as teachers or theologians. Her body became a channel for divine knowledge, enabling her to transcend the normal limitations placed on women in the medieval Church. In a letter to her spiritual companion Elizabeth of Schönau, Hildegard described this sacred permeability that she performed throughout her life: “Human being is a vessel, which God built for himself, and which he imbued with his breath, so that he might complete his works in it.”⁸

Perhaps the most dramatic example of Hildegard’s bodily porosity as a strategic tool came when she decided to move her community from Disibodenberg to Rupertsberg. When the abbot resisted her plan, Hildegard fell ill, interpreting her sickness as divine punishment for her failure to fulfil God’s will, similar to her sickness when she refused to write down her visions. Eventually, her strategic “charismatic illness” convinced the Church authorities to withdraw their objections, allowing her to establish an independent female community at Rupertsberg.⁹ Later, she founded a second community at Eibingen, further demonstrating her remarkable ability to cross established boundaries through her claimed divine connection to her body.

Her connections reached to people, too. During her life, Hildegard of Bingen maintained a lively correspondence with the powerful figures of her time, including emperors, popes, and theologians. Her letters show her moving fluidly between the postures of humility and authority—describing herself as a “poor little weak form of a woman”¹⁰ while simultaneously delivering bold prophetic admonitions to male authorities who had “the twin advantages of formal education and gender superiority in a patriarchal society.”¹¹ This rhetorical fluidity allowed her to speak with authority while acknowledging the gendered limitations of her position.

Hildegard’s intellectual output demonstrates a similarly permeable quality. She moved between genres and disciplines with remarkable facility, producing works of theology based on her visions, such as *Scivias*, the *Liber vitae meritorum*, and the *Liber divinorum operum*; natural science and

7 Feiss, “Introduction,” 13.

8 Rapp, “A Woman Speaks,” 21.

9 Newman, “Introduction,” 13.

10 “Hildegard to the Monks,” in Hildegard of Bingen, *Letters*, trans. Baird and Ehrman, no. 113r, 2:59.

11 Kerby-Fulton, “Prophet and Reformer,” 72.

medicine, such as *Cause et cure* and *Physica*; music, such as the *Symphonia*; hagiography; and even an invented language. Her theological and medical works, in particular, represent how she understood the female body as not merely a passive vessel but an active participant in creation, healing, and spiritual transformation.

Hildegard's self-representation as a vessel of God's knowledge worked well in two ways. First, it helped her build authority as a female religious figure, permitting her to channel divine wisdom without claiming personal credit. Second, it enabled her to redefine the vessel image itself, transforming it from a symbol of passivity to one of active mediation, which was not limited to her individual case but extended to all women. Just as she depicted the woman's womb as actively purifying male semen during conception, as will be discussed further later, Hildegard presented herself as actively processing and communicating divine knowledge.

Hildegard died on September 17, 1179, having lived until the remarkable age of eighty-one. Despite popular veneration during her life, she was not officially canonized until 2012, when she was also named a Doctor of the Church—one of only four women to be formally recognized as contributing to the Church intellectually.¹² Granted that the canonization process is complicated and easily influenced by social and political circumstances, Hildegard's delayed official recognition reflects the complex position she occupied as a woman who frequently transcended the boundaries placed upon her sex, remaining, like her view of the female body itself, too fluid to be easily contained or fixed by ecclesiastical categories.

Theorizing Female Porosity: Historical Continuity

Hildegard of Bingen did not invent the concept of female porosity. The understanding of women's bodies as fundamentally porous has deep historical roots, extending from ancient Greek medical theories through medieval theology and into modern scholarly analysis. The humoral theories that informed Hildegard's understanding of the woman's body represent not a medieval discovery but rather the inheritance of ancient Greco-Roman medico-philosophical traditions that continued to evolve for centuries before and after her death. These concepts of female porosity, both as physiological reality and as spiritual metaphor, demonstrate remarkable persistence

12 The other female Doctors of the Church are Angela of Foligno, Catherine of Siena, and Teresa of Ávila.

across disparate historical contexts. What distinguishes Hildegard is not that she rejected these inherited ideas about women's permeable bodies, but rather that she reinterpreted them through her unique theological vision, transforming potential liabilities into spiritual assets.

