

GENDER, FAITH, AND HOLISTISM AS PROPHETIC VISION: THE LEGACY OF HILDEGARD  
VON BINGEN'S RHETORIC OF "MARRIAGE TO GOD"

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**Title**

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## ABSTRACT

Hildegard von Bingen, a 12<sup>th</sup> century German Catholic nun, became one of the most influential voices in a time when women, especially in the realm of religion, were suppressed. Yet, Hildegard overcame these suppressions through her writing and work subsequently legitimizing her status today as a saint and Doctor of the Church. Hildegard's influential writings hold weight beyond the Catholic Church especially in feminist circles. This thesis applies rhetorical criticism as the scholarly lens from which to analyze a sample of Hildegard's writings for the purposes of understanding her contemporary influence. Aided by Kenneth Burke's interpretive method of logology, this project argues that Hildegard's legacy is shaped by her consistent use of the "marriage to God" metaphor. The "marriage to God" metaphor functions persuasively, I argue, because its prophetic vision emphasizes a union with God, rather than as a disenfranchisement from God.

*Keywords:* Logology, Hildegard von Bingen, medieval, religious rhetoric

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To my parents – your kindness and generosity define you. You were and are responsible for the best in me.

To Troy – many nights and weekends that we might have shared were spent, instead, on this. Thank you for understanding.

To Miriam Scarlett – may your world be full of wonder and your sages ever wise.

To Hildegard – throughout this, I imagined you resting on your knees in a great, green field – examining the petal of some rare bloom at the feet of your beloved. I hope that's your eternity. Thanks for being brave.

## DEDICATION

For Miriam Scarlett & the women of all religions, tribes, and continents who recognize the beauty of the universe and the power of their place within it.

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# CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE – HILDEGARD VON BINGEN: BACKGROUND AND LEGACY

Born the tenth child in a family of minor nobles, Hildegard von Bingen's life could have been one of obscurity. At about the age of eight in 1106, she was given to the Catholic Church as a tithe and put into the care of a hermit nun named Jutta of Sponheim. The two shared a one-room cottage, constructed probably of stone, on the grounds of a monastery in the German Rhineland. While many of the details of her confinement have been lost to time, scholars know something of the generalities through historical documents and Hildegard's own writings. According to Baird (2006) the door was locked from the outside and a single window used for passing food and supplies connected them to the outside world. The commitment for submitting to such an existence was not a casual one. Baird (2006) described the rite, "At the entry into such a life, a solemn liturgical ceremony was performed, with the rites of the dead being read over the entrants. For they were, henceforth, considered as dead to this world, destined to live out the brief moment of this life in paradisaal seclusion from the evils of the outside world to ensure their eternal life in the world beyond." (p. 3) They were visited only by the stream of pilgrims seeking Jutta's spiritual guidance.

Hildegard was not eclipsed by these circumstances. In fact, after her death, she would become one of the most powerful and influential voices of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, frequently corresponding with both religious leaders and the highest tiers of European nobility (Baird, 2009). Thousands would gather to hear her preach at a time when women had little voice. Priests and monks would consult her for clarification on liturgical matters. Kings and emperors turned to her for guidance. Centuries later, the symphonies and choirs of the world still play the music she composed. Those interested in natural medicinal practices pour over her work. Today, her writings line the shelves of bookstores and libraries in Madrid, Manhattan, and London. She has been revered as a saint since her death

though only in 2012 was she formally named one by the Church. Author Carmen Acevedo Butcher (2007) describes the phenomenon around her this way:

The only downside to Hildegard's modern celebrity is that her original-yet-orthodox self has been appropriated by many camps. New Age reformers invoke her name over crystals, and feminists see her as their Mother. What is it about Hildegard's work that invites us all in? And who is she really.

(Forward)

Hers is a story of a woman wielding phenomenal power far beyond the confines of her natural life. Her work connected the spiritual and physical realms – constructing the earth an extension of God. As such, Hildegard's legacy for contemporary New Age followers, holistic practitioners, and spiritual mystics speaks to the basic elements of their own belief systems. That connection is arguably best understood by focusing on her use of language, particularly her use of the "marriage to God" metaphor prominent in her letters and writings.

Several hundred letters written to or from Hildegard exist offering unusual biographical insight. Her literary works also include information detailing portions of her life. While much of her early existence remains vague, scholars agree, at least, on this general chronological chain of events (Newman, 1997). It was 1106 when she entered the hermitage of Jutta of Sponheim. Since religious communities for women were few, Jutta's wealthy parents built her a shelter connected to the thriving St. Disibod Monastery. There, Jutta and, most likely, several other women including the child Hildegard lived. It was in Jutta's care that Hildegard would learn Latin and begin her religious studies and devotions. The monk, Volmar of St. Disibod, was responsible for the rest of her education. Volmar would become Hildegard's lifelong friend, confidant and secretary (Newman, 1997).

In total, Hildegard trained with Jutta as a recluse for 24 years. According to Newman (1997), during that time, the cult to which she had committed herself as a child grew to an impressive number of religious women following the Rule of St. Benedict with Jutta as its



abbess. (Newman, 1997) Thus, their life of solitude evolved. By the time Hildegard reached age 13 or 14, the convent, comprised largely of the daughters of local nobility, was a flourishing Benedictine nunnery attached to and dependent on the monastery of Disibondenberg. Upon Jutta's death in 1136 the nuns elected Hildegard unanimously as her successor. Five years later, she received what she considered her prophetic call to compose her first work entitled *Scivias*. It was not a task she undertook without some trepidation. She considered herself unequal to the charge and refused to start. She described her reluctance this way:

But although I heard and saw these things, because of doubt and a low opinion (of myself) and because of the diverse sayings of men, I refused for a long time the call to write, not out of stubbornness but out of humility, until weighed down by the scourge of God, I fell onto a bed of sickness. (*Scivias*, 1151, Preface)

That humility would remain a prevalent force in her work and a means of attaining power and legitimacy.

## Hildegard's Work and Church Authority

A profound writer, Hildegard's primary books, *Scivias*, *Physica*, and the *Book of Lives Merits* document her prophetic visions, her advocacy for holistic healing, and her love of poetry and music. The common theme in these diverse books is the connection of humanity with God on mystical, physical, and artistic levels. For Hildegard, connection to God through spirituality, health, and art required authority from God's human enactment of the Church. Hildegard openly shared these books with Church officials, primarily for gaining their authority and authentication. Thus, Hildegard's writings, by her own insistence, needed authentication by the authority of the Church. All of her books received Church approval and, as such, Hildegard's legitimacy and celebrity garnered her significant political and

cultural legitimacy. Hildegard's writings, via Church approval, created for her political influence and power not afforded to many women in the Middle Ages.

Hildegard's book, *Scivias*, was born from the prophetic visions which started early in her childhood long before she was inspired to act upon them. Historian and Hildegard scholar Barbara Newman (1997) outlines how these episodes acted as a driving force in the trajectory of her life even as a small child.

