

Spring 4-8-2015

Hildegard Of Bingen: Visionary Woman Who Encouraged The Role Of Feminism

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**Hildegard of Bingen:
Visionary Woman who Encouraged the Role of Feminism**

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8 April 2015

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
graduation with Distinction**

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Table of Contents

Acknowledgements.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Research Paper.....	1
Bibliography.....	16

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my Distinction Advisors, Dr. Amy Johnson, Dr. Suzanne Ashworth, and Dr. Tammy Birk for their assistance throughout this paper. Their insight, teachings, and informational resources have helped me through this process to construct my ideas of gender and how they were portrayed during the Medieval Ages. I would also like to thank my Second Reader, Dr. James Bates. His expertise in music and music history has given me a strong foundation that I was able to pull from in order to craft this paper. I am also grateful to Dr. Robin Grote, my Distinction Program Representative, for their assistance.

In addition, I would like to thank the Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies and Music Departments at Otterbein University for their continued support through this process. Through a wide array of classes offered in these programs, I was able to develop my knowledge base as an undergraduate student that helped me to tackle multiple facets of gender, feminism, music, and composition within this paper.

I would also like to thank Brandeis University, who has accepted me into their Gender and Sexuality Studies Graduate Program for Fall of 2015, where I will be researching and expanding on more of the ideas that will be discussed in this paper.

Abstract

This paper will discuss the life of Hildegard of Bingen and how her musical and lifestyle choices can be defined as that of a feminist. Hildegard was a nun during the mid 1100's who was given the gift of visions. These visions, sent from God, told her about how she should be living her life and the lessons she should be teaching her followers. However, as a woman during this time, Hildegard had no power or any opportunities to share these ideas with others without being shunned as stepping outside of her "gender role." It was not until she gained power as an abbess in her own nunnery that Hildegard was able to express these visions through her compositions. Even though the other nuns in her convent believed her visions as being from God, Hildegard still had to convince her male colleagues of her validity. In order to do this, Hildegard claimed frailty in order to gain access to a male-dominated profession. Only when the patriarchal societal structures were confirmed and gender roles were established was Hildegard accepted as a prophet and a gift from God who created compositions that spoke the lessons of God himself. This idea of frailty and gender roles and how Hildegard used them to gain respect within her society will be explained more in depth in my paper.

Throughout this essay, I will explore how Hildegard was able to subvert the power structures that she lived in and rebel against the patriarchy while still conforming to her gender roles. I will explore how she opposed the traditional styles of composition, how she opposed some of the teachings of the church, and how she opposed how women were viewed in her society. I will also look at how her gender was both an advantage and disadvantage in this society and how she turned her disadvantages into an advantage. Through these many examples, I will show how Hildegard's thoughts and actions can be seen and defined as feminist.

During the Middle Ages, if a woman wanted to gain any form of education, her only option was to join a nunnery. Nuns were taught the basic skills of reading and musical fluency during their time in the nunnery, and some were given the opportunity to study theological and devotional works after taking their vow.¹ Many nuns were only given the ability to read music, but some were fortunate enough to study music and composition within their convents; Hildegard of Bingen was one of them. Through her studies, Hildegard became a skilled composer, but she never shared her compositional talents as women were not allowed to participate in activities that were mostly for men, such as composition. It was not until she began to have visions that she believed were sent from God that Hildegard knew she had to share her musical compositions. Though Hildegard wanted to share her visions with others and teach them the lessons that God had shared with her, she understood that she would face certain obstacles in order to achieve this.² She knew that a woman had no place in her society and that she was going to have to make one for herself. It was then that Hildegard began to take actions that can be defined as acts supporting the ideals of feminism in today's society. Feminism is the doctrine advocating social, political, economical, cultural, personal, and all other rights of women equal to those of men.³ While Hildegard of Bingen was not a direct advocate for feminism, she displayed actions and ideals that directly correspond with today's ideals of what it means to be a feminist.⁴ With her disregard for the traditions of music during her time, her objection to the

¹Anne Bagnall Yardley, "'Ful weel she soong the service dyvyne": The Cloistered Musician in the Middle Ages," In *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150-1950*, edited by Jane Bowers and Judith Tick, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 17.