Numerous historians and philosophers have uncovered this persistent thread in Western thinking about gender and embodiment. Scholars such as Thomas Laqueur, Joan Cadden, and Monica Green have demonstrated how Galenic and Aristotelian models positioned the female body as inherently more open, moist, and permeable than its male counterpart.¹³ These physiological theories found profound expression in medieval religious and literary contexts. Modern feminist scholarship has further illuminated how concepts of female porosity shaped gendered power dynamics. In particular, the work of Caroline Walker Bynum on religious women's bodily practices reveals how medieval Christian culture understood female physicality through its capacity for transformation and permeability.¹⁴ The porous female body was also believed to create vulnerability that made women more easily possessed by either God or evil spirits.¹⁵

Leah DeVun has analyzed how women were linked to softness and leakage, demonstrating how this feminine porosity became equated with moral weakness, "which might invite feminine vanity, torpor, and decadence" and potentially corrupt manly men and the entire social order in the High Middle Ages.¹⁶ DeVun points out that medieval authorities located women's sexuality specifically in the body's openings and pathways, citing how Isidore traced female desire to the umbilicus, while other authorities attributed it to "an anatomically open pathway to the uterus."¹⁷ Such anatomical explanations reinforced the association between female openness and moral vulnerability.

Building on this historical view of female porosity, Vern Bullough demonstrates that misogynistic attitudes towards women's bodies were not solely religious in origin but deeply rooted in ancient medical traditions that medieval scholars inherited.¹⁸ Bullough shows how Aristotelian notions posi-

13 Laqueur, *Making Sex*; Cadden, *Meanings of Sex Difference*; Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*.

14 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*.

15 Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*.

16 DeVun, "Erecting Sex," 29.

17 DeVun, "Erecting Sex," 30.

18 Bullough, "Marriage in the Middle Ages," 485–501.

tioning women as “incomplete men” with inherently inferior, porous bodies were seamlessly integrated into medieval thought systems, even appearing in the works of prominent theologians like Thomas Aquinas. These classical medical traditions, particularly Galen’s characterization of women as colder, moister, and fundamentally more permeable versions of the male ideal, provided seemingly scientific justification for women’s subordination. The persistence of these medical theories about female porosity—that women’s bodies were intrinsically more open, leaky, and susceptible to external influences—offered learned authorities a “natural” explanation for restricting women’s roles and mobility, one that operated alongside and often reinforced religious restrictions.

Similarly, feminist philosophers have examined how feminine fluidity challenges dominant patriarchal discourse. This concept of female fluidity has attracted significant attention from feminist scholars, particularly those employing psychoanalytic approaches. For these theorists, the metaphors of women’s instability and flow provide frameworks for understanding both historical oppression and potential resistance. In *Speculum of the Other Woman*, for instance, Luce Irigaray further develops this concept through her critique of the mechanics of solids that has dominated Western thought. She contrasts this with a mechanics of fluids that better represents feminine experience. Women are not fixed but constantly changing—neither open nor closed. “This incompleteness in her form, her morphology, allows her continually to become something else, though this is not to say that she is ever univocally nothing.”¹⁹ While the flowing and fluid are referred to as “shameful,” “deforming,” and “abhorrent” by men,²⁰ this fluid discourse reflects the physical reality of female bodies that flow monthly, that change shape during pregnancy, that emit milk—all processes that Hildegard, centuries earlier, had recognized as divinely ordained rather than deficient.

While the woman’s womb was the place of human origins, it was often compared to the enclosed garden. Liz McAvoy extensively explores how garden imagery, particularly the enclosed garden, reinforces the paradoxical nature of the female body, both open and closed, both dangerous and sacred, that appears consistently throughout medieval writing about women. Through religious and literary texts, she demonstrates how the female body functioned simultaneously as theological metaphor and physical reality, its permeability serving various symbolic and practical purposes in religious

19 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 229.