A revealing passage in the saint's *Vita* suggests that, although Hildegard perceived this extraordinary light from her infancy, decades were to pass before she understood the light and the figures she saw in it as a gift from God. At the age of three, Hildegard told her biographer, she shuddered at the vision of a dazzling light that she was still too young to describe. When she was five she startled her nurse by looking at a pregnant cow and accurately predicting the color of the unborn calf. Often she foretold the future. In her teens, however, the naïve and fragile girl finally realized that no one else could see what she saw. Embarrassed, she ceased to recount her strange experiences, although the visions continued. The girl confided only in her mistress, Jutta, who reported the visions to Volmar. (Chapter 1, Biographical Sketch, para.3)

Even as abbess of the convent after Jutta's death, Hildegard did not immediately use her new authority to disclose her visions. Even upon responding to her call to write, she never described the visions she had prior to 1141. This is significant. Only in retrospect, it appears, did Hildegard recognize these early mystical experiences as a stage of preparation for her life work (Newman, 1997). Hildegard looked to the Church for confirmation and approval. She requested the counsel of Bernard of Clairvaux (later St. Bernard) through a letter in which she begged for his prayers calling to the forefront her "wretchedness" as a woman while asserting the divinity of her visions. Meanwhile, Volmar, her secretary to whom she had confided, revealed his confidant's secret to Kuno, the current abbot of

Disibod. Thus whispers of the “seer” began their ascent through the tiers of the Church’s hierarchy. Kuno informed Heinrich, archbishop of Mainz. Heinrich told Pope Eugenius III. Whether an account reached the Pope first from the archbishop or Bernard is unknown. Whatever, the origin, the Pope was intrigued and sent two men to visit Hildegard and secure copies of her writings. The two returned with an incomplete version of *Scivias*. So impressed was the Pope that he actually began reading from it before high ranking members of the clergy who were equally impressed. Bernard, who had received the letter earlier from Hildegard, was among those in the Pope’s audience. He interceded on Hildegard’s behalf with his superior – encouraging him to write the humble nun. Eugenius did, giving her apostolic license to continue writing. From that point, Hildegard’s fate as a famed seer was sealed. Till her death and beyond it, those seeking her counsel and intercession would continue to multiply.

Hildegard’s celebrity attracted so many that the modest convent at St. Disibod could not adequately accommodate them. She decided to move. What transpired after that decision was the first of several controversies that would mark her life. Newman (1997) writes:

...She decided to move, founding a new community at the Rupertsberg opposite Bingen – a site revealed to her in a vision. The monks of St. Disibod, reluctant to lose their new source of prestige and revenue, opposed this plan. She now began to struggle for independence from the monks, finally securing exclusive rights to the Rupertsberg property from Kuno and his success in 1155. (*para.29*)

During this rather tumultuous time, Hildegard completed *Scivias* – the first of a series of three volumes detailing her visions and the role of the church. After its completion in 1151, her focus shifted from the strictly spiritual to the physical – titling her scientific and medical encyclopedia *Nine Books on the Subtleties of Different Kinds of Creatures*, or more

simply, *Physica*. It was supplemented with a handbook of diseases and remedies called the *Book of Compound Medicine* or *Causes and Cures*.

Her work during this time included a number of liturgical poems and pieces of music. By 1163, she completed the second book of her visionary trilogy. This installment she titled: *Book of Lifes Merits*. The final volume, *On the Activity of God* or *Book of Divine Works*, was completed in 1173. Newman (1997) further lays out the breadth and depth of Hildegard's work during this complicated time:

While writing six major books, founding two monasteries, and preaching throughout Germany, Hildegard also found time for various occasional and controversial works. Among her opuscula are expositions on Benedictine Rule and the Athanasian Creed, lives of her patron saints Rupert and Disibod, and solutions to thirty-eight theological questions propounded by Guibert and the monks of Villers. A series of Gospel homilies, probably transcribed by her nuns in chapter, displays a strong originality despite the sketchy transmission. Perhaps the oddest of all her works is the so-called *Unknown Language*, a list of about nine hundred artificial nouns and other words with an accompanying German glossary. The purpose of this invented language is unclear, although it includes many names for plant and herbs and may have been related to Hildegard's medical work. (para.32)

Her notoriety among both the religious officials and lay people created a natural transition for her to enter the world of politics. She extended her influence occasionally at the request of others, but more often on her own accord. Newman (1997) aptly describes her role in German and European politics: "In political affairs Hildegard could take advantage of her aristocratic standing and her great celebrity to obtain privileges from the great; but she could equally well oppose them, qua prophet in the name of God." (para. 33)

Hildegard's lack of aversion from meddling in the polemic drew her into a controversy which, if not the most incredible in substance, certainly involved an interesting

and powerful set of characters. Frederick Barbarossa was the Holy Roman Emperor and King of Germany between 1152 and 1190. He created a schism in the church in 1159 when he backed a papal candidate, Victor IV against Pope Alexander the III. At first, Hildegard remained outside of the controversy and took no stance, at least publicly, on the schism. That changed in 1164. Victor died and Barbarossa was brass enough to name a successor. This infuriated Hildegard. In a heated letter, she called the King both an “infant” and a “madman.” Barbarossa ignored the rebuke and went on to name yet a third antipope in 1168. Once again, Hildegard responded enraged. She was again subsequently ignored. Despite the brashness of her criticism, Barbarossa kept her and Rupertsberg under his protection during the factional warfare. His lack of response to what appeared to be a blatant rebuke from a subject may be a further indication of Hildegard’s status.

Hildegard would not, as the poet Dylan Thomas wrote centuries later, “go gentle into that good night.” Instead, her final years were as controversial as those proceeding. The first of the two last controversies which would taint the end of her life involved the death of her secretary and provost of her convent, Volmar. The monks of Disibod refused to replace him. She would not passively take this slight. Instead, she implored the help of Alexander III, the pope she so fervently defended in her fiery though ineffectual correspondences with Barbarossa. The Pope intervened and placed Gottfried as provost. Before dying himself in 1176, Gottfried began the composition of Hildegard’s *Vita*. He was replaced by Guibert of Gembloux in 1177. The Walloon monk, had long been in correspondence with Hildegard, and became one of her most trusted confidants and friend. He acted as her secretary, remaining with her at the convent till her eventual death.

The final test of Hildegard came last and was likely the most painful and trying of her life – certainly it was the most personal. In 1178, an official interdict was placed upon her community. At the time the abbess was eighty years old. The controversy started with the burial of an excommunicated nobleman in the Rupertsberg churchyard. The laws of the Mainz Cathedral demanded the man be exhumed and removed from the holy ground.

Hildegard refused – outwardly ignoring the Cathedral’s canons by arguing that the man had been reconciled with his faith before death. She proceeded to solemnly bless the grave with her abbatial staff. This began an internal squabble amongst church leaders which would not be resolved until the ban was finally lifted permanently in March of 1179. Hildegard died just six months later. (Newman, 1997)

Though her veneration as a saint started immediately after her passing, it was not until 1233 that Pope Gregory IX opened proceedings for her official canonization by the Church. The process was never completed due to technicalities largely because those investigating her work were incompetent. (1997, para 11) Meanwhile, the faithful continued to seek the unofficial saint’s intervention. Local legend holds that Hildegard’s nuns, disturbed by the influx of pilgrims, began to pray fervently that the miracles cease. Local legend has it – they did.

Today, Hildegard’s cult remains strong. Since 1940, with special permission of the Sacred Congregation, all Catholic dioceses in Germany observe September 17 as her feast day. On May 10, 2012, Pope Benedict officially added her to the catalogue of saints. Soon after, on October 15, he named her a Doctor of the Church – a distinction given to only four women in the Church’s 2,000 year history.

## Hildegard’s Rhetorical Significance and Role: Justification for a Thesis

The unlikely trajectory of Hildegard’s life appears, at least on the surface, to be one comprised of an awkward duality. Hildegard was both religious phenomenon and politician. The first portion of her life was lived in complete obscurity, while the end was bathed in nothing less than fame. She corresponded with and challenged the most powerful men of her time, yet heavily laced her rhetoric with humility and descriptions of the weak and subservient nature of women. She was a fierce proponent of the traditional hierarchy of the

Church, while simultaneously advocating reform and change within it. Her very status was a mark of that change.

This complexity, as well as her unlikely rise to prominence, has inspired over the last three decades, especially, a renewed and growing interest from several pockets of academia – communication, psychology, English, sociology, music, and history.

