

INTRODUCTION

WEAKNESS. VULNERABILITY. SOFTNESS. Susceptibility. Receptibility. Versatility. Fickleness. Talkativeness. Passivity. Airiness. Permeability. Emptiness. Throughout history, women's bodies have been described as weak, soft, leaky, and open to outside influences. These ideas of "porosity"—their bodies' openness to flows and external forces—appear repeatedly in medieval European medical texts, religious writing, and literature. Often, these descriptions supported negative views of women as physically and morally inferior, which has contributed to modern understandings and treatment of women. Yet what if these same qualities could be seen not as weakness but as sources of salvation, healing, and divine connection?

This book examines how Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179), a remarkable twelfth-century German Benedictine nun, healer, and visionary, transformed traditional ideas about women's bodies. Rather than accepting the conventional view that women's physical nature made them lesser beings, Hildegard reinterpreted and reimagined female porosity as a sacred gift and healing power, a divine channel through which healing and salvation could flow. In Hildegard's writings, women's bodies appear as fountains, vessels, gardens, and wombs, images rich with both natural and spiritual meanings. These were not merely poetic or analogical comparisons; they reflect Hildegard's understanding of the female body as a site where divine and physiological communication occurs. In her medical work *Cause et cure* and her visionary text *Scivias*, Hildegard presents the female body, especially the womb, as a vessel ordained by God to receive, transform, and create life. Through this perspective, she reframed traditional associations of women with weakness and danger, offering instead a vision of purification, healing, salvation, and spiritual authority.

There are some major differences from the tradition in the way Hildegard of Bingen treats the woman's reproductive body. Drawing on her gynaecological and theological writings, I show how she offers a distinctive example of a female writer representing women's bodies as having beneficial and positive powers. I thus focus on the womb and women's reproductive bodies as the core of understanding women in medieval culture from both men's and women's perspectives, contrasting Hildegard's theories of

women's reproductive bodies with male-centred views handed down by the traditions of medicine and theology she learned. I argue that Hildegard represents the "womanly" body (despite its weakness) as having beneficial aspects not given to males because of the purgative and re-creative power of the womb. While she is neither the first nor the only theorist who sees the womb and women's reproductive role as the core of gender difference, I present her as one among few scholars who emphasize women's reproductive organs as having important, divinely ordained functions. I contrast her to many medieval theologians, who insist that feminine reproductive processes are a punishment brought on by Eve's fall, and many medieval physicians, who see them as evidence of women's inferior bodies. I support my argument by drawing mainly on two of Hildegard's writings, *Scivias* and *Cause et cure*.

Here, my aim is not to represent her as a proto-feminist or her views as liberating women. Hildegard of Bingen still heavily depends on the contemporary stereotypical gender roles of her time, such as the popular image of females as the weaker and inferior sex, when she explains the creation and bodily conditions of human beings. However, it is noteworthy that she was not a woman who exactly fit the medieval gender stereotypes. Above all, Hildegard of Bingen was not a weak woman. Despite ecclesial limitations and difficulties imposed on her due to her femaleness, she was someone given to raising her voice in theological and political matters, as seen in her extensive correspondence with clerical and political authorities who sought her opinions. Her influence was more significant than was common among medieval women, though there are a few other cases found among saintly women who spoke from the authority of visions and mystical experience.

Hildegard of Bingen was neither a wife nor a mother, which were the roles expected of medieval women. She was brought up in religious life from an early age and remained celibate throughout her life. Nevertheless, she showed sympathy to women who were wives and mothers, understanding their reproductive processes and functions. As an older nun, she provided care for women in childbirth and remedies for menstrual pains and problems. We find no instances where Hildegard treated menstruation, conception, or childbirth as polluting or as dangerous to males, though it was common to find these attitudes in men's writing. These less judgmental views were based on Hildegard's fundamentally optimistic position that all men and women were created with a divine purpose by God to engage in roles that were not just hierarchical but, importantly, complementary to each other.