20 Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, 237.

discourse. Women's logic of flux is contrasted to the "monolithic, fixed, phallic" reasoning of men, establishing a gender binary based fundamentally on concepts of containment and flow.²¹ Also, McAvoy points out, "these 'feminine' drives based on fluidity, change and renewal tend to become focused upon desire, natality and the maternal, and, like the unconscious, erupt periodically into the text via lacunae in the latter to offer challenge to the intransigence of the Law."²² Thus, women's supposed instability becomes reframed as a potential weapon against the male-centred Church and society. Women's fluid nature can have transformative power.

McAvoy introduces many medieval writings on this subject, and interpretations by feminists who have adapted psychoanalytic approaches to understand medieval women's mystical and physical experience also emphasize women's state of constant movement as "efflorescence."²³ As McAvoy rightly points out, the close association between the woman's body and the garden repeatedly emphasizes female porosity in medieval thought. The enclosed garden, *hortus conclusus*, which appears prominently in the *Song of Songs* and its exegeses as well as in Marian adoration, represents the paradoxical nature of the virginal woman's body, which is simultaneously closed to worldly corruption yet open to divine influence. These gardens are explicitly described as "closed and sealed" against improper entry; yet, crucially, they remain permeable to the right influences, allowing them to flourish, create, and reproduce.²⁴ This imagery perfectly captures the medieval ambivalence toward female porosity: a quality that required careful containment yet remained essential for fulfilling divine purposes.

In this regard, the virginal body presents a fascinating paradox in medieval thought. The Virgin Mary's body is traditionally portrayed as sealed—the quintessential enclosed vessel. Laura Miles examines medieval interpretations of the Annunciation scene to highlight this enclosed nature of Mary's body. Yet her body cannot be entirely sealed, as her womb both receives and delivers God. As Miles notes, in Goscelin of St. Bertin's *Liber confortatorius*, "the Lord would be watching over his 'going in,' in his conception, and over his 'going out,' in his birth."²⁵ This tension between closure and openness

²¹ McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden*, 85.

²² McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden*, 85.

²³ McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden*, 29.

²⁴ McAvoy, *The Enclosed Garden*, 35.

²⁵ Barnes et al., *Writing the Wilton Women*, 166; Miles, *The Virgin Mary's Book*, 55–57.

creates a productive theological ambiguity that medieval thinkers like Hildegard would explore.

Even much later, in eighteenth-century Germany, Barbara Duden identifies “clear echoes and yet fleeting shadows of ideas about humours, fluxes, and the openness of the flesh” of women in medical writings that originated in archaic Greek tradition.²⁶ This remarkable continuity demonstrates how deeply entrenched these concepts were in Western medical and cultural thought. Similarly, Hildegard’s work reveals these ancient concepts not merely as medical theories but as living traditions that shaped both practical medicine and theological understanding in the Middle Ages. However, as DeVun, Bullough, McAvoy, Miles, Duden, and many others demonstrate, “the history of the sexes is a history of the contingent, the changing, and therefore the changeable.”²⁷ It is precisely this changeability that Hildegard seizes upon, transforming traditional notions of female porosity into a positive theological vision.

And this porosity, although it will be fully discussed in later chapters of this book, is very vividly represented in Hildegard’s concept of *viriditas*, the generative greening power essential to creation. Central to Hildegard’s reconceptualization of female porosity was her distinctive understanding of this greening power. While the term had precedent in theological writings—Augustine and Gregory both used it to describe spiritual vitality—Hildegard radically expanded its application to encompass physical processes, particularly those of the female body.²⁸ For her, *viriditas* represented not merely spiritual vigour but the divine life-force manifest in all creation, flowing most visibly in women’s bodies through menstruation, pregnancy, and childbirth. This conceptual innovation allowed her to transform traditional understandings of female “leakiness” from a liability into a privileged connection to divine creative power.