In Germany, she still enjoys a wide popular cult, and the abbey at Eibingen has become a center of scholarship and pilgrimage. Herbalists have rediscovered some of her prescriptions and have begun to experiment with their use in modern homeopathic practice. Musicians have performed her liturgical songs and her drama, the *Ordo virtutum*, to great acclaim. To students of spirituality, Hildegard remains of compelling interest, not only as a rare feminine voice soaring above the patriarchal choirs, but also as a perfect embodiment of the integrated, holistic approach to God and humanity for which our fragmented era longs. While the movement for creation-centered spirituality has exaggerated certain elements of her teaching and denied its more ascetic and dualist aspects, it remains true that Hildegard unites vision with doctrine, religion with science, charismatic jubilation with prophetic indignation, and the longing for social order with the quest for social justice in ways that continue to challenge and inspire. (Baird, 2006, Introduction, para 30)

Many feminist scholars, in particular, have devoted their research to the life of this 12<sup>th</sup> Century German nun. In her book, *The Creation of Feminist Consciousness: From the Middle Ages to Eighteen-seventy*, Gertrude Lerner (1994) writes

The works of female mystics, beginning with Hildegard of Bingen, certainly deserve consideration, over and above their description of a spiritual journey, as works of autobiography, but as such they lack precisely the authority and assertiveness whereby the self becomes an exemplar of the life leading to

salvation. The female mystics rather submerged the self in order to become open to ecstatic revelations. They saw themselves as insignificant instruments through which the power of God is manifested, "God's little trumpet," as Hildegard referred to herself. The search for an authentic self had to take different forms for women than it did for men, since for men authority was assumed, while for women it was utterly denied. Thus each woman asserting authority was a self-defined freak and had to deal with that fact in her writing before her audiences could be open to her language and thought. (p. 47)

The culmination of these efforts has done much to shed light on Hildegard's social and political achievements. Further, the diversity of the scholars studying her life and work is representative of her complexity as a subject matter. She does not fit easily into the confines of any single paradigm or field of research. Newman (1997) explores this issue:

... Hildegard confronts us too often as an anomalous figure – a woman fascinating in the sheer breadth of her accomplishment, yet strangely alienated from her context. Few medievalists today would deny her a place in the history of spirituality, of medicine, or of music. But if we try to glimpse the totality of her life and work where are we to "place" Hildegard of Bingen? ( para.1)

To Newman's question, there is no obvious answer. What there is, though, is a rich and detailed set of artifacts archiving her life and the world in which she lived. Premier among those artifacts are her personal correspondences and little scholarship exists that focuses on Hildegard's rhetorical strategies and how they shaped her legacy. In short, this project facilitates a direct focus on how the language used in her writings helped garner her religious and political authority. Hildegard incorporated language strategies in her personal letters, particularly the use of metaphor, and as such, she persuasively advocates how the Church and society should enact a "marriage to God."



While many have chosen to focus on Hildegard's liturgical writings, my interest is in her private correspondence. There are approximately 390 known letters either to or from Hildegard. It is a sample of these letters represented in this translation titled *The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen* that will be the focus of this analysis.

There is clear rhetorical significance to Hildegard's letters. For example, the recipients and senders are astoundingly diverse, representing all tiers of Medieval society. The content of the letters are wide ranging. Hildegard's writings are sometimes prophetic in nature or biographical memoirs – still others are biting political commentaries of the state of the Church or political leaders. The letters share, though, a glimpse at the person of Hildegard and the means by which she shaped her sphere of influence – her rhetorical role. Roderick P. Hart and Suzanne Daughton (2005) describe rhetorical role as "...a regularized set of verbal strategies resulting in a distinctive personal image" (p. 211). The authors expand upon this further by stating that such an analysis is an attempt to "... understand how a rhetor's words interact with an audience's perceptions to create social change" (2005, pg. 211). Hildegard was acutely successful in this regard.

In summary, Hildegard's rhetorical role is a complex enactment of Church advocacy and critique; convoluted by her popularity and celebrity legitimacy in the Middle Ages. This project attempts to provide insight into how Hildegard managed to sustain her popular cultural status and Church authority while struggling with the realities of being a woman who often criticized the Church which she loved. I argue that Hildegard "managed" these complexities by crafting and examining her "marriage to God"—a prominent metaphor in her personal writings.

This inquiry is organized in three remaining chapters. Chapter two discusses Hildegard's letters and provides further elaboration on the historical context in which she writes them. I provide the rationale for studying a sample of these letters and I outline the scholarly method of rhetorical criticism and the interpretive ideas from Kenneth Burke that will guide my analysis of the letters. My analysis, with specific attention to Hildegard's use

of metaphor and in her elaboration of the “marriage to God” metaphor, is presented in chapter three. This chapter provides documentation and evidence from Hildegard’s letters that support’s the central idea of this project: that an understanding of Hildegard’s rhetorical significance requires an understanding of how she uses language in her personal letters as a way to “make sense” out of her contradictory sacred and secular roles. I argue that her use of the “marriage to God” metaphor is her primary means of sense-making and in chapter four, I discuss how this metaphor continues to legitimize Hildegard with contemporary audiences affiliated with the New Age movement, holistic healing, and spiritual inquiries. Finally, I discuss how Hildegard’s “marriage to God” metaphor can aid contemporary debates about religion, morality, marriage, and civil unions.

## CHAPTER 2: RHETORICAL CONTEXT, TEXT, PERSPECTIVE, AND METHOD

This chapter provides an orientation to Hildegard's letters by further discussing the historical context that shapes Hildegard's rhetorical role. I also propose that my inquiry study a sample of these letters and I outline how I discerned the scope of the sample. I then discuss the rhetorical perspective that guides this inquiry and how rhetorical criticism functions as a "method" for understanding rhetorical roles and how language constitutes these roles.

Initially, it is important to understand the humanities-based scholarly inquiry of rhetorical criticism. Through this means of analysis, the researcher illuminates the holistic context from which a rhetorical artifact is derived. It acknowledges that such artifacts do not exist in isolation, but both influence and are influenced by the political, social, and religious situations of a time and place. "Rhetorical works belong to the class of things which obtain their character from the circumstances of the historic context in which they occur" (Bitzer, 2005, p. 60). To separate language from its environment removes it from the essential larger reality from which it is derived. Bitzer writes

"... the situation controls the rhetorical response in the same sense that the question controls the answer and the problem controls the solution. Not the rhetor and not the persuasive intent, but the situation is the source and ground of rhetorical activity – and I should add, of rhetorical criticism."  
(2005, p. 61-62)

In this vein, ideas and concepts influence and are influenced by the context in which they are conveyed. "Ideas take on a history in process, which includes transmission." (Wrage, 2005, p. 29) Further, the analysis of a rhetorical artifact, whether it is a public speech or a written correspondence, is an opportunity to illuminate not only the rhetor, but

the context in which he or she exists. "A speech is an agency of its time, one whose surviving record provides a repository of themes and their elaborations from which we may gain insight into the life of an era as well as into the mind of a man" (Wrage, 2009, p. 32).

At its core, rhetorical analysis must first acknowledge that artifacts of rhetorical significance whether a speech, a written correspondence or the phrasing of a line of poetry, are tied irrevocably to the context in which they are drawn. Put simply, rhetorical criticism analyzes language use in relation to the overall context, text, perspective and method.

## Rhetorical Context

Hildegard's letters are heavily influenced by her rhetorical role in society, as well as, her audiences' perception of that role. The constraints of women in 12<sup>th</sup> Century society were incredibly stringent by any contemporary measure – especially for a woman who has taken vows to live a religious life. However, the 12<sup>th</sup> Century was also a time of change and reform both of European society and the Church. Logan writes,

We see the pope as one political player among others in the struggle for power in Western Europe, and religion had little to do with it. A papal defence would claim that the pope needed to be independent and free from the coercion of secular rules in order to exercise his sacred mission, and he thus needed strong papal territories in central Italy to guarantee that independence. For the truly religious movements of the time we need to look beyond Rome to see the profound changes that affected the living of the Christian life. (2006, p. 135-136)

Just as the Pope was not singularly a religious figure, it would be inaccurate to classify Hildegard as only a nun. Both her official writings and personal correspondences stepped beyond religious discourse into the realm of social and political activism. She had the ear of some of the most powerful figures of the time and she was not afraid to attempt to

influence their actions. Her ability to accomplish this was tied heavily to the influx of changes occurring in German and European society.