I build upon the work of certain pioneers in medieval women's historical studies to support this positive depiction of the woman's body and religious role. Caroline Walker Bynum opens the gate for the study of medieval women by showing how women's religiosity and devotional practices need to be investigated separately, alongside those of medieval men.¹ Barbara Newman continues to be the most important writer about Hildegard of Bingen's theology of the feminine.² Monica Green has shown in many studies that medieval medical culture was not entirely controlled by men but also included important contributions by women.³ Ruth Mazo Karras investigates how medieval women are understood, showing how, despite prevalent misogyny, they contribute to, as well as participate in, society and culture.⁴ And Dyan Elliot emphasizes how women's weakness and porosity transformed into the possibility of receiving the Holy Spirit.⁵

This book differs from the work of these major historians by its narrow focus on one material and conceptual aspect of the distinction between women and men: the womb and its functions, representing woman's porosity. By the conclusion of this book, I hope to show how Hildegard of Bingen appreciates women's reproductive bodies and their functions as important small mirrors of God's creation and salvation. Granted that the Virgin Mary's womb was already understood as an important object of praise for its role in bringing Jesus into this world, I suggest that Hildegard of Bingen also writes about ordinary women while emphasizing the positive meanings and divine powers attributed to the womb and the female reproductive body. Even when Hildegard follows the traditional notion of women as the weaker sex, she manages to create positive interpretations. Ultimately, she always manages to show that God made women in this way for good reason, thus converting the things that were traditionally treated as signs of women's inferiority into strong points in her well-integrated discussions of female physiology and theology.

The degree to which women's reproductive bodily processes, such as menstruation and childbirth, were viewed with negative connotations, as signs of inferiority, impurities, or toxins, is hard to overestimate. In the Vul-

1 Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*; Bynum, *Wonderful Blood*.

2 Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*; Newman, "Hildegard and Her Hagiographers," 16–34.

3 Green, *Making Women's Medicine Masculine*; Green, "In Search of an 'Authentic' Women's Medicine," 25–54.

4 Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*.

5 Elliot, "Gender and the Christian Traditions," 21–35.

gate, attitudes to menstruation can be seen in the prophecy of Isaiah for people living against God's will, "And thou shalt defile the plates of thy graven things of silver, and the garment of thy molten things of gold, and shalt cast them away as the uncleanness of a menstruous woman. Thou shalt say to it: Get thee hence" (Isaiah 30:22).⁶ This use of the menstrual-cloth metaphor shows how deeply ingrained such negative attitudes were.

However, these traditional attitudes do not mean that only unfavourable attitudes towards women's bodies and reproductive symptoms existed in the Middle Ages. Although male authors tended to dominate intellectual, medical, and religious spheres, which is not surprising in a male-centred society, I focus on Hildegard of Bingen as a woman professionalized in gynaecological and theological knowledge who promoted positive understandings of the womb and reproduction by highlighting the porous nature of women. I would like to show that Hildegard not only receives conventional representations of the woman's body but also, as a woman, uses them, even manipulates them, in woman-friendly ways by emphasizing women's purgative and re-creative bodies in both her medical and her theological accounts.

After showing Hildegard's medieval understanding of the woman's porous body, I end this book with a case study of Korean women's folk medicine, which also highlights the porosity of the female body. In presenting the porous female body not as a flaw but as a site of divine interaction, Hildegard offers a powerful reimagining of gender, medicine, and theology. This book seeks to recover and amplify that vision for both historical understanding and contemporary thought. Therefore, this book also draws a line from Hildegard's reflections to modern Western and non-Western alternative and folk medicine to show how the porosity of female bodies remains important.

