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# The Flesh of the Voice: Embodiment and the Homoerotics of Devotion in the Music of Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

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Body is the instrument upon which the mystic rings changes of pain and of delight. It is from body—whether whipped into frenzy by the ascetic herself or gratified with an ecstasy given by God—that sweet melodies and aromas rise to the very throne of heaven.

[BYNUM 1991, 194]

**W**ITH THE FOLLOWING WORDS, Margery Kempe, the fifteenth-century English mystic, describes her calling by God into mystical life:

On a night, as this creature lay in her bed with her husband, she heard a sound of melody so sweet and delectable, she thought, as she had been in Paradise. And therewith she started out of her bed and said, “Alas, that ever I did sin, it is full merry in Heaven.” This melody was so sweet that it passed all the melody that ever might

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be heard in this world without any comparison, and caused this creature when she heard any mirth or melody afterward for to have full plenteous and abundant tears of high devotion with great sobbings and sighings after the bliss of Heaven, not dreading the shames and the spites of the wretched world. And ever after this experience she had in her mind the mirth and the melody that was in Heaven, so much that she could not well restrain herself from the speaking thereof. For, where she was in any company, she would say oftentime, "It is full merry in Heaven."<sup>1</sup>

Music, "a melody so sweet and delectable," is the medium through which Kempe receives her first direct impression of heaven, and she depicts her experience in a way that might seem typical of medieval devotional writing: the music of heaven surpasses all worldly melody "without any comparison," inspires a burning desire for union with God, and cannot adequately be described in the fallen language of mortals. Heavenly music, spiritual and ineffable, allows Kempe to transcend the pleasures and temptations of the carnal world and, if only for a moment, hear the wondrous and glorious sounds of the afterlife.

Yet, paradoxically, this very same music expresses itself in an unmistakably worldly way. Although we might expect Kempe's initial exposure to the music of heaven to be a purely spiritual phenomenon, she describes it in words that reveal its profound effects on her physical body. Upon hearing the celestial melody, Kempe sheds "full plenteous and abundant tears of high devotion with great sobbings and sighings," explicitly acknowledging music's ability to stimulate the senses. Later in the chapter, Kempe writes, "And also, after this creature heard this heavenly melody, she did great bodily penance. She was shriven sometimes twice or thrice on the day. . . . She gave herself to great fasting and to great waking; she rose at two or three o'clock and went to church and was there in her prayers unto the time of noon and also all the afternoon. And then was she slandered and reprov'd by many people for she kept so straight a living. Then she got herself a hairshirt from a kiln such as men dry malt on and lay it in her girdle as subtly and privately as she might that her husband should not spy it" (1940, 12). Once again, it is the sound of music that causes Kempe to engage in "great bodily penance"—to confess frequently, to sit still in church all day, to starve herself, and even to keep a haircloth bound against her skin as she sleeps. Despite its celestial essence, music for Kempe is an often painful reminder of her nature as an embodied human being and of the tremendous distance between herself and God.

<sup>1</sup> Kempe 1940, 11; all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.

Nor was Kempe alone in her somatic responses to sacred music. Over a century before she described her melodious calling into bodily penance, a medieval nun of Unterlinden recounted what was a common practice in her nunnery: "In Advent and Lent, all the sisters, coming into the chapter house after Matins, hack at themselves cruelly, hostilely lacerating their bodies until the blood flows, with all kinds of whips, so that the sound reverberates all over the monastery and rises to the ears of the Lord of hosts sweeter than all melody" (Ancelet-Hustache 1930, 341; see Bynum 1987, 210). And in the *Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer's Prioress tells of a hymn to the Virgin Mary miraculously vivifying the corpse of a choirboy whose throat has been slit:

"My throte is kut unto my nekke boon,"  
 Seyde this child, "and as by wey of kynde  
 I sholde have dyed, ye, longe tyme agon.  
 But Jesu Crist, as ye in bookes fynde,  
 Wil that his glorie laste and be in mynde,  
 And for the worship of his Mooder deere  
 Yet may I singe O *Alma* loude and cleere."

[Chaucer 1987, 212]

Although these examples are particularly vivid (and perhaps horrifying to modern readers), the close association between music and body that underlies each of them was a not-uncommon feature of medieval devotional writings and practices. Medieval monks, nuns, poets, scholars, and mystics were deeply aware of music's distinctive ability to stimulate and enliven the human body, and, as the words of the Unterlinden nun reveal, the body itself was invested with the miraculous potential to burst forth in sonorous melody at any moment. It may not be an exaggeration to say that, to many medieval Christians, the most fundamental attribute of music was its inextricability from bodily experience.