²Barbara Newman, *Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validato* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 171.

³Feminism, Dictionary.com, Dictionary.com *Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/feminism> (accessed November 23, 2014).

⁴Charles Fourier, a Utopian Socialist and French Philosopher, was one of the first scholars to use the word "feminism" in his writings in 1837. Other countries began to adopt this word and by 1910 most countries were using the word "feminism" to describe their movements for equality. If this word had been around during the Middle Ages, Hildegard would have more than likely used it to describe her doctoring ideas. Because a word like feminism

church and its ideals, and her objection to the position of women in power, Hildegard can be seen as a woman who climbed the social ladder and used her gender as an advantage in order to share her music and messages from God, and who can be defined as one of the first women to openly support the ideals of feminism as we define them in our current culture.

Hildegard of Bingen was born in 1098 near the Rhine River. She was born into a large family of ten by father and mother, Hildebert of Bermersheim and Mechthild of Merxheim. Hildegard began to have her visions when she was around three⁵. She shared these visions with her parents, and they decided to give Hildegard to the church as an oblate where she was to be taught the words of the sacred scripture when she was eight years old.⁶ After years of studying the Lord's word, on her fourteenth birthday, she decided to dedicate her life to God and join a convent. Hildegard was placed under the guidance of Jutta, the abbess of the convent Disibodenberg in the Palatinate Forest, in what is now Germany.⁷ During this time of study and prayer, Hildegard's visions became more vivid. While she slept, visions from God would appear to her, showing her the ideals that God wanted her to teach, such as the battle between good and evil and the devil's presence in our everyday lives. Though Hildegard began to wonder if these visions were God trying to tell her something, she eventually concluded that these more vivid dreams were occurring because her study of the scripture had been intensified since joining the

did not exist during this time, there is no record of Hildegard using this language, even though her actions and ideas fall into the category of feminism.

⁵ The visions that Hildegard had can be divided into two categories: those before and those after 1136. Before 1136, when Hildegard was still living with her parents as a young child, she thought her visions could be something from God, but she just assumed that they were something that was created by her imagination. Even through her adult years, Hildegard felt her visions were just wild dreams that came from studying the Bible. It was not until 1136 when Jutta the abbess died that Hildegard realized that her visions were those from God. Hildegard has a graphic vision where she saw her abbess die only a few short days before Jutta's death. Hildegard knew this was no coincidence, and therefore she began to take her visions seriously and draw inspiration from them as she saw God speaking to her through them.

⁶ Fiona Maddocks, *Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of her Age* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

convent.⁸ She also worried about how others in the convent would perceive her if they found out she was having such strange and vivid dreams. "Some speculate that she held back out of womanly timidity, fear of what people might say, and the rash judgments of others."⁹ It was not until 1136 when Jutta died that Hildegard began to accept these dreams as a sign from God, as she had seen visions of her previous abbess before her death.¹⁰

After Jutta's death, Hildegard was named as the new mother superior by her fellow nuns. The Abbot of Disibodenberg asked if she would become a Prioress,¹¹ but instead, Hildegard wanted to move herself and her nuns to a convent in Rupertsberg, an area where Hildegard could become more independent; Hildegard would be able to run her own convent without the strict guidance of an Abbot watching over her. When the Abbot refused her request, Hildegard went to the Archbishop Henry I of Mainz and asked for his approval, which he granted.¹² The Abbot still refused her request, even with the approval from the Archbishop, and he did not change his mind until Hildegard fell ill from her visions.¹³¹⁴ With his approval, Hildegard and 20 nuns moved to a convent in Rupertsberg in 1150, where Hildegard became the head abbess. With her new position and the power that came with it, Hildegard began to express her visions from God in the only form that she found appropriate: musical compositions. These visions helped Hildegard write her volume of poems known as *Scivias* (1151) and later *Symphonia* (1150-1160), the

⁸ Maddocks, 59.

⁹ Ibid., 59.

¹⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹¹ This is a position that would have given Hildegard more power in the church, but she still would have been positioned under the Abbot. If Hildegard chose this position, she would have been under the control and supervision of the Abbot, and she did not want those kinds of restrictions.