6 English translation from the Douay-Rheims Bible. The Latin is "et contaminabis lamminas sculptilium argenti tui et vestimentum conflatis auri tui et disperges ea sicut inmunditiam menstruatae egredere dices ei." Also, Isaiah 64:6 presents a similar analogy between menstruating women and sinners in the context of repentance: "And we are all become as one unclean, and all our justices as the rag of a menstruous woman: and we have all fallen as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away." The Latin is "et facti sumus ut inmundus omnes nos quasi pannus menstruatae universae iustitiae nostrae et cecidimus quasi folium universi et iniquitates nostrae quasi ventus abstulerunt nos."

Woman's Porous Body as Devil's Gateway

In this book, I conceptualize a vessel's capacity for flow as permeability or porosity, drawing from Hildegard's medical and religious terminology. The womb is frequently characterized as a vessel in medieval texts, just as women themselves are often described as vessels. While Hildegard recognizes this porosity as a potential power for maintaining or restoring health, historically and traditionally, the same quality has frequently been deployed against women as evidence of their inferiority. To appreciate the revolutionary nature of Hildegard's positive reinterpretation of the female porous body, it is essential to first examine how pervasively and dauntingly negative the traditional characterizations were.

In the history of medicine, women have consistently been relegated to a passive position, characterized primarily by their capacity to "receive something." Aristotle emphasized that men are active in the reproductive process, while women are passive.⁷ Even Galen, despite advancing the more balanced two-seed theory, maintained that women played a comparatively passive role in conception, with their contribution considered weaker and less vital than the male seed.⁸ This passivity is also found in the works of Thomas Aquinas: "[a]mong perfect animals the active power of generation belongs to the male sex, and the passive power to the female."⁹ This passivity is related to the weakness that women were assumed to have. Earlier than Aquinas, Isidore of Seville claims that the man's power (Latin *uis*) is shown in the Latin word *uir*, while the woman or *mulier* has the softness expressed by *mollier*.¹⁰ For him, those etymologies justified the claim that women are meant to be subjected to men, who are stronger and unbreakable.

At the same time, this porosity is understood as being easily defeated by evil or spiritually contaminated. Women were believed to corrupt others

⁷ Aristotle, *De generatione animalium*, trans. Platt, bk. 1, chap. 20, §§27–32, p. 729a.

⁸ Galen, *On the Usefulness of the Parts of the Body*, trans. Tallmadge, bk. 14, chap. 2.296, §5, p. 628.

⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province, pt. 1, q. 92, "The Production of the Woman," article 1, <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1092.htm>. See also article 2, "Defuisset enim bonum ordinis in humana multitudo si quidam per alios sapientiores gubernati non fuissent. Et sic ex tali subiectione naturaliter femina subjecta est viro, quia naturaliter in homine magis abundat discretio rationis."

¹⁰ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. Lindsay, bk. 11, pt. 2, 1:17–20.

easily as much as they can be easily corrupted.¹¹ In the moral view of medieval Christianity, Eve is the exemplar of how women's fleshy and porous bodies brought sin into the world. Eve's weakness causes her to succumb to the serpent's temptation, bringing death to human beings. As punishment, Eve's body and those of her female descendants became even weaker, receiving the flow of menstruation and reproductive processes.

These perceptions of a woman's body are closely interwoven with both medical and religious understandings. When certain medical ideas, widely accepted as "scientific," are used to explain a woman's overflowing sexuality, it becomes evident that religious language not only has the potential to take advantage of women but, in a sense, is required to do so. When gaps are found in medical knowledge about a woman's biological body, religious meanings could fill those gaps, and vice versa. When a specific idea is widely accepted as true, both religion and medicine are often expected to explain it.

A woman's sexuality also plays an important role in understanding her fleshy nature. In order to verify their medical ideas in religious terms, theologians sought reasons from Genesis, in the idea, for example, that Eve is born out of the body of Adam, which makes her more physical and therefore causes her body to contain a stronger physical desire.¹² At the same time, the description of Eve succumbing to the deceptive plan of the serpent in scripture could be used as religious proof that women are more lustful than men. Similarly, physicians could use this reasoning to explain that the sexual drives of women are more powerful, using different means but coming to the same conclusion.