Chief among those changes was the reality that commerce during that period was strengthened by improvements in agriculture. As more was being produced, more was available for trade. With commerce, came changes to the class structure and an evolving relationship between the rural and urban.

Selling the excess to towns, which were growing in number and size, provided the seller with actual money with which he could buy town-made goods, such as finished cloth. Commerce was the essential ingredient in defining a town, and commercial towns soon developed a merchant class and an artisan class, both of which organized themselves into guilds, which had a religious flavor. (Logan, 2003, p. 131)

With these changes,

The twelfth century witnessed critical developments in the practice of the Christian faith. New religious orders and new forms of religious devotion produced a flowering of practical Christianity, far removed from the seemingly sordid world of papal politics. Historians may debate the reasons for these extraordinary developments – a thriving economy, pressures of demographic growth, the maturing of the forms of religion, an individual quest for more than what the material world can give. They may even propose various names to describe the phenomenon – reform, revival, renaissance, even reformation, Yet whatever the reasons and the names given, the reality is beyond dispute: A religious enthusiasm seldom, perhaps never, witnessed before in the (by then) long history of Christianity. Changes in the life lived by men and women in religious vows (which we, perhaps inexactly, call the 'religious life') were an essential expression of this enthusiasm and near its epicenter. (Logan, 2007, para. 1)

Her life spanned much of the 12<sup>th</sup> Century, placing her, therefore, at the core of this evolutionary transformation. Subsequent arguments have been made that Hildegard was either a catalyst or a product of these changes. (1994, Lerner, p. 78) While not the primary focus of my analysis, I would suggest that it's most likely that both assertions are accurate. The shift in the collective societal mind allowed figures like Hildegard to emerge, while the unique composition of Hildegard, herself, opened the door for additional societal change. She was both an instigating force and a product of her place in time: her rhetorical roles were shaped by the context, events, and issues of her time and by her disposition as both a Church authority and critic.

## Rhetorical Text

The 390 known letters either to or from Hildegard have only in the last 100 years been fully translated to English. Dr. Joseph L. Baird, Professor Emeritus of Classics and Medieval Studies at Kent State University, has edited and translated (from Latin) these into three volumes. In a fourth, he compiled those letters which he considered especially important in the life and development of Hildegard as a significant figure in her time and beyond. It is a sample of the letters represented in this work titled *The Personal Correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen* that will be the focus of this analysis.

A central theme within these letters is the nature of Hildegard's sacred vows. Upon entering the Order of Saint Benedict, she effectively tied herself to God as His bride. This metaphorical marriage was not uncommon at the time. While largely an action taken by unmarried virgins entering religious orders, however married and widowed women occasionally made the same claim. In her doctoral thesis, Rabia Gregory wrote of this,

This patristic literature for virgins became the main source of medieval formational literature for religious women, and Ambrose and Jerome were

especially influential. Male confessors and spiritual counselors continued to describe, cajole, and praise sanctified virgins as Brides of Christ. However, the sanctified bodies of veiled virgins and pure Christians' bridal souls ceased to be abstractions in the mid-twelfth century, soon after Bernard of Clairvaux popularized the understanding that the bride was an individual's soul. By the late twelfth century, women (and men) were no longer passive recipients of bridal status, but instead actively proclaimed themselves (or were recognized to be) individual and living brides of Christ. These brides of Christ wore wedding rings, bridal gowns, and bridal veils, either in their souls or on their bodies. They spoke to the Godhead as if he were their lover and visited with the Bridegroom in vineyards, palaces, wine cellars, and bedchambers, just as the bride in the Song of Songs had. Many of these medieval brides even married Christ, whether through a monastic initiation ceremony, or through a spiritual donning of bridal gown, crown, and wedding ring. By the late twelfth or early thirteenth century, every day sinners could, through religious conversion, marry Jesus and become the bride of Christ. Between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries, increasing numbers of women and men became brides of Christ, stepping into the role of the Shulamite woman and becoming living participants in a metaphoric enactment of Christ's transformative love.

(2007, p. 3-4)

Hildegard employs this "marriage to God" status in both justifying her actions and validating her work and political positions. The various aspects of that marriage are explicitly implied throughout her writings. While many others of the time employed similar strategies, few mastered the full physical, spiritual and mental embodiment of such varied aspects of the role of wife. She did not just employ it in small ways, but on a very holistic level. The sample of five correspondences I have selected represent the complexities of her

spiritual role as “wife” and the implications of that role within the larger society and her status in the church.

I argue that Hildegard fully understood the complexity of this role and acted accordingly within the situational context of her life. Through her written correspondences, she represented various aspects of her “wifely self” and, by effectively doing so, she carried the inherent power of being God’s spouse. Put simply, she fulfilled her role as wife convincingly and society responded accordingly.

Each of the letters represents a different aspect of the role of wife. The five letters are each listed according to this role and the sequence in which they appear within Baird’s work.

- The Obedient Wife - Letter 1 – to Bernard of Clairvaux
- Femininity of the Holy Bride: Letter 5 – to Mistress Tengswich)
- Mother to His Children: Letter 10 – to Her Own Community
- Agent of her Groom – Letter 13 – to Heinrich Archbishop of Mainz
- The Faithful, Adoring and Peaceful Wife - Letter 75 – A Meditation

## Rhetorical Perspective

The Dramatistic approach developed by Kenneth Burke is a

“method of analysis and a corresponding critique of terminology designed to show that the most direct route to the study of human relations and human motives is via a methodical inquiry into cycles or clusters of terms and their functions.” (Burke, 2007, p. 160)

Central to Burke’s theory is the use of the pentad: act, scene, agent, agency, and purpose. (2007) It is through the use of these terms and the manner in which they function together that one can illuminate the motives and interactions of the rhetor. For Burke, context is essential and so, too, are the different classes of beings between which



communication passes. In *A Rhetoric of Motives*, Burke discusses the role of classes and communication, as well as its inherent hierarchical structure as it applies in a religious context:

“But also implicit in persuasion, there is theology, since theology is the ultimate reach of communication between different classes of beings. The steps here would seem to be: (1) In the courtship of persuasion there are the rudiments of love, respectful pleading. (2) The ultimate of this attitude is reverent beseechment, prayer. (3) Prayer has its own invitation to the universalizing of class distinction, the pleader being by nature inferior to the pled-with. (4) The relation attains its utmost thoroughness in the contrast between the mightiest sovereign and the lowliest of his subjects. We can next note that the pattern may be *brought to earth* in an attenuated form, as social hierarchy.) (5) But in its “pure” form, there is need to find a discussable content, or object. One cannot with an almost suicidal degree of perfection merely pray. One must pray to *something*. (6) Hence, the plunge direct to the *principle* of persuasion, as reduced to its more universal form, leads to the theologian’s attempt to establish an object of such prayer; namely: God (largely applying to this end terms set by the *social* hierarchy.) (1969, p 178-179)

Thus, Burke approaches the religious act of prayer from a scientific position, in which context and hierarchy are essential elements of persuasion and motive.

The letters will be considered through the lens of a portion of Burke’s work entitled: *The Rhetoric of Religion – Studies in Logology*. On a macro level, Burke’s approach offers a mechanism of analysis rooted heavily in motive and psychology. Central to his theory is that even when the tenants of a faith are shared, religion is inevitably perceived and experienced on a very individualistic level. As such, it inspires a great deal of discourse (and discord)

between parties. Burke's strategy for study is an analysis of the words themselves, as well as, the nature of the origins from which those words were derived.

