

Hildegard : Cracks in the Glass Ceiling II

Medieval Feminism

David Green, 2010

Hildegard would seem to be a woman most severely oppressed, and yet she rose to a position of influence, if not power, whose work both musical and philosophical, has had a profound and lasting effect. She was the 10th child of a noble family who, in those times, was lucky to survive as she was often ill. Her parents, Hildebert and Mechthilde - apparently Hilde was a popular name, offered her as a anchoress to the church, which effectively meant that she was put in a cell, or as we may term it imprisoned, for life; as the tenth child she had been dedicated to the church at birth at the families tithes. There is some dispute as to the age at which she entered the convent. Her biography or *vita*, which was dictated by her, says she was eight, whereas the church records say fourteen. The former is probably correct as there would have been several ceremonies prior to her being officially enclosed. The term of the day was enclosed, and indeed many of these women were walled up in cells with only a small sliding door for food to be pushed through. In fact, she placed in a cell with an older noblewoman, Jutta, who was known to the family, along with both her and Jutta's maid. My sympathies lie more with the maids whose whole life was disrupted at the whim of a family to whom they effectively belonged.

Both Jutta and Hildegard were visionaries, which was not considered unusual in those times; rather Jutta developed quite a following, many people coming to visit their cell. She taught Hildegard to read and write but never considered herself learned enough to interpret the Bible. The convent, known as the sister community, was attached to the monastery at Disibodenberg, in the Palatinate Forest of what is now Germany. Jutta died when Hildegard was 37, in 1136. The other nuns unanimously elected her leader, or *magistra* while the Abbot asked her to be Prioress. Hildegard felt that the nuns would be subservient to the monastery and asked Abbot Kuno to let her move the convent to Rupertsberg, which he refused. At this point Hildegard showed her strength of character for she appealed to the Archbishop of Mainz, going up the chain of command. Possibly because he was upset at this, the Abbot still refused to accede to her request. At this point Hildegard became paralyzed, she interpreted this as God's will for failing to move 'her nuns' as He had directed, and, after the Abbot personally tried to move her to no avail, he relented and Hildegard, along with 20 nuns moved to the monastery of St. Rupertsberg in 1150, where a monk named Volmar, a follower of hers, was appointed Provost to satisfy the proprietaries. Fifteen years later she founded another convent at Eibingen. It is possible that Kuno acted more for the glory of his monastery than out of petty spite, for he promoted Hildegard's writings even while he was refusing her request.

Hildegard came late to writing, she was 42, so she relates, when she had a vision in which God instructed her to put her feelings and observations in writing. She still hesitated and finding it very hard to express her true emotions until she became very sick; thinking this was punishment for shirking His commands, she strove harder and soon found she was gaining strength from "the deep profundity of scriptural exposition." Much of her writing was criticized in recent years for what was viewed as her demeaning of women as the "weaker sex" and her position that she was an unlearned woman incapable of Biblical interpretation. Her statements should be seen in the context of her times when women were thought of as incapable of rational thought. Her statements, to contemporaries, underscored the verity of her visions; given that she was a woman this must be the voice of God speaking through her, which gave far greater importance to her pronouncements. Oliver Sachs, the neurologist and author, believes that her visions were the product of migraines, particularly because of her descriptions of light within them.

Her books covered many aspects of life, including sexual pleasure, scriptural interpretations, guides

for living and, very influential, a complete approach to holistic medicine. The books she wrote include 'Know the Way', 'Book of Life's Merits' and 'Of God's Activities', three theological texts which interpret her visions, in addition she wrote *Physica* and *Causae et Curae*, both dealing with the natural sciences. These last two are rich and informative texts describing the plants, animals, minerals, rocks, medicines and universe that she saw about her and are extremely detailed and accurate. She also wrote morality plays and what we would term sermons. Banned from preaching, because she was a woman, she traveled Europe on four tours where her writing was delivered by local preachers. One of her works was a morality play, 'The Play of the Virtues', featuring the human soul, the Devil and 16 virtues, presumably played by her provost, Volmar, and the 20 nuns.

Hildegard was also a prolific composer, some 70 to 80 of her compositions survive, we can presume that there were many more which have been lost. Many of her compositions were liturgical songs usually monophonic; there was only one melodic line which ran through the song. They were written to have minimal instrumental accompaniment but employed unusual soaring soprano lines, difficult to achieve for most singers and certainly different from most chants. One very unusual aspect of her music was the attention she paid to the confluence of music and lyrics, she was 500 years ahead of her time musically. She invented an alternative alphabet, almost an alternative language, based on medieval Latin but with different letters and both abridged and inflated words. This language she used extensively in her work and probably throughout the convent.

Her correspondence was prolific, communicating with, amongst others, Pope Eugene III and Pope Anastasius IV, Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, the statesman Abbot Suger and Bernard of Clairvaux, instrumental in the crusades. A lot of this correspondence was done at the behest of Abbot Kuno, which supports the theory that he wished to bask in her celebrity rather than let her go elsewhere. By means of this, her music, writing and plays she was able to disseminate her influence far beyond the cloister. Revered by her peers, she had an enormous impact, both spiritually and socially on the medieval era.

Sources: Maddocks, Fiona. Hildegard of Bingen: The Woman of Her Age. New York: Doubleday, 2001

[Hildegard of Bingen](#)

Bennett, Judith M. and C. Warren Hollister. Medieval Europe: A Short History. New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006