This concept of female porosity was also applied to "effeminate" men who, despite being physiologically male, were not considered sufficiently masculine to receive equal treatment as men. In medieval Christian polemic, Jews and Muslims were characterized as "less complete" through accusations of effeminacy. This gendered discourse served to position non-Christian males as fundamentally inferior. Notably, this rhetoric extended to attributing female biological processes to Jewish men, who were claimed

11 In her analysis of Heloise's letters to Abelard, Karma Lochrie identifies Heloise's evident concern regarding female homoeroticism between religious and secular women with "foulness of a corrupted mind," a subject systematically overlooked by her male theological contemporaries and subsequently neglected in modern scholarly discourse. Lochrie, *Heterosyncrasies*, 33.

12 Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 4.

to suffer from bloody flux or menstruation¹³—a physiological impossibility that nonetheless reinforced their perceived deviation from Christian masculine ideals.¹⁴

Since women in general are already viewed as lesser than men, various inferiorities are easily attached to women. As many feminist scholars point out, medieval misogynistic views not only minimize women's contributions to economics and politics but also theorize women as lesser beings through theology, philosophy, and science. Women are not simply discriminated against. Discrimination against women is justified through the notion that women are "passive, irrational" and closer to "body, emotion, lust, mercy, and disorder."¹⁵ The polarities that determine women's inferiorities are supported by many different knowledge systems and disciplines.

And this disparity is understood as originating from God's creation. Since the Fall is first caused by Eve, it establishes a scenario in which Eve and all women are bound to their reproductive roles by God's command as punishment. In this view, it is not surprising that women are depicted as craving sex, since by divine will they are supposed to get pregnant and give birth to children.¹⁶

Seeing women as more physical also leads to other cultural impositions and prejudices. For example, women are often understood as having greater difficulty in achieving the ideal virginal state because of their stronger sexuality.¹⁷ Their craving for sex is evidence that human beings are or became weak due to original sin.¹⁸ The fact that women are weaker than men is also connected to their stronger bodily needs and militated against their ability to achieve the ideal of virginity.

But if childbirth is a punishment, it is also necessary. Since human beings were expelled from paradise and eternal life by taking the forbidden fruit, they must have children to keep humankind going. However, since generation is seen as a substitute for eternal life, coitus is to be initiated only

13 Koren, "The Menstruant as 'Other,'" 45.

14 For more implications of masculinity and feminization, see Kruger, "Becoming Christian, Becoming Male?," 21–41.

15 Bynum, "... And Woman His Humanity," 257; Murray, "One Flesh, Two Sexes, Three Genders?," 39.

16 As Karras notes, the medieval concept of female sexuality was different from the Victorian one in that stronger sexual desire was often connected to women in the Middle Ages. Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 56.

17 Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 1.

18 Karras, *Sexuality in Medieval Europe*, 54.

for its proper reason, which is the re-creation of the human form. In other words, sex is acceptable only when a man and a woman have vaginal sex in order to produce a baby. Even when a person feels pleasure during coitus, the delight should not be primary but secondary in that it may help a man or woman produce the semen or fluid needed for a successful pregnancy. Sexual pleasure is legitimate only when it occurs for the sake of offspring. Seeking sexual intercourse only for pleasure is not following God's will.

Women could then be regarded as dangerous in that they are full of more desire than is needed for human generation. As Eve shows in the creation story, women are unable to contain their bodily desires. Eve was defeated by the serpent's temptation and consumed the forbidden fruit, thereby introducing sin into both the bodies and the souls of humankind. In this view, women are created only for reproduction, and it is problematic when they use their sexual nature for anything other than reproductive purposes. Sexual impulses and appetites overflowing from the woman's body are thought of as capable of driving women away from the proper order, and some male theologians are concerned with the danger that women were too licentious to be properly managed. God punishes Eve and controls the evil in her by subjecting her to Adam and limiting her role to propagation. My question is thus: How did women receive these negative characterizations of their bodies, and how did Hildegard of Bingen respond to such depictions?