Where her contemporaries saw female fluidity primarily as a danger requiring containment, Hildegard recognized in it a reflection of divine creative power—a means through which the redemptive “greening” of humanity could occur.²⁹ In her book on Hildegard’s medical knowledge, Sweet has pointed out the central importance of fluidity in Hildegard’s *Cause et cure*, particularly how Hildegard’s positive depiction of the female body is

26 Duden, *The Woman Beneath the Skin*, 33.

27 DeVun, “Erecting Sex,” 37.

28 Sweet, *Rooted in the Earth*, 140–42.

29 Fassler, *Cosmos, Liturgy, and the Arts*, 209, 233.

intrinsically linked to her concept of *viriditas*. Sweet suggests that Hildegard would have been exposed to the concept of *viriditas* in the writings of the Church Fathers who adapted this word to signify the growth of good qualities such as faith or love, based on plants' fertility and greenness.³⁰ However, Sweet also points out that Hildegard's usage of *viriditas* is unique in using this concept beyond botanical and theological studies.³¹ Hildegard expanded the concept of *viriditas* to encompass human physiology, asserting that the body itself possesses this greening power, with the female body in particular embodying this creative force.

Hildegard interprets *viriditas* as flowing power, causing the flow of humours, blood, and moisture so that the body can function in the right way. It grows the bodily members of the foetus. It is something that grows hair on one's head or chin. At the same time, moisture is much needed in Hildegard's gynaecology and can be carried by the help of *viriditas*. Throughout her medical and theological works, Hildegard establishes a direct correlation between women's menstrual cycles and the concept of *viriditas*.

The stream of a woman's menstrual period is her life-giving *viriditas*³² and her exuberant vigor. This sprouts into offspring, as a tree with its vital force sprouts and flowers, producing leaves and fruits. So a woman, from the vital force of the menstrual blood, produces flowers and leaves in the fruit of her womb.³³

Hildegard's *viriditas* is directly related to flowing and flowering. For example, Hildegard explains that infertility in younger and older women is caused directly by their physiological deficiency in *viriditas*—a condition that she

30 Sweet, *Rooted in the Earth*, 141–42.

31 Sweet, *Rooted in the Earth*, 150–54.

32 In analysing Hildegard's complex terminology, I have deliberately preserved the Latin *viriditas* rather than adopting Throop's translation of "vital force." This philological decision maintains the term's multivalent significance within Hildegard's corpus, encompassing connotations of verdant fecundity, vital essence, and generative plenitude that operate simultaneously across her natural philosophy, gynaecological writings, and horticultural observations. The untranslated term better preserves the conceptual intersection between theological vitality and biological generativity central to Hildegard's integrated cosmology.

33 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 87. "Riuulus autem menstrui temporis in muliere est genitiua uiriditas et floriditas eius, que in prole frondet, quia ut arbor uiriditate sua floret et frondet et fructus profert, sic femina de uiriditate riuulorum menstrui sanguinis flores et frondes in fructu uentris sui educit." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 2, §227, p. 145.

explicitly parallels with arboreal biology, wherein trees lacking sufficient sap (their botanical *viriditas*) fail to generate flowers and fruit from their roots. This botanical–gynaecological homology exemplifies Hildegard’s emphasis on flowing as an integrated natural philosophy.

At the same time, this physiological function is presented not as mere biological necessity or fertility. For Hildegard, *viriditas* was also the embodiment of divine creative force, positioning the female body as a vessel of sacred generative capacity within the medieval cosmological framework, highlighting female porosity in spiritual and physical senses. Occasionally, Hildegard uses this greening power in relation to the soul when she discusses the soul’s ability to send the vital power of *viriditas* so that the soul can grow or maintain the bodily members.

I [soul] am the living breath in a human being, placed in a tabernacle of marrow, veins, bones and flesh, giving it vitality [*viriditas*] and supporting its every movement.³⁴

...for it gives vitality [*viriditas*] to the marrow and veins and members of the whole body, as the tree from its root gives sap and greenness [*viriditas*] to all the branches.³⁵

This *viriditas*, the greening power, is closely connected to the *vivens fons*, or “living fountain” in English, and the Garden of Eden where the first human beings were placed. Furthermore, Hildegard uses water images in association with *viriditas* in emphasizing its power to grow trees, in contrast to dryness and desiccation.³⁶ Hildegard emphasized this vital greenness in her music as well and indicated that this vital greening power must ultimately be restored through salvation, returning eternal verdancy to humanity. In her illuminated manuscripts, Hildegard frequently depicted *viriditas* as streams of moisture flowing between divine and human realms, often col-

34 Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 113. “Spiraculum tamen uiuens in homine sum, posita in tabernaculum medullarum, uenarum, ossium et carnis, ita quod eidem tabernaculo uiriditatem tribuo et quod illud ubique in motibus suis circumfero.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 4, p. 67.