¹² Monica Furlong, *Visions and Longings: Medieval Women Mystics*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1996), 84.

¹³ Ibid., 85.

¹⁴ Hildegard became paralyzed and she claimed that God struck her ill because she was not following his orders to move the nuns to Rupertsberg. It was not until the Abbot tried to prove Hildegard a liar and failed that he realized that this was the work of God.

musical accompaniment for these visionary poems. It was here that Hildegard began to break away from the traditions of her time and exert the power she had gained over the years.

Her musical compositions were one way that Hildegard of Bingen strayed away from the traditions of the Medieval Period. During this time period, Gregorian chant was the predominant musical style of religious compositions. Within this style, music was written into eight different church modes, each with its own unique sound and note arrangement, such as Dorian, Hypodorian, Phrygian, Hypophrygian, Lydian, Hypolydian, Mixolydian, and Hypomixolydian. Music of this time was also seen as more neumatic rather than melismatic, meaning that each syllable had only one note attached to it with some embellishments, rather than a large amount of embellishment for each syllable. Hildegard broke with both of these conventions while composing her music. Instead of following the rules for composition, Hildegard wrote what she felt needed to be written, seeing as she saw herself as a messenger for God.¹⁵ She wrote her music based on what she heard during her visions and what fit correctly with her text, not what the rules of Gregorian chant dictated. In her piece, *O rubor sanguinis*, an antiphon¹⁶ about martyrs' blood being shed and the purity of virgins, the church mode appears to be Dorian; most of the notes in the piece fall between an octave of D to D. However some of the notes, such as the E and F above the second D, are written beyond this 8 note octave to create more of a dramatic effect. Example 1 shows how Hildegard uses notes not normally seen in pieces of this time to create a better connection between the words and the music. In the text, the word *fluxisti* is Latin for flowed. This text connects with the music because the musical line is heading downward, much like in the text that reads that blood flowed down from Heaven onto the

¹⁵ Craig Wright and Bryan Simms, *Music in Western Civilization: Volume A: Antiquity Through the Renaissance* (Belmont: Schirmer Cengage Learning, 2006), 39.

¹⁶ An antiphon is a short chant sung before and after a psalm and its doxology.

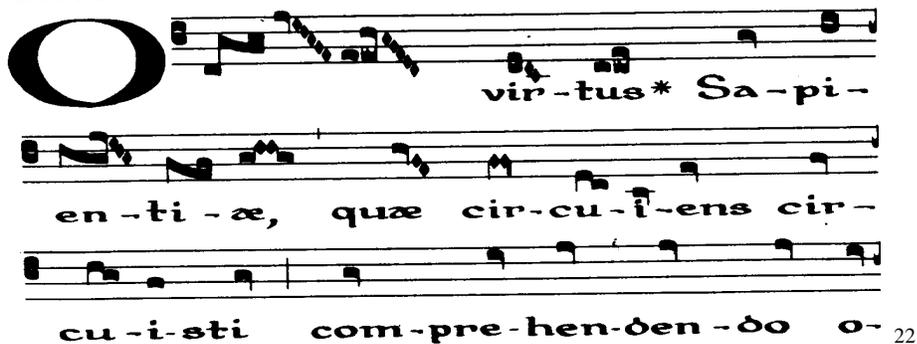


Example 3, *O virtus Sapientiae*, and Example 4, *Item de Virginibus*, also show Hildegard's disregard for the musical conventions during this time and her use of melisma. *O virtus Sapientiae* is an antiphon written to praise wisdom. Hildegard wrote this chant to thank wisdom for everything it has done for her and to remind others that wisdom is something to be cherished and appreciated. *Item de Virginibus* is an antiphon written about the connection between womanhood and nature. This antiphon explains how both are beautiful and how both can be seen as a gift from God and the closest thing humans have to Heaven. The text "*et quae in candida serenitate lucet in rota, quam nulla terrena excellentia comprehendit,*" which translates to "And who shines in bright serenity upon the wheel, Nothing on earth can comprehend you" is sung as notes reach higher on the staff, representing humans trying to get closer to Heaven.²¹

Example 3

59 *O virtus Sapientiae*

Ant.