Whatever the unifying nature of religion in this technical sense (with theology as a central science, to terms of which all else might be 'reduced'), the history of religions has also been the history of great discord. It would seem that nothing can more effectively set people at odds than the demand that they think alike. For, given our many disparate ways of life, we couldn't really think alike, even if we wanted to. Though we repeated exactly the same articles of faith, we'd understand them differently to the extent that our relations to them differed. The rich man's prayer is not the poor man's prayer. Youth's God is not the God of the aged. The God of the wretch condemned to be hanged is not the God of the lucky chap who just won at bingo under ecclesiastical auspices. (Burke, 1970, Forward)

As the experience of the sacred varies, so do the words applied to describe and define it. Man, as a symbol-using animal, is forced to assign words from the secular world in his describing and defining that of the sacred. "...in so far as religious doctrine is verbal, it will necessarily exemplify its nature as verbalization; and insofar as religious doctrine is through, its ways of exemplifying verbal principles should be correspondingly thorough." (Burke, 1970, p. 1) In effect, whatever the reality of the existence of a divine, humanity has assigned words to it. "For regardless of whether the entity named 'God' exists outside His nature sheerly as key term in a system of terms, words 'about him' must reveal their nature as words." (Burke, 1970, p. 2) Further, the language used to describe Him is a useful artifact for illuminating the relationship the user perceives to have with Him.

The subject of religion falls under the head of rhetoric in the sense that rhetoric is the art of *persuasion*, and religious cosmogonies are designed, in the last analysis, as exceptionally thorough going modes of persuasion. To persuade men towards certain acts, religions would form the kinds of attitude

which prepare men for such acts. And in order to plead for such attitudes so persuasively as possible, the religious always ground their exhortations (to themselves and others) in statements of the widest and deepest possible scope, concerning the authorship of men's motives. (Burke, 1970, Forward)

In this sense, the subject of religious exhortation involves the nature of religion as persuasion. (Burke, 1970, Forward) Further, Burke is not concerned with the validity of faith, but instead, in the words employed by individuals on behalf of their faith and the relationship of those words to their origins in the physical world.

It is not within the competence of our project to decide the question either theistically or atheistically, or even agnostically. This investigation does not require us to make any decisions about the validity of theology *qua* theology. Our purpose is simply to ask how theological principles can be shown to have useable secular analogues that throw light upon the nature of language.

(Burke, 1970, p. 2)

In short, religion and faith are among the most divisive topics tackled by rhetoricians. By seeking to understand the persuasive strategies of those who most effectively advocate on behalf of their faith or religious principles, the scholar can apply those same strategies to the secular world and its most challenging arguments. I argue that Hildegard was incredibly successful because she spoke of God as a spouse and, therefore, inherently, the weight of that association bolstered her credibility as a part of and critic of the Church.

## Rhetorical Method

The relationship between words and the things they describe, whether natural or supernatural, compose the framework for this analysis. In the following chapters, these categories will be applied to Hildegard's letters with special emphasis given to the metaphor

of her "Marriage to God." Burke does focus heavily on the origin of words and what those origins say about the people who borrow them in describing the supernatural. In that vein, Burke categorizes all words into four realms (1970 pp. 14-16):

1) Words for the natural realm. "This order of terms would comprise the words for things, for material operations, physiological conditions, animality, and the like." (1970, p. 14)

2) Words for the social political realm. "Here are all the words for social relations, laws, right, wrong, rule and the like." (1970, p. 14)

3) Words for words realm. "Here is the realm of dictionaries, grammar, etymology, philology, literary criticism, rhetoric, poetics, dialectics – all that I like to think of as coming to a head in the discipline." (1970, p. 14)

4) Words for the supernatural realm.

Burke differentiates the fourth category from the first three. The supernatural is by definition the realm of the "ineffable." And language by definition is not suited to the expression of the "ineffable." So our words for the fourth realm, the supernatural or "ineffable," are necessarily borrowed from our words for the sorts of things we can talk about literally, our words the three empirical orders (the world of everyday experience). (1970, p. 15) That mechanism of borrowing words from the natural realm and applying them to the supernatural is a central component of Burke's theory and this analysis. Words borrowed from the physical carry some inherent meaning from their origins. The light of nature lends its luminosity to the Light of God. Hildegard felt a close attachment to the natural world and studied it with the eye of a scholar. That connection surfaces often in her word choice as she borrows frequently from the natural words. In that frequency is born a wealth of words applied to the supernatural that generally have not been so used. Burke elaborates upon the further by writing:

Think first of the relation between the thing and its name (between a tree and the word "tree"). The power is primarily in the thing, in the tree rather than in

the word for tree. But the word is related to this power, this thing, as “knowledge” about that thing. Hence, derivatively, it has a kind of power, too (the power that is in knowledge, in accurate naming). But primarily power is in the materials, the things, that we can build with, or heat with, or strike with and so on. (1970, p. 29)

The phenomenon is cyclical. Just as secular concepts and words are applied to the supernatural world to give it form, so too, are supernatural concepts and words reapplied to the natural and secular world. Language folds upon itself creating symbols for symbols. Early in describing the theory, Burke uses the example of St Augustine as an illustration and the reapplication.

St. Augustine, having arrived at his Trinitarian idea of God, saw manifestations of this supernatural principle in all sorts of sheerly natural phenomena. Every triad, however secular, was for him another sign of the Trinity. (Burke, 1970, p. 2)

The power of the word is adopted, applied and reapplied to infuse within its hosts whatever nuance it inherently carried. As Burke aptly put, “Words are to the non-verbal things they name as Spirit is to Matter.” (1970, p. 16)

Burke expands upon that cyclical discussion further stating:

But though there is this area wherein analogies may fold back upon themselves, reilluminating the place they started from, the fundamental materials out of which our terms for the supernatural can be analogically constructed are:

First, the sweep and power of the natural (of storms, of seas, of mountains), also the structural consistencies, as with crystals and with the symmetries of biological organisms. Second in the socio-political order, the dignities and solemnities of office – and the intimacies of the familial. And third (and here I

thought I found myself compelled to make up a word), the “symbolicity” of the symbolic. (1970, p. 37)

An analysis of Hildegard’s work is especially interesting from this approach for two reasons: First, her personal experience of religion was so singular. Scientists and physicians would later speculate that her “visions” were just a symptom of severe migraines. However, by all accounts, Hildegard attributed both her pain and the visual anomalies that accompanied it to supernatural forces. Whatever the source, those experiences acted as the framework of her faith and, to her, the very manifestation of God in the physical world. Secondly, her expression of that faith is remarkable not only in its rhetoric, but also in its effectiveness. Hildegard’s “Words about God” had far reaching effects – geopolitical effects. I argue that her influence is born from the concept of her perceived role as a bride of Christ.

Burke’s Logology theory was formed in an effort to bridge the gap between the natural and supernatural worlds, the secular and the sacred. It is worth noting that Hildegard’s rhetoric often achieved that very goal. Through her “marriage with God,” she spoke of her spouse and about her spouse. By doing so, she validated a special place in society and within Church from which to exert great influence both in her time and for centuries later.

“Theological doctrine is a body of spoken or written words. Whatever else it may be, and wholly regardless of whether it be true or false, theology is preeminently verbal. It is “words about ‘God.’” (Burke, 1970, Forward)

This metaphorical union became the font from which she found her voice. Hildegard’s “words about God” were words about a beloved. They helped her to define herself.

## CHAPTER 3: HILDEGARD'S "MARRIAGE TO GOD": ASPECTS OF THE "HOLY WIFE"

My analysis will extend a paramount theme in Christian inquiry: Marriage to God.

The metaphor of "Marriage to God" is one that emerges repeatedly throughout Christian theological inquiry. It was employed by many in varying ways and with varying degrees of worldly success.

St. Catherine of Alexandria is "found again and again in the art of both northern and southern Europe, from the late medieval to Baroque periods, kneeling next to the Virgin and Child, receiving a ring that marks her as the bride of Christ." (Muir, 2004-2005, pp 135)

The legend of St. Agnes also describes her as a bride of Christ through a series of self-deprecating events.