Purpose of This Book

This book examines porosity as both a physical reality and a theological concept in Hildegard's work. While medieval writers often viewed bodily openness as dangerous—creating risks of contamination, sexual transgression, and moral weakness—Hildegard of Bingen emphasizes its regenerative potential and power. In other words, she uses these concepts of fluidity and porosity to explain women, especially their sexual and reproductive bodies. While representations of the woman's open body appear in different contexts, they all share the ability to receive, hold, and release to the outer world. In a similar sense, Hildegard refers to herself as a trumpet whose tune is played by God.¹⁹ This analogy emphasizes her as an important instrument of God and validates her words as directly coming from God.

19 "Sed et lorica fidei induant mites, mansueti, pauperes et miseri existentes, sicut etiam agnus ille fuit, cujus sonus tubae ipsi sunt, mores etiam simplices infantis habentes, quia Deus illos semper flagellat, qui in tuba ipsius canunt, praeviciens ne fictile vas illorum pereat, sed ut sibi placcat." Hildegard of Bingen, "Epistola 45," in

This vessel image seems to have helped her survive despite being *magistra* and despite her gender; “[t]he apostle does not permit a woman to teach in Church; but this woman is freed from this condition by the assumption of the Spirit.”²⁰ Her vision offers an alternative understanding: one where the porous female body becomes not a liability but a mirror of the cosmos and a channel of divine vitality. Even God refers to himself as a fountain in Hildegard’s vision: “I [God] am Divine Love, the radiance of the living God. Wisdom has done her work with me, and Humility, who is rooted in the living fountain, is my helper...I am the living fountain, because all that was made existed in me like a shadow.”²¹ Through Hildegard’s voice, God emphasizes the vitality of water, presenting himself as both living light and living fountain. Consequently, when women’s reproductive bodies inherit God’s creative power through their fluidity and porosity, their supposed female weakness transforms into a conduit for new life and healing. The woman’s restoration of God’s order and reproduction of new life do not occur simply at the individual level but extend to all humankind, paralleling how the Virgin Mary’s womb fulfilled its sacred duty of bearing Christ in medieval theological understanding.

Continuing the trajectory of recent studies showing that women navigated their ability and power despite social and religious limitations placed on them, this book highlights how women’s physiological difference could become the very source of their spiritual and healing authority. Through close reading of Hildegard’s texts, especially her medical treatise and her theological work, I demonstrate how her view of the womb as an instrument of both bodily and spiritual renewal stands out as theologically sophisticated and historically significant. Whether it is in the womb or in God’s vessel, the notion of flow is an important one. If menstrual flow stops without proper reasons, it can lead to serious health issues, including infertility. If God’s messengers do not deliver God’s words to people, it can result in the degeneration of people’s devotion and moral behaviour, which Hildegard

Hildegard of Bingen, *S. Hildegardis Abbatissae Opera omnia*, col. 217D, as cited in Sur, *Feminine Images of God*, 38.

20 Mews, “Hildegard and the Schools,” 109.

21 Hildegard of Bingen, *Book of Divine Works*, trans. Campbell, pt. 3, chap. 3, pp. 387–88. “Ego caritas uiuentis Dei claritas sum, et sapientia mecum opus suum operata est; atque humilitas, quę in uiuo fonte radicaui, adiutrix mea extitit, . . . Vnde et uiuus fons sum, quia omnia quę facta sunt uelut umbra in me fuerunt” Hildegard of Bingen, *Liber divinorum operum*, ed. Derolez and Dronke, pt. 3, chap. 3, p. 379; Sur, *Feminine Images of God*, 31.

criticizes male priests for. The proper flows not only maintain stable conditions but also heal poor conditions. And the woman's body is represented as a suitable vessel for this flow because it is porous.

Structure of the Book

This book discusses how the woman's body was, and is even now, described and represented as porous and communicative. While the woman's body was often imbued with negative connotations in medieval medicine and theology, this book focuses on Hildegard of Bingen's medical and theological treatises that transformed the woman's body into a place of possibilities for purgation and salvation.