35 In the English version, *viriditas* was translated as “vitality” and “greenness” in this sentence. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Hart and Bishop, 120. “Quoniam uiriditatem medullarum ac uenarum et omnium membrorum toti corpori tribuit, uelut arbor ex sua radice sucum et uiriditatem omnibus ramis dat.” Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, ed. Führkötter and Carelvaris, pt. 1, bk. 4, chap. 16, p. 78.

36 Peter Loewen argues that Hildegard of Bingen followed the Church Fathers’ use of the concept of greenness, especially Gregory’s understanding of *viriditas* in spiritual terms. See Loewen, “From the Root to the Branches,” 125–69.

oured green to emphasize its connection to growth and fertility. This visual language reinforced her understanding that female bodily processes participate in cosmic patterns of flow rather than representing dangerous aberrations requiring containment. By associating women's physiological processes with this sacred moisture, the same divine moisture that greens the earth after rain and sustains all living things, Hildegard created a theological framework that dignified female embodiment. As we will see, this concept became the cornerstone of her positive reinterpretation of menstruation, conception, and childbirth as sacred rather than polluting processes.

Menstruation and the Porosity of Women's Bodies

Menstruation is the most visible example of a woman's porous body with flow in and out, and medieval medicine acknowledges the importance of menstruation. Many medieval books claim that menstruation is needed not only for conception but also for general health. Menstruation is assumed to be necessary for a woman's body because it does not have the same qualities as a man's body. The female body is so lacking in heat and dryness that it has to expel its waste regularly. Because menstruation is seen as the residue of waste, it is understood as polluting, a notion that is not new in the Middle Ages. The toxic nature of menstruation can be traced all the way back to ancient Greek medicine and natural science. In the physical and medical view of medieval Christianity, women's reproductive organs and their processes are understood as permeable in ways that are both necessary and potentially toxic.

This notion of menstruation as pollution is easily seen in the book *De secretis mulierum*, "Regarding Women's Secrets" in English, composed in the thirteenth or early fourteenth century and falsely attributed to Albertus Magnus, although it is not just Pseudo-Albertus Magnus who believes in poisonous menstruation.³⁷ As Green comments, this book is "one of the most influential documents in the history of medieval scientific attitudes toward women."³⁸ While the superficial purpose of the book is to instruct the reader

37 This manuscript contains a mix of voices—the author (possibly Pseudo-Albertus Magnus), Commentary A, and Commentary B. While the English translation and its Latin manuscript reference combine these different sources, I have not distinguished between them in my analysis.

38 According to Green, this book was neither the first nor the last work to be entitled "women's secrets." From the middle of the thirteenth century, texts began to be written under this title with the common goal of letting men in on the hidden secrets

in biological facts about human generation, the authors repeatedly emphasize women's polluting and dangerous sexuality. The real aim of *De secretis mulierum* is thus to convince men of women's evil and dangerous nature, and in so doing, make them warier of women's sexual bodies.³⁹

According to Pseudo-Albertus, women often cause harm even when they do not intend to because of the polluting nature of their bodies. The evidence for this notion, as Pseudo-Albertus presents it, lies in women's menstruation. He explains menstruation according to the medieval medical understanding of it as a monthly purgation of excess food.⁴⁰ However, menstrual blood is not merely residual food: it is much more toxic and harmful than dietary waste alone would be.⁴¹ In order to show that women's menses are like venom, Pseudo-Albertus draws not only on ancient medical theory but also on popular belief, arguing, for example, that if any tree was touched by menstrual fluid, it would immediately lose its vitality.⁴² Also, if babies in cradles are stared at by menstruating women, it would harm them.⁴³