"On Agnes's way home from school, the son of a prefect sees her, falls in love with her, and proposes marriage. Agnes refuses, saying that she is already promised to another lover, whom she then praises lavishly for his many fine qualities. In her speech to her suitor, she says that her beloved 'has placed His ring upon my finger, has given me a necklace of precious stones, and has clothed me in a gown woven with gold.' At this refusal, the young man falls ill, and his father tries to persuade Agnes to change her mind. Learning that her lover is Christ, the prefect offers her a choice: to sacrifice to pagan gods or to be taken to a brothel. Refusing to make the sacrifice, Agnes is stripped and led to the brothel; however, her hair miraculously grows long enough to cover her naked body. When she reaches the brothel, an angel appears with a white garment to clothe her. The prefect's son and his friends come to visit her intending to have their pleasure with her; however, the son drops dead on the spot, killed by a demon. Agnes, at the prefect's request, restores the son

to life. Even so, the prefect, encouraged by his priests, has her thrown into a fire. As Agnes is untouched by the fire, a dagger is thrust into her throat, and she dies." (Muir, 2004-2005, pp 136)

It's also important to note that though usually adopted by those in religious orders, others also claimed it. Margery Kempe made the difficult transition in the Middle Ages from a married mother of fourteen children to a spiritual mystic. (Robitaille, 2005, p. 1) "Her experience as Christ's 'blessed spouse' and handmaiden makes her unique and differentiated from any scribe, priest or mortal man. Her tears and her bodily asceticism give her true authorship over her life and its representation." (Robitaille, 2005, p. 6) Neither a man, nor a virgin, Kempe is pushed from the inner circles of the church in a way that even Hildegard is not. As such, she is forced to carve out a space singularly her own claiming to experience God as His bride in a physical way that male clerics cannot. (Robitaille, 2005, p.7)

St Theresa of Avila (1921) writes in *The Interior Circle* of the difference between marriage between persons and marriage to God.

"Union may be symbolized by two wax candles, the tips of which touch each other so closely that there is but one light; or again, the wick, the wax and the light become one, but the one candle can again be separated from the other and the two candles remain distinct; or the wick may be withdrawn from the wax, But spiritual marriage is like rain falling from heaven into a river or stream, becoming one and the same liquid, so that the river and rain cannot be divided; or it resembles a streamlet flowing into the ocean, which cannot afterwards be disunited from it. This marriage may also be likened to a room into which a bright light enters through two windows – though divided when it enters, the light becomes one and the same. (1921, p. 273)

Hildegard's own marriage to God was one centered on the elevating of God in contrast to her own severe self-deprecation. Through this context, Hildegard clearly suffered



not only physically, but spiritually and mentally. I'll argue that it is through that suffering that Hildegard attained a higher rank in the eyes of the Church's hierarchy and her contemporaries.

The Old Testament several times references this union in the Song of Songs. The English translation of "O Ecclesia": Hildegard's Sequence for St. Ursula, a Virgin Martyred for God, illustrates her understanding of that union. Thematically, she employs similar images as the Song of Songs passage, most notably that of the lover running to her beloved, the eternal union, and the beauty of her beloved. Through this description she makes the pain of martyrdom a powerful means of obtaining the favor and love of God.

Like "Marriage to God," the sanctity of self-deprecation and suffering is an important theme for Christians especially in Hildegard's time. "Perhaps no other major world religion endows pain with greater spiritual significance than Christianity, and among Christians none spoke so directly to the issue of suffering as the mystics of late medieval and early modern Europe." (Flynn, 1996, p 257) Pain, sacrifice and suffering were a means to attaining a closer proximity to the divine. Fasting, flagellation and difficult pilgrimages were not uncommon. In the beating down of oneself, God was raised up.

"The *vitae* of saints are filled with descriptions of ascetic practices that were performed in the belief that physical affliction would prepare the soul for God. Historian Caroline Bynum tells us that holy women of the Middle Ages consistently fasted as part of their devotional exercises, identifying their undernourished and emancipated bodies with Christ, an image of extraordinary self-sacrifice and humility in medieval culture." (Flynn, 1996, p. 258)

Thus, Hildegard's self-depravation was a recognized and revered form of worship in her time. Through it, Hildegard was able to both emulate and exalt her God. Further, this self-sacrificed made her an ideal Bride of Christ.

Using the Burkean perspective of Logology, I will illustrate how five aspects of marriage are illustrated through Hildegard's personal correspondence and how that theme improved the effectiveness of her work politically and in the hierarchal structure of the church.

From a Burkean vantage, each of the themes plays an important role in establishing Hildegard as a Bride of Christ, and, subsequently a legitimate mystic and leader within the traditionally patriarchal hierarchy of the Church. Each role acts to demean her in relation to God, and in doing so, elevate her within the hierarchy of the Church. As the faithful wife of the omnipotent, she establishes a status that supersedes in some ways even the clergy. Hildegard's "words about God" are words about her relation to Him as His wife. The roles she adapted in her letters legitimize that connection and her place within the Church.

## The Obedient Wife – Letter 1 to Bernard of Clairvaux

Hildegard found her voice late in life. By the time she penned her first letter of significance sometime in the year 1146 or 1147 – she was nearing 50. Her recipient was carefully chosen. The humility of her voice equaled the distinguished stature of his high station. Bernard of Clairvaux was an accomplished abbot with the ear of the Pope. He would be named a saint by the Church after his death. Hildegard had already spent five or six years working on her first major book – *Scivias*. She had something to tell the world – something that she was convinced she was ordained by her very God to convey. However, the inherent restraints of her position dictated that she receive approval from Church hierarchy before she publish her work. Bernard of Clairvaux was essential to that process. In fact, it may be argued that due to his influence, convincing Bernard of Clairvaux *was* the process. Therefore, that process must be handled delicately. Baird (2006) writes of this,

...Hildegard is quite aware that she must gain the favor of the ecclesiastical authorities before she will be able to publish her work and in order to accomplish this she must show that she is not just some pride-filled woman, either deluded by the devil or out for her own gain in the world.." (para. 1)

This first letter is representative of the paradoxes and rhetorical strategies she so often would later employ. To be effective, Hildegard must portray herself as both a willing recipient though one deeply aware of her social unworthiness. She must appear supernatural in her gift but weak in her humanity – passionate, but not unstable. The letter is an excellent example of her employing her mystical role as The Obedient Wife.

Ultimately, Hildegard needed from Bernard confirmation of her abilities and a subsequent endorsement from the Church. And yet that request is but a sliver of the content contained in the letter. It is, instead, thick with praise for its recipient. In those few short paragraphs she addresses Bernard of Clairvaux as:

- "O venerable father Bernard"

- "Highly honored by God"
- One who brings... "fear to the immoral foolishness of this world and, intense zeal and burning love for the Son of God, father men into Christ's army to fight under the banner of the cross against pagan savagery."
- "Steadfast and gentle father"
- "A man looking straight into the sun, bold and unafraid"
- "Good and gentle father"
- "You are not inconstant, but always lifting up the tree, a victor in your spirit, lifting up not only yourself but also the whole world unto salvation. You are indeed the eagle gazing directly at the sun."

Her descriptions of herself stand in stark contrast to that glowing praise for Bernard. She writes of herself as:

- "Wretched, and indeed more wretched in my womanly condition"
- "...your unworthy servant, who has never, from her earliest childhood, lived one hour free from anxiety."
- "your handmaiden"
- One with "...no formal training at all" knowing "... how to read only on the most elementary level, certainly with no deep analysis."
- One who is "untaught and untrained in exterior material"
- One with "halting, unsure speech"
- One "bedridden in my infirmities, and am unable to raise myself up"
- "Unstable because I am caught in the winepress, that tree rooted in Adam by the devil's deceit which brought about his exile into this wayward world."