Yet the most enduring scholarly assumption about medieval religious music has been that its importance to medieval people lay in its perfect expression of heavenly concord, mathematical proportion, and cosmic order. This assumption has held such powerful sway for so long in large part because of music's place in the medieval quadrivium along with the other numerical arts—arithmetic, geometry, and astronomy—as well as medieval discussions of music as an expression of number and proportion. The anonymous author of the *Scholia enchiriadis*, a Carolingian treatise on the liberal arts, for instance, writes, "Music, like the other mathematical disciplines, is in all its aspects bound up with the system of numbers. And so it is by number that it must be understood" (Gerbert 1784, 196). The author goes further, adding, "Music is entirely formed and fashioned after the image of numbers. And so it is number, by means

of these fixed and established proportions of notes, that brings about whatever is pleasing to the ear in singing. Whatever pleasure rhythms yield, whether in song or in rhythmic movements of whatever sort, all is the work of number. Notes pass away quickly; numbers, however, though stained by the corporeal touch of pitches and motions, remain" (196). By claiming that number and number alone is the basis for musical form, fashion, meaning, and pleasure, the author spurns the "corporeal touch of pitches," the sensual effects that musical sounds invariably have on the human body.

Given passages such as these, it is no wonder that musicologists have accepted the overriding significance of music's numerical properties to medieval people. No less a scholar than John Stevens recently encapsulated the relationship between words and music in the entirety of medieval plainsong in this single sentence: "Behind both words and notes lies 'number,' a numerical Idea waiting to be incarnated; we may come to regard this as the only common term between the verse and the melody" (1986, 47). While I certainly do not wish to downplay the symbolic significance of number and proportion to many medieval writers on music, I would argue that these purely theoretical categories played a less significant role than Stevens suggests in the ways in which the great majority of medieval people actually heard, thought about, and experienced music.

Indeed, from the early Middle Ages, Christian writers made explicit connections in exegetical and devotional works between music and body. Glossing the thirty-third psalm, for instance, an anonymous third-century author (long thought to be Origen of Alexandria) writes, "*Give thanks to the Lord on the harp; with the ten-stringed psaltery chant his praises . . . the body is said to be a cithara, the spirit a psaltery, which are likened musically to a wise man who aptly uses the bodily members and the spiritual faculties as strings. . . . The 'ten strings' stand for 'ten nerves,' for a string is a nerve. And the body can be seen as the ten-stringed psaltery, for it has five bodily senses and five spiritual faculties*" (Pseudo-Origen 1857–66, 1303).<sup>2</sup> In a famous passage from the *Confessions*, St. Augustine admits that he "used to be much more fascinated by the pleasures of sound than the pleasures of scent" and begs God to release him from the "danger that lies in gratifying the senses" with sacred music (1961, 238–39). For Augustine, even introspective, devotional music leaves an indelible mark on the flesh.

A century after Augustine, Boethius theorized the relationship between music and body at length, synthesizing Platonic and Aristotelian

<sup>2</sup> As James McKinnon has pointed out, early psalm commentaries are the locus classicus for such instrumental allegories, inspiring similar commentary from literally hundreds of Christian exegetes throughout the Middle Ages (see McKinnon 1987, esp. 38–39).

conceptions of the body/soul relationship to define and explicate the *musica humana*, or “human music”: “Whoever penetrates into his own self perceives human music. For what unites the incorporeal nature of reason with the body if not a certain harmony and, as it were, a careful tuning of low and high pitches as though producing one consonance? What other than this unites the parts of the soul, which, according to Aristotle, is composed of the rational and the irrational? What is it that intermingles the elements of the body or holds together the parts of the body in an established order?” (Boethius 1989, 10). In the Boethian view, music binds soul to body; indeed, body itself is quite literally held together by musical sound.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the tenth-century nun Hrotsvit of Gandersheim argued that *musica humana* resides in “the union of body and soul, . . . in the pulse of our veins and in the measures of our limbs” (1989, 100).<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps the medieval figure whose work most thoroughly and intensively reflects an awareness of music’s corporeality is the Benedictine abbess and visionary, Hildegard of Bingen. Born in 1098 and placed in a monastery at the age of eight, Hildegard was astonishingly prolific throughout the course of her long life. Her extant oeuvre consists of three major theological works; several learned treatises on natural history, medicine, and the nature of the human body; over a hundred letters; several saints’ lives; a complete religious drama with music and text; and, most important for the purposes of this essay, over seventy liturgical compositions in a collection she entitled *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*.

In the following pages, I will explore just a few of the many ways in which Hildegard’s musical compositions exemplify her own conceptions of body—particularly the female body—and its central role in religious devotion. As we shall see, music provided Hildegard with a means of exploring and, quite literally, “giving voice” to the female body and all of its fleshly senses in a manner that would not have been possible through the written word alone. This devotional music sonorously elaborates upon female bodies (both human and divine) and female sexual desire, making sensual physicality integral to religious devotion. Although in her

<sup>3</sup> See Chadwick 1981, 78–101, for an excellent discussion of *De institutione musica* that takes into account the work’s Platonic and Aristotelian influences.