²⁰Roden, Wright, and Simms, 27.

²¹Hildegard von Bingen, *Item de Virginibus*, Edited by Jürgen Knuth (Germany: Werner Icking Music Collection, 2012), *International Music Score Library Project*, http://imslp.org/wiki/Symphonia_et_Ordo_virtutum_%28Hildegard%29 (accessed April 5, 2015).

²²Barbara Jean Jeskalian, "Hildegard von Bingen," In *Historical Anthology of Music by Women*, edited by James Briscoe, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), 8.

While this may not seem like an important affront to the church, the fact that she was a woman composer who bent the rules of musical composition to express her own visions shows her willingness to go against the conventions of the time in order to share her visions with her followers.

Not only did Hildegard reject the musical traditions of the time, she had some objections to what was being taught in the church. While she was a nun who followed under the orders of the church and St. Benedict, she also preached to her followers the important lessons that she felt the church ignored; these ideals were ignored mostly to keep the patriarchal structure in place. During the last 20 years of her life, Hildegard began to receive more visions from God that told her she needed to spread her message to others besides the nuns in her convent and so she went on four different speaking tours across Germany. She spoke to both the clergy and the public, explaining her ideas and denouncing the corruption within the church.²⁴ One idea that Hildegard emphasized was that of men and women being equal. Within the Apostle's commands, one that stayed true in the church was that "no woman is to teach or have authority over men."²⁵ The church at this time felt that men and women were not of equal value but Hildegard fought for the rights of women and told her followers that both men and women were made for each other equally and that neither was superior. "The primordial man and woman are created equal, meant to generate children in the everlasting play of wisdom, as their love becomes incarnate in ever-new forms. Eve further signifies the vocation of all humankind—ultimately, of all creation—to be joined to its Creator in bridal love."²⁶ This quote from Barbara Newman shows how

²⁴ Furlong, 86-87.

²⁵ Newman, 175.

²⁶ Barbara Newman, "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology," *Spiritus: A Journal of Christian Spirituality* Vol. 13 (2013): 43.

Hildegard saw both sexes as equal and felt that in the eyes of God, neither sex was of greater importance and that both could be important to the preaching of God's message. Hildegard also found both Adam and Eve responsible for the fall of the Garden of Eden. She believed that both sexes had flaws that allowed them to fall to sin and therefore both sexes were seen as equally sinful in the eyes of God. However, Eve is seen as the main reason for the fall of Eden because if Adam were to take the blame, this would show that men are not the superior sex and therefore weaken the patriarchy during this time. So Eve is given the blame and placed "under the power of man" in order to better control her.²⁷

She also advocated for the idea that, "In the inner being of God there exists an almost erotic relationship of feminine and masculine. That is mirrored in the complementary relationship of men and women."²⁸ During this time, men felt as though God created man to resemble himself in certain aspects. Most people viewed men as the image of God and women to be second-class citizens; some even thought of women to be a failed version of a man. Hildegard fought against this idea. She believed that God was a complex combination of both of the sexes. She did not believe that the man created the relationship and that the woman was only there for support and reproduction. She saw both men and women as important aspects to a relationship and that each brought something different to the relationship, something only they could bring. During this time, men and women were seen as being made of different elements. Aristotle saw men as the highest two elements, air and fire, and women as the lowest elements, earth and water. Hildegard disagreed with this statement, saying that men were the lowest and highest elements, fire and earth, and women were the two middle elements. This way, men and women balanced each other out and were therefore necessary for each other in order to make one

²⁷Newman, "St. Hildegard, Doctor of the Church, and the Fate of Feminist Theology," 44.

²⁸ Charles Moffat, "Hildegard von Bingen: The Biography of a Feminist Nun," *The Feminist eZine* (2002); <http://www.feministezine.com/feminist/HildegardVonBingen-FeministNun.html> (accessed November 23, 2014).

complete human being.²⁹ These radical ideas of equality made some of Hildegard's followers uneasy about her validity; however, for those who listened to her teachings, she was a revolutionary teacher. She gave women a reason to be proud of their accomplishments and to see themselves as more than an object to be bought and sold at the desire of men. These ideals help to show how Hildegard can be defined as having feminist actions and ideals, as the main purpose of feminism is to create equality between the sexes, which she was actively fighting for.