The letter to Bernard Clairvaux was political. The response from Clairvaux was tepid compared to Hildegard's impassioned manuscript. However, the effect was sufficient in gaining her the credibility she required to precede. Though his letter was of little note, scholars generally agree that it's likely that Clairvaux did present Hildegard's situation to

Pope Eugenius who was holding a synod at neighboring Trier. Others believe that Abbot Kuno informed Archbishop Henry of Mainz about Hildegard's work and that it was through him, not Clairvaux, that the Pope was made aware of her efforts. What is certain is that the Pope sent representatives to Hildegard's residence at Mount St. Rupert to retrieve the completed portion of *Scivius*. Later, the Pope, himself, would read it to the assembled cardinals and the archbishop. They would unanimously agree that Hildegard should not only be allowed, but encouraged, to continue her work. (2006, Baird, Letter 1, para 8)

The use of self-deprecation combined with the high compliments for her reader acted as an effective persuasive and, ultimately, political strategy. Through the role of "obedient wife," she accomplished two objectives of great importance. First, she diminished herself to a station of weakness and unimportance while simultaneously elevating Bernard of Clairvaux. The combination of these actions helped her to achieve her second objective: the validation of her work. If she was so weak and flawed in her femininity, such astounding work could only be attributed to something outside of her: her bridegroom, God. As the modest, obedient wife, Hildegard simply was the messenger of her beloved's message – the unworthy chalice of his divinity. In her humility, she offered this message to Bernard. In her passivity, she creates an image of herself as little more than the medium of God's divinity.

This is especially effective because she elevates Bernard to a place near God. If he accepts his heightened rank and her low status – he has no choice but attribute her gift to a supernatural source thus validating her claim.

## Femininity of the Holy Bride – Letter 5 to Mistress Tengswich

Baird included one letter from a Mistress Tengswich<sup>2</sup> who likely represents those in the most conservative branch of Catholicism. (2006, Baird, Chapter 2, para 3) The attack is a personal one laced with sarcasm. She writes to Hildegard based solely on rumors surrounding the management of her nuns and the ceremonies being performed at the convent. It is important for two reasons. First, it gives us a glimpse at how portions of the public viewed Hildegard. Secondly, it gives us a tantalizing view of her management of her nuns and the conventions she was willing to break.

Tengswich begins her correspondence by addressing her letter "To Hildegard, mistress of the brides of Christ" (2006, Baird, Letter 4, para.1) Tengswich goes on to accuse Hildegard of lacking modesty and more specifically that "on feast days your virgins stand in the church with unbound hair while singing the psalms and that they wear white, silk veils, so long that they touch the floor." (2006, Baird, Letter 4, para. 3)

Interestingly, Hildegard responds<sup>2</sup>, not with a denial of any of Tengswich's allegations, but with theology. It would have been easy to attribute the woman's accusations, at least in part, to wicked rumors and misinformed sources. She makes no such claim, and instead, seeks to justify her femininity as an act of obedience to God her groom. She agrees that once married a woman "ought not to indulge herself in prideful adornment of hair or person, nor ought she to lift herself up to vanity wearing a crown and other golden ornaments, except at her husband's pleasure, and even then with moderation." (2006, Baird, Letter 5, para 3)

She then expands upon that by indicating that virgins, like herself and her nuns, do not have such restrictions because "Virgins are married with the holiness in the bright dawn of virginity." (2006, Baird, Letter 5, para 5) It is at this point in the letter that Hildegard reveals the most complete description of how she views her relationship with God and Christ.

"...and so it is proper that they come before the great High Priest as an oblation presented to God. Thus through the permission granted her and the revelation of the mystic inspiration of the finger of God, it is appropriate for a virgin to wear a white vestment, the lucent symbol of her betrothal to Christ, considering that her mind is made one with the interwoven whole, and keeping in mind the One to whom she is joined,"

(2006, Baird, Letter 5, para 5)

Hildegard very much sees her role, and that of her nuns, as that of the feminine bride who is called to be pleasing before her groom. In that role, she is justified in presenting herself in a manner which might otherwise be controversial for the time. Employing this role in the letter to Mistress Tengswich is especially effective, because in doing so she reinforces her own sacred union to God which cannot be understood or questioned by Tengswich who is married to a mere mortal. By establishing herself as God's own beloved bride, she puts herself at level beyond which Tengswich can dare to question.

For Hildegard, the marriage to God role requires her to embody both the obedience displayed in the first letter and the femininity illustrated in the second. Both are pleasing to God and reinforce her role in the mystical marriage from which she draws her social legitimacy. The unification of these roles naturally extends to a third: Mother to God's Children.

## Mother to His Children - Letter 10 to Her Own Community

As the leader of her community, Hildegard often speaks and acts from the role of “Mother” especially late in her life. She uses this platform to legitimize herself as leader, caregiver, and agent of the Father/God. In this metaphor, she is humble and maternal but also a proxy of God. She writes in one letter to her own community about some property she believes belongs to them. Near the end of that discussion, she touches upon her eventual death and, in doing so, makes a very frank discussion of her motherly role:

O daughters, you who have followed in Christ’s footsteps [cf. I Pet 2.21] in your love for chastity, and who have chosen me, poor little woman that I am, as a mother for yourselves – a choice made in the humility of obedience in order to exalt God – I say these things not on my own accord but according to a divine revelation speaking through my motherly affection for you. (2006, Baird, Letter 10, para 1)

Later in the same letter she establishes her mystical maternal role even more blatantly:

O how loudly these daughters of mine will lament when their mother dies, for they will no longer suckle her breasts. And so for a long time with groans and wails and tears they will say: Alas, alas! Gladly would we suck our mother’s breasts if we but had her here with us now! Therefore, O daughters of God, I admonish you to love one another, just as from my youth, I, your mother, have admonished you, so that in this good will you might be a bright light with the angels, and strong in your spirits, just as Benedict your father, instructed you. May the Holy Spirit send you His gifts, because after my death you will no longer hear my voice. But never forget the sound of my voice among you, for it has so often resounded love among you.



Now my daughters are grieved in their hearts out of the sadness they feel for their mother, and they sigh and look to heaven. (2006, Baird, Letter 10, para. 3-4)

Hildegard borrows heavily from the words about physical motherhood and applies them to her role as the mystical mother of her community. This role is one that is a testament to her sacred union with God and, as an extension of that union, her responsibility to His children. As such, she must act accordingly and watch over and lead those in her care.

Within this role, Hildegard also is charged with caring for God's handiwork. As the bride of the Creator, she is, by extension, also mother of that Creation and the children who fill it. While this letter does not refer to it directly, Hildegard does have a special connection to the natural world referring to it often in her music and writing and devoting whole books to its study. There is certainly a maternal component to such devotion.

## Agent of Her Groom – Letter 13 to Heinrich Archbishop of Mainz

Despite her eventual fame and popularity, Hildegard was often in opposition to the hierarchy of the church. At one such time she accused the Archbishop of Mainz of the sin of simony. Despite his high rank, her tone is harsh, accusing and condescending. Instead of the meek nun, Hildegard rises as a soldier for what she perceives as the position of her sacred spouse writing:

And so your malicious curses and threatening words are not to be obeyed.

You have raised up your rods of punishment arrogantly, not to serve God, but to gratify your own perverted will. (2006, Baird, Letter 13, para 2)

There was great risk in taking such a disrespectful tone against a church leader. Yet, Hildegard never wavered from whatever stance she perceived God was taking. Later in life, she would take a similar approach in her correspondence with a Pope and several heads of state never with any retribution.

As wife of God, she felt an ultimate call to defend his cause and attack all those she perceived as perverting His mission or divinity. She was empowered by her marriage to Him. It gave her credibility both in her own mind and in the eyes of those she attacked. Even if they may not have agreed with her assertions, they could not retaliate. She was so confident in her role as wife that those who contradicted her were perceived as contradicting God himself.

Hildegard was called to this role. The obedient wife and mother cannot fulfill her vows unless she is willing to sacrifice herself and her safety for her beloved.

## The Faithful, Adoring and Peaceful Wife - Letter 75 – A Meditation

Finally, Baird presents a final document as representative of Hildegard's personal work. He describes it in this way:

This final document, although a 'meditation' rather than a 'letter,' is a fitting conclusion to this work, for it is, in effect, a letter to the divine, consisting, as it does, almost wholly of songs and poems to the Trinity and the Holy Virgin.