Possible effects of this "venom" in women's menstrual fluid also include a predisposition for epilepsy and leprosy in children conceived during menstruation. When Pseudo-Albertus advises men not to have intercourse with

supposed to exist regarding women's sexual and reproductive bodies. Green, "From 'Diseases of Women' to 'Secrets of Women,'" 14–15. The work has 105 surviving copies; in particular, it seems that it enjoyed great popularity in the fifteenth century insofar as three-fourths of the surviving copies were produced in this period. Green appreciated how quickly this book appeared in print and how rapidly it spread, considering the fact that printed versions of it started to appear by 1475. Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*, 212n31.

39 Lemay, "Introduction," 16.

40 Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 69. Lemay primarily relied on the Lyons 1590 edition for this translation. "Iuxta quod notandum quod menstruum in muliere nichil aliud est quam superfluum alimenti quod in substantiam rei alende non cedit, sicut est in viris sperma. Et vocatur 'menstruum' in muliere quia fluit quolibet mense ad minus semel cum mulier tante etatis fuerit, hoc est, novem annorum, ut frequencius accidit. Tunc incipit esse fluxus menstruorum quolibet mense propter nature purgacionem." Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *El "De secretis mulierum,"* trans. Barragán Nieto, chap. 1, §§31–37, pp. 234–36.

41 Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *El "De secretis mulierum,"* trans. Barragán Nieto, chap. 1, §§49–53, p. 238.

42 This excerpt from Commentary B is absent from the Lyons 1590 edition of the text. Commentary B represents a separate gloss tradition not included in this particular manuscript. Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 75.

43 Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 129. Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *El "De secretis mulierum,"* trans. Barragán Nieto, chap. 8, §§30–34, p. 450.

women during their period (after providing tips for recognizing whether a woman is menstruating or not), he offers the cautionary information that epilepsy and leprosy would be caused by toxic menstruation.⁴⁴ The idea that intercourse with a woman during her period could cause leprosy was a widely held belief. Yet women were not affected by their venomous menses as long as they did not retain them. On the other hand, menstrual fluids could always potentially harm men and animals, even at a distance.⁴⁵ The implied danger of women's sexual fluids also sometimes occasioned another belief in the toxicity of women's bodies. Some people suggest that certain women are fine even after they swallow poisonous materials,⁴⁶ which in turn helps to explain why women are protected from their own poison even if their menstrual fluids are toxic to men.⁴⁷

On the other hand, women can also become sick if they do not menstruate. According to the cultural belief that menstruation is pollution, if they experience menstruation retention, the toxins in their menses will accumulate. Apparently, however, sexual activity can help them avoid such accumulation. This sickness happens in women because they are full of corrupt and poisonous menses, and therefore it is good that these women, whether young or old, often use men, so that this matter might be expelled. This is especially helpful in young women because they are full of humidity.⁴⁸ Thus,

44 Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 129. "Et caveat sibi quivis quod tunc non coeat, quia pueri qui in menstribus fluentibus concipiuntur maiorem inclinacionem habent ad morbum caducum et ad lepram. Et tales huiusmodi infirmitates qua alia cius inficiuntur lepra, quare propter talem venenositatem mulierum nocivum est coire." Pseudo-Albertus Magnus. *El "De secretis mulierum,"* trans. Barragán Nieto, chap. 8, §§27–28, p. 448n.

45 Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 60. In this footnote, I reference a different edition for the Latin text, since it includes essential commentary absent in the critical edition. The following is from Commentary A. "Et hoc ideo quia mulieres sunt tempore menstrui venenose, ita quòd intoxicant animalia per visum, inficiunt pueros in cunis, maculant speculum bene tersum, et quandoque faciunt coeuntem cum ipsis leprosum fieri, quandoque cancrosum. Et quia malum non euitatur nisi cognitum, ideò necesse est vulentibus abstinere cognoscere immunditiam coius, et multa alia qua in hoc libro docetur, et sic Albertus videns quod iustè peteret, consensit ei, et sic tangitur causa effeciès, mota cùm dicitur scribo, et sic." "Prooemium" in Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *De secretis mulierum*, 5–6.