When Hildegard first began to accept her visions as messages from God and began to tell others about what she had seen, many people did not believe her. During this time, women were given no rights and had no voice in the community. Many people thought that she was lying or that she had been possessed by evil demons. Many people wondered, "Why so many mysteries should be revealed to a foolish and uneducated woman, when there are many powerful and learned men."³⁰ Knowing that she had no power in her current state, Hildegard discovered a way to break away from her role as a woman and become just as respected as any other man. She relied on her "female frailty" to reinforce her duty as a messenger for God. She explained that because "The power of God is perfected in weakness, because the humblest shall be exalted," it was clear why she was chosen to be the messenger of God.³¹ Seeing how a woman had no power at this time, and she came from a poor and uneducated background, she fit the mold of weak and humble perfectly. With these ideals on her side, people began to believe her and listen to her visions. They believed that the Holy Spirit was speaking through this poor and frail woman and so Hildegard took this opportunity and used it to her advantage.³² Once she was able to break

²⁹ Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Women, Volume 1: The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 B.C. - A.D.1250*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 295.

³⁰ Newman, *Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validato*, 171.

³¹ Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard Theology of the Feminine* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987), 35.

³² Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard Theology of the Feminine*, 35.

these barriers as a woman, she was able to fulfill her true purpose to teach her followers about the visions that God had sent her. She rejected the status that society had given her as a woman and created a position for herself that she felt satisfied with. She was not going to allow traditions to dictate her teaching and therefore rebelled against the system that oppressed her and created her own path in order to teach the ways of God that she had seen in her visions.

Hildegard's actions can be defined as a woman who is "acting" as a female in order to gain any momentum in her society. As stated before, Hildegard framed herself as a weak and frail woman in order to have her compositions recognized and appreciated in her culture. As Judith Butler would say, Hildegard was acting or performing her gender in order to stay within society's standards. Butler is an American philosopher and gender theorist who first developed the idea of gender being a performance rather than an inherent biological trait. Within her essay, "Performing Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory" Butler makes this argument about the idea of gender:

To be female is, according to that distinction, a facticity which has no meaning, but to be a woman is to have become a woman, to compel the body to conform to an historical idea of "woman," to induce the body to become a cultural sign, to materialize oneself in obedience to an historically delimited possibility, and do to this as a sustained and repeated corporeal project. The notion of a "project," however, suggests the originating force of a radical will, and because gender is a project which has cultural survival as its end, the term "*strategy*" better suggests the situation of duress under which gender performance always and variously occurs. Hence, as a strategy of survival, gender is a performance with clear punitive consequences. Discrete genders are part of what "humanizes" individuals within contemporary culture; indeed, those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished.³³

According to Butler, gender is something we are constantly performing and recreating for the world. Gender is cultural, and so what is acceptable for a gender during a period of time is

³³Judith Butler, "Performing Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," In *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theater*, edited by Sue-Elle Case, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 272.

determined by the culture surrounding the body in question. And if a body rejects the cultural standard of gender during that time, that body can expect to receive backlash and punishment for opposing the dominant gender. Butler also states that gender is interchangeable based on the culture in which it is situated. "Terms such as "masculine" and "feminine" are notoriously changeable; there are social histories for each term; their meanings change radically depending on geopolitical boundaries and cultural constraints on who is imagining whom, and for what purpose."³⁴ And so during this time and within this culture, women were seen as weak and the lesser sex. Therefore, in order to survive in her culture, Hildegard had to perform her gender and play to the idea of a weak woman in order to be heard. Once she was accepted into the compositional world, she was able to be more creative and express the images that God has sent her. But she still had to tread carefully, as her society could have shunned her at any moment if she overstepped her boundaries. "But once women begin to compose, it is hardly any longer the body that features in the activity at all, for composition involves a metaphorical display of the power of the mind. This cerebral power conflicts with patriarchal constructions of femininity to the extent that, when it is harnessed by women, it produces a threat to the sexual order."³⁵

Some researchers have even suggested that Hildegard claimed a form of female hysteria in order to gain power and a voice within the church. Female hysteria was a term that was used to describe women who were seen as more independent and who "exhibited more than usual force and decision of character, of strong resolution, fearless of danger."³⁶ Hysteria did not begin to be an accepted medical term until around the 18th and 19th century, but it can still be cited in

³⁴ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender*, (New York: Routledge, 2004), 10.