(2006, Songs and Hymns, XIII)

This version of Hildegard is that of an artist adoring her subject. She paints for the reader a vision of the supernatural realm using all that is beautiful and powerful from natural. She is the wife in love and at peace with her life and her meditation takes on a poetic quality so often employed by lovers throughout history.

With hearts afire, we long to follow You,  
But, O how difficult it is for us miserable creatures,  
To imitate You, King of the angels without blemish or Guilt.  
Now, we call out to You,  
Bridegroom, Consoler,  
To You Who redeemed  
Us on the cross.  
Through Your blood,  
We have been joined to You  
In betrothal,  
Refusing a husband,  
And choosing You,  
O Son of God. (Baird, 2006, Hildegard Letter 75 para 10-13)

Hildegard, the wife, sees her husband as the center of all things, creator of all things. She looks to the natural world binding the beauty and strength of Nature to the divinity of Him. She writes:

From You, the clouds flow, the ether flies,  
From You, the rocks have their moisture,  
From You, the waters bring forth their rills,  
From You, the earth exudes its viridity.

(Baird, 2006, Hildegard Letter 75 para 59)

This is a love letter to the Divine – a note of poetry left for her Lover. Once again, there is agency here. This meditation was written late in her life. By this time her mysticism and prophetic writings had been authenticated by the Church and she had a significant following.

She had long enjoyed a status as a Holy Bride and people looked to her for guidance. This poetic meditation is as much for her followers as it is for her God. It illustrates her as an obedient, adoring, impassioned lover. The Hildegard of this meditation does not just obey her husband – she glorifies him, praises him.

The element of nature is also prominent. She didn't just see sanctity in God. To Hildegard that sanctity multiplied over and over in the majesty and brilliance of his Creation. And over and over she borrowed words and metaphors from the Earth to describe the grandeur of the realm she believed Her beloved ruled over. Like a wife who cares for her husband's home, Hildegard felt a commitment and connection to Nature.

It is in this meditation that Hildegard completes the full scope of her marriage to God. She has acted as his virginal feminine bride, the mother of his children and creation, and the agent of his causes. It is here, though, that she shows the full scope of her devotion – an unflinching loyalty and love for all that He is. It is also here that she shows a Medieval church which was defined by "fear of God" another way of experiencing Him.

## CHAPTER 4: CONCLUSIONS AND HILDEGARD VON BINGEN'S LEGACY IN CONTEMPORARY RELIGION, POLITICS, AND MORALITY

Rhetorical criticism is a vehicle through which to analyze language within a historical and societal context. From a meta perspective, Burke's logology is the analysis of "words about God" with special emphasis on the metaphorical strategies employed by the subject. Thus, the primary tenant of my thesis is this: Hildegard was successful rhetorically because her words about God were constructed as the wife of God. Her metaphorical marriage created an ideal vantage from which to exert her agenda. The purpose of this project is to illuminate that rhetorical strategy and offer some understanding of her modern appeal to multiple groups. Finally, it is my intent that this project brings greater clarification to her work and the historical and societal context from which it was derived.

This extension of an already quickly growing field of Hildegard scholarship offers, too, a new perspective from which to analyze her incredible volume of work. I have applied the "marriage to God" metaphor to only a small percentage of her personal correspondences. Certainly, there is merit in using it to analyze her music lyrics, liturgical writings, and the remainder of her letters. Beyond Hildegard, "the marriage to God" analogy may offer a vehicle for understanding additional religious figures.

Hildegard's use of the "marriage to God" metaphor is her primary means of sense-making in her contradictory roles within and separate from the traditional hierarchy of the church. That position allowed her status and a position from which to comment on the injustices and corruption she saw around her. And the aspects of that role which she employed with different audiences bolstered her credibility both as a abbess and a mystic. I have identified those aspects as:

- The Obedient Wife

- Femininity of the Holy Bride
- Mother to His Children
- Agent of her Groom
- The Faithful, Adoring and Peaceful Wife

Through the diverse nature of these aspects, Hildegard reached an equally diverse audience both during her life and in the centuries that have followed. In her metaphorical “marriage to God,” Hildegard understood that whatever cause or corruption she identified was best countered from that mystical stance.

This strategy was so effective that the Church authenticated her writings and perpetuated her myth. Even after the initial validation from the Church hierarchy, the rhetoric she employed continued to promote her status as wife and extend her political and societal reach. She was unwavering in her convictions and rhetorical voice.

As God’s bride she sought to extend her reach and His message through writing, music, herbal medicine, and politics. Her status as God’s bride allowed her entry into those realms and through those rhetorical actions she further solidified her position. By extension, she still holds weight in these areas among modern practitioners.

Hildegard remains complex enough today that those seeking everything from New Age enlightenment to traditional Roman Catholicism find wisdom in her voice. Strange, too, that the woman heralded by feminists was canonized as a Doctor of the Catholic Church – a religious sect often at odds with modern feminism. In the age of local produce and herbal remedies, her medicinal cures are being revisited. Her music continues to be re-recorded and re-discovered by artists and listeners alike. A basic Google search on April 28, 2013, for “Hildegard von Bingen” returned 1,210,000 results.

If Hildegard is judged by the ranks and diversity of her followers, she is a contemporary success nearly unmatched. Those committed to New Age enlightenment appreciate her recognition of sanctity in nature. Musicians embrace the artistic abandon of

her work. Feminists appreciate her fearless voice in a patriarchal society. Modern Catholics recognize in her an unwavering soldier for God and a prophetic mystic of the Divine.

In the end, Hildegard's universal appeal to these groups may be attributed to the very rhetorical strategies employed during her life. Hildegard often fought against the very hierarchy she was a part of. While solidifying her role in the Church, she preached in a time when women did not preach. She consulted on exorcisms when that was (and still largely is) a role for male priests. She disobeyed direct orders from her superiors and buried a man in holy ground that she deemed worthy. Her singular constant was her unwavering devotion to something larger than herself. Her devotion and obedience won over her contemporaries, as well as, a diverse swath of humanity today.

And yet what does her "marriage to God" metaphor have to offer contemporary debaters of religious and social issues? Can a renewed interest in a Medieval nun translate to useful guidance from her rhetorical strategies?

While few debating modern social or political issues will claim "marriage to God" effectively, there is an argument to be made for aligning oneself and acting on behalf of the best of one's condition or cause. So often, today's battles are fought by two that are each trying to elevate themselves above the other. Political rhetoric is almost exclusively of the nature in which one builds up oneself and degrades the opponent. In her role as the Bride of Christ, Hildegard took the opposite approach. She constantly elevated the Church and the patriarchal society she ultimately defied. Yet, in doing so she asserted herself as someone who recognized the order of things and could be trusted, even elevated beyond her natural station. In short, she practiced humility in the face of pride.

Those who look to her from a modern feminist vantage, see a woman who made faith and God more accessible. The marriage metaphor allowed her contemporaries a connection that could not be claimed by their male counterparts. It was a connection that promoted a powerful union with God instead of disenfranchisement and separation. She fought for the women of her order, whom she viewed as both sister brides and daughters.

She protected them from the larger male dominated Church and gave them a voice and a foothold from which to worship and advocate.

Those in the New Age Movement today find in Hildegard a woman who sees sanctity in the nature world. She communed with her God in that realm and finds both healing and ecstasy there. So, too, do they appreciate her advocacy for not separating but joining oneself with one's higher being.

The modern world is still attempting to define and redefine the parameters of marriage for a contemporary nation and world. As politicians attempt to assert one definition or line over another, the spectrum of what is marriage shifts again. On this front, Hildegard offers the scholar multiple and varying faces of what makes a legitimate union. If there is one standard that can be applied today, it is that Hildegard acted in many roles as the Bride. The one constant was her devotion to her Beloved.

Finally, Hildegard, too, offers those with a cause, but little voice, an example of powerful and effective communication in the face of not just personal, but societal adversity.



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