46 Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 92.

47 Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 191.

48 Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *Women's Secrets*, trans. Lemay, 132. "Hec autem egritudo contingit mulieribus quia multum habundat in eis de menstruo quod corruptum est et venosum. Et ideo cautum est et bonum ut tales, quecumque fuerint sive

menstrual blood or menses can lead to sickness or madness in women who try to lead an ascetic life because they do not have the chance to eliminate their bodily toxins through sexual activity.⁴⁹

These ideas must have been enough to drive home a negative image of the female body to male readers, as they reinforce a pervasive phobia of women's hidden reproductive anatomy and their dangerous bodily fluids. While Pseudo-Albertus's book was popular among medieval men, other male writers also accept the toxicity of menstruation and the polluting nature of menstruating women.

Hildegard's Porosity of Women and the Whole World

But are only women porous? For Hildegard, human beings' sin made not only their own bodies but also the whole world porous, too. Once humankind fell from its pure and perfect state, the offspring of Adam and Eve were impacted by the aftermath, becoming porous and adaptable to change to survive in their degenerated state. Once the first human beings became open to the original sin, they were all exposed to the need to purge themselves on a regular basis. Women have a more regular process for purging themselves: menstruation. However, men also have their own ways to cleanse themselves through sweat, although they were believed to have greater heat and did not need to have regular bleeding.

And according to Hildegard's micro-macrocosm, the whole world had also degenerated from its original state since the first human beings. Before Adam's transgression, the world was not movable and did not need to move, as it was perfect as it was. However, once the human body became imperfect and needed purgation, the whole cosmos succumbed to the same destiny, needing to be cleansed on a regular basis.

Before the fall of Adam, the firmament was immobile and did not revolve; after his fall, it began to move and revolve; after the last day, it will stand immobile, as in the first creation, before Adam's fall. Now, however, it revolves, and is strengthened and firmed by the sun, moon, and stars. If it stood motionless, it would quickly flow away, having become liquid and soft.⁵⁰

iuvenes sive antique, sepe viris utantur, ut materia talis expellatur. Iuvenibus autem multum expedit que in humido habundant." Pseudo-Albertus Magnus, *El "De secretis mulierum,"* trans. Barragán Nieto, chap. 9, §§22–27, p. 460.

49 Jacquart and Thomasset, *Sexuality and Medicine*, 174.

50 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 9. "Ante casum Ade firmamentum immobile fuit et non circumuoluebatur, post casum autem eius cepit moueri et circumuolui; sed post nouissimum diem immobile stabit, ut in prima creatione ante

Previously, the firmament did not move and did not need to move.⁵¹ However, Adam's transgression made it move. According to Hildegard's view, it seems that the whole cosmos, including the heavens, started to suffer from venoms and poisons. Therefore, its motion works as a useful way to purge these poisons when the firmament is not in the purest state. The moving and revolving state is now required, and the firmament would have problems without it.

If it [the firmament] stood motionless, it would quickly flow away, having become liquid and soft. Because it revolves, it cleanses the elements. This cleansing sometimes consists of visible watery, dark clouds; just as water, placed in a pot on the fire, throws off a foam in the boiling heat, and is cleansed.⁵²

For Hildegard, in this degenerated cosmos, the firmament should keep moving. Its movement allows the firmament to clean itself through "visible watery, dark clouds." For Hildegard, the dark colour signifies the negativity.

Hildegard also utilizes the imagery of a pot during this cleansing process. In the later parts of this book, I revisit Hildegard's concept of a vessel or pot to highlight porosity in her optimistic cosmology and anthropology. While vessel or pot images have been popularly used to explain the female body that menstruates and gives birth through an association with weakness, here it is the firmament that becomes weakened; yet, precisely due to this weakness, it achieves self-purification.

casum Ade fuit. Nunc autem ideo circumuoluitur, ut a sole, luna et stellis roboretur et confirmetur, quia si immobile staret, cito liquefactum et emollitum deflueret." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 1, §27, p. 32.