Chapter 1, "Female Porosity and Sacred Flow," establishes how Hildegard of Bingen transformed medieval views of women's bodies from negative to positive. While traditional thought characterized female bodies as dangerously permeable and therefore inferior, Hildegard reinterpreted this porosity as a divine gift enabling purification and spiritual connection. Using the example of Hildegard's own life as a vessel for divine revelation, alongside the theological examples of Eve and Mary, the chapter examines how Hildegard's concept of *viriditas* (greening power) positioned women's physical openness as a strength rather than a weakness. This framework bridges natural science and theology, establishing the foundation for Hildegard's innovative understanding of women's reproductive processes explored throughout the book.

Chapter 2, "The Unsealer of Sin," examines how medieval Christianity understood women's bodies as inherently porous and permeable. While Eve, as the first sinner, introduced sin and death to humankind through her vulnerability, the Virgin Mary's receptive womb brought salvation by bearing the Saviour. These contrasting female figures provided Hildegard of Bingen with rich conceptual frameworks for theorizing the female body, allowing her to bridge natural science and theology. This chapter also introduces Hildegard's life and works, particularly her self-understanding as a divine messenger transmitting God's words to humanity. As a communicator between sacred and worldly realms, Hildegard emphasized women's mediating position in both reproduction and salvation.

Chapter 3, "Releasing Blood and Humours," investigates women's reproductive processes, which medieval thought attributed to the physical openness of the female body. Unlike many of her contemporaries, who viewed menstruation and female sexuality negatively, Hildegard presents a more nuanced understanding of women's embodied experiences, highlighting

how these processes serve important purgative functions. Hildegard's categorization of women by temperament further challenges medieval stereotypes by acknowledging women's physiological diversity.

Chapter 4, "Receiving the Spirit, Foam, and Fluids," develops the concept of female porosity to explore women's life-giving capabilities in both biological reproduction and spiritual salvation. Hildegard's understanding of conception emphasizes complementary male and female contributions, with the woman's body actively purifying, warming, and transforming the male seed. This chapter examines how Hildegard connects these physical processes to spiritual concepts, particularly through her notion of *viriditas*.

Chapter 5, "Giving Birth to a Baby and Giving Spiritual Birth to Humankind," elaborates on how Hildegard conceptualizes holy flows through women's bodies. The chapter analyzes Hildegard's vision of Ecclesia as a female figure whose perforated womb receives and purifies souls, drawing parallels between physical childbirth and spiritual salvation. For Hildegard, the female body's capacity for flow becomes a powerful metaphor for divine redemption.

While the chapters in the body of the book focus on medieval European contexts, the afterword widens the scope by analysing Korean folk medicine practices that similarly utilize concepts of the porosity of female reproductive organs, suggesting cross-cultural continuities in understanding women's bodies as sites of both vulnerability and power.

Throughout the book, the terms "porosity" and "flow" are central to analysing Hildegard's depiction of women's reproductive and spiritual bodies. "Porosity," in this context, refers specifically to the physical and symbolic openness and permeability of the woman's body—especially evident in reproductive functions like menstruation, conception, and childbirth—which Hildegard reinterprets from a traditionally negative vulnerability into a positive, salvational quality. Similarly, the notion of "flow" encapsulates not merely physical fluids (such as blood, humours, and milk) but also the dynamic movement of spiritual energy, grace, and salvation through the female body. Together, these concepts illuminate how Hildegard transforms the medieval understanding of the female body from passive receptivity into active engagement with divine and natural processes. Each chapter will reinforce and clarify how Hildegard applies and redefines these terms, ultimately revealing their integrative role in her theological and medical visions. This framework allows us to see how Hildegard's innovative approach challenges conventional medieval theological and medical understandings of the female body, repositioning women's reproductive capacities as central rather than peripheral to salvation history.