³⁵ Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 88.

³⁶ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830-1980*, (London: Virago Press Ltd., 1987), 145.

different scholarly texts dating back to the time of Egyptians.³⁷³⁸ Hysteria has been approached by two different schools of study when trying to understand and define it: the scientific and the supernatural. Some scholars, such as Hippocrates and St. Thomas Aquinas, believed women were prone to hysteria because they were weak individuals who could easily be influenced by the supernatural and whose bodies were never built to endure the daily physical and mental strains that a man had to endure.³⁹ While many women were diagnosed against their will with the term hysteria, some women sought out this term from their doctors. If a woman was deemed hysteric or mad, she was unable to perform her daily duties as a woman and was put on rest. Therefore, a woman claiming hysteria could escape the duties of a woman, including housework and childbirth, in order to live a more independent life. Some women were even taken to doctors who would perform genital manipulation in order to relieve the madness within a woman by creating an orgasm. During his research from 1870-1890, Jean-Martin Charcot found that the ovarian regions were "a sensitive hysterogenic zone" and that pressure to these areas might induce convulsions that could relieve the madness and tension within a woman.⁴⁰ So some women may have also claimed hysteria in order to fulfill their sexual needs and desires that were not being fulfilled by their husbands.

While Hildegard did not use her hysteria to escape her female duties or even use the word hysteria during her life, she did use traces of hysteria within her own life in order to gain social power within her church. Hildegard used the idea of a weak female to support her intelligence and ability to see spiritual visions. "Hildegard was able to claim this authority because of the

³⁷ Cecilia Tasca, Mariangela Rapetti, Mauro Carta, and Bianca Fadda, "Women and Hysteria in the History of Mental Health," *Clinical Practice and Epidemiology in Mental Health* No. 8 (2012): 110, *PMC*, <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3480686/> (accessed November 23, 2014).

³⁸ The first description of female hysteria can be dated back to 1900 BC within the Kahun Papyrus, stating that one cause of female hysteria was the spontaneous and uncontrollable movement of the uterus within the female body.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Showalter, 150.

belief in women's irrationality. Because her works were of such high intellectual quality, they must of necessity have been divinely inspired; thus, Hildegard's authority was not gained on her own merit but instead given by the will of God."⁴¹ Because hysteria could be seen as both medical and spiritual, Hildegard claimed the supernatural in order to gain her power within the church. She accepted her weak, frail female form as her way into gaining the recognition she deserved within the church.

Hildegard was a woman who was blessed enough to be given visions from God and given the musical abilities to share these visions with other believers. However, because of her gender and position with society, Hildegard had to face many obstacles in order to share these visions with her followers. She had to contend with men who believed her not worthy of receiving visions from God and from society that lashed out against any woman who tried to change her power and position within society. It was only by reinforcing her gender and by claiming frailty that Hildegard was allowed to write her compositions and share her visions from God. By reinforcing the patriarchal structures she lived in, Hildegard was able to silently subvert her role as a female into someone who gained power and respect within her culture, all the while pretending to believe in and adhere to the gender roles that were forced upon her. Once she gained this power, Hildegard was finally able to share her visions and begin to advocate for things that she believed in. She advocated for the equality of women and questioned the authorities who tried to silence her. She did not allow religious leaders or traditions to dictate how she was going to live her life. Through her innovative and personalized way of writing music, her fight against the place of women in the world, and her teachings against some of the

⁴¹ Newman, *Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validato*, 170.

traditions in the church, Hildegard can be seen as a woman who not only fought for the rights of others, but who can be considered one of the first feminists in history.

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