51 The firmament was characterized as a luminous, tenuous expanse, frequently connected with celestial radiance. This characterization corresponds to exegetical traditions emphasizing its ethereal qualities, particularly evident in the Songs of the Sabbath Sacrifice, where textual evidence associates it with the radiance of angelic vestments. Within ancient cosmological frameworks, the firmament constituted one element in a restricted cosmographic taxonomy, typically juxtaposed with heaven and the primordial waters, signifying its function as a fundamental structural component in premodern cosmic architecture.

52 Hildegard of Bingen, *Causes and Cures*, trans. Throop, 9. "Quia si immobile staret, cito liquefactum et emollitum deflueret. Ex hoc etiam, quod modo circumuoluitur, elementa purgat, et purgatio illa interdum sunt aquose et nigre nubes, quas uidemus, uelut etiam aqua, cum ad ignem in olla ponitur, et in feruore caloris spumam eicit et purgatur." Hildegard of Bingen, *Beate Hildegardis Cause et cure*, ed. Moulinier and Berndt, bk. 1, §27, p. 32.



Figure 2. "The Creation with the Universe and the Cosmic Man." In Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, thirteenth century. Lucca, Biblioteca Statale di Lucca, MS 1942, fol. 9r. By permission of the Ministry of Culture—Biblioteca Statale di Lucca. Further reproduction, duplication, dissemination, or publication of this image by any means, whether for profit or not, without the authorization of the Biblioteca Statale di Lucca, is prohibited.

For Hildegard, once humankind committed sin and fell from a pure state, it became important to keep the right balance in the human body, the economy of salvation, the Church, and the whole cosmos in her view of the microcosm and macrocosm.⁵³ Once they become degenerate and therefore start to move, they kept moving. Just as a woman's body cleans itself through the movement of the blood in her period, so also the firmament cleans itself. This motion is especially highlighted as a "flow" when Hildegard analyzes the woman's body, which goes through menstruation, childbirth, and even salvation.

Hildegard's Counter: Positive Porosity

Hildegard of Bingen advocates how and why this process of womanly purgation can become beneficial not only to women but to all of humankind and the whole world. As we have all degenerated, none of us are better off than women, according to Hildegard, a view that sharply distinguishes her from male theologians or medical theorists who discussed and explained menstrual pollution. While menstrual anxiety is also based on women's porosity, allowing menstrual fluids to flow out to pollute men and other beings, Hildegard sees menstruation as the possibility of purgation and purification. A woman's menstruation is the flow out of a woman's body that cleans her body of food waste. Men do not have this flow, as their bodies burn up these residues with their strong heat.

What traits characterize a woman as a woman in the medieval Christian world? Hildegard of Bingen, like many of her contemporaries, focuses on women's reproductive role, understanding female identity largely through reproductive body parts. Medieval physicians and intellectuals routinely emphasized women's reproductive organs, particularly the womb, and their distinctive physiological makeup, characterized by weakness, fragility, coldness, and dampness. These discussions typically concluded that women represented inferior versions of men in virtually every respect. From both theological and social perspectives, a woman's purpose was understood primarily as bearing children, while women's medical issues were predominantly viewed in relation to sexual desire and reproductive function.

In these fundamental assumptions, Hildegard shares much with other writers of her time. Where she diverges—and this marks her revolutionary contribution—is in her interpretation of these physical characteristics.

53 Kalas, "Hildegard's *Causae et curae*," 2.

From contemporaneous narratives of women's weak and leaky bodies, Hildegard uncovers what might be called positive porosity. She transforms perceived weakness into strength, reinterpreting female physical openness as a divinely ordained capacity for healing and salvation. This reframing would profoundly influence her understanding of women's bodies and their spiritual significance throughout her work.

This examination of female porosity reveals how Hildegard integrates the physical realities of women's bodies with theological representations of divine receptivity. For Hildegard, the body's openness is not a weakness. Rather, it is a foundational principle that enables spiritual transformation and salvation. In this way, medical understanding and theological vision become mutually reinforcing aspects of her perspective.