<sup>4</sup> A particularly striking adaptation of the Boethian *musica humana* is Hugh of St. Victor’s discussion of the body/soul relationship in the *Didascalicon*: “The music between the body and the soul is that natural friendship by which the soul is leagued to the body, not in physical bonds, but in certain sympathetic relationships for the purpose of imparting motions and sensation to the body. Because of this friendship, it is written, ‘No man hates his own flesh’” (1991, 69); for Hugh, “the music of the human body . . . is constituted in the number ‘nine,’ since nine are the openings in the human body by which, according to natural adjustment, everything by which the body is nourished and kept in balance flows in or out” (65).

written work Hildegard frequently employs the language of humility and obedience to patriarchal church authority and religious orthodoxy, I will argue that her music represents a highly positive—and even, at certain moments, subversive—recuperation of female embodiment.

Hildegard began composing music in the 1140s, soon after she was commanded by God to begin putting her mystical experiences and revelations into words. In the opening “Declaration” to the *Scivias*, her longest work, she describes this moment in her life:

It happened that, in the eleven hundred and forty-first year of the Incarnation of the Son of God, Jesus Christ, when I was forty-two years and seven months old, Heaven was opened and a fiery light of exceeding brilliance came and permeated my whole brain, and inflamed my whole heart and my whole breast, not like a burning but like a warming flame, as the sun warms anything its rays touch. And immediately I knew the meaning of the exposition of the Scriptures, namely the Psalter, the Gospel and the other catholic volumes of both the Old and the New Testaments, though I did not have the interpretation of the words of their texts or the division of the syllables or the knowledge of cases or tenses. [Hildegard of Bingen 1990, 59]

Hildegard’s direct encounter with divinity, like Margery Kempe’s, takes place in and through the physical body, involving many of the same kinds of corporeal pains and devotional pleasures. She hears God describing her as one who “suffers in her inmost being and in the veins of her flesh; she is distressed in mind and sense and endures great pain of body, because no security has dwelt in her, but in all her undertakings she has judged herself guilty” (60). Similarly, while she is resistant at first to recording her visions for others to hear and read, she is “compelled at last by many illnesses” to set her “hand to the writing” (60).

Hildegard brings this same awareness of the place of the body in religious experience to her reflections on the nature of music.<sup>5</sup> For her, “words symbolize the body, and jubilant music indicates the spirit; the celestial harmony shows the Divinity, and the words the Humanity of the Son of God” (1990, 533). Through this subtle analogy, in which music vivifies the liturgy just as the “celestial harmony” vivifies Christ’s earthly

<sup>5</sup> Two good discussions of Hildegard’s view of music are Barbara Newman’s “Introduction” to Hildegard 1988, 1–63, esp. 17–27; and Flanagan 1990.

body, Hildegard imagines music as vital to bodily existence, as do her thoughts on the emotional effects of sacred song: “For the song of rejoicing softens hard hearts, and draws forth from them the tears of compunction, and invokes the Holy Spirit. . . . And their song goes through you so that you understand [the heavenly voices] perfectly; for where divine grace has worked, it banishes all dark obscurity, and makes pure and lucid those things that are obscure to the bodily senses because of the weakness of the flesh” (534). Heavenly music draws “tears of compunction” by permeating the entire body, filling it with melody, and rescuing the flesh from postlapsarian weakness.<sup>6</sup>

Not all bodies are musically equal in Hildegard’s eyes, however. As we shall see, she invests the female body in particular with melodious qualities. Discussing human birth in the *Causae et curae*, Hildegard writes that women’s bodies are “open like a wooden frame [*lignum*] in which strings have been fastened for strumming [*ad citharizandum*]; or, again, they are like windows through which the wind blows, so that the elements affect them more vehemently than men, and the humors also are more plentiful in them” (Hildegard 1903, 105). Similarly, in her poetry, she imagines Ecclesia’s children “gathered to her breast in supernal symphony” (“in superna simphonia filii eius in sinum suum collocati sunt” [1988, 252]) and the Virgin Mary singing to the God who “planted in [her] innards all varieties of music in all its florid tones” (“in visceribus meis omne genus musicorum in omnibus floribus tonorum constituit” [260]). Hildegard saw the dynamic between music and the female body enlivening her own flesh as well. In a letter to Elizabeth of Schönau, another twelfth-century female visionary, she describes her body as “a poor, earthly vessel” (“paupercula et fictile vas” [1844–64, 216]) “sounding a little like the small sound of a trumpet” (“parvus sonus tubae”) in the service of God (217–18). While Hildegard employs a humility topos here that is typical for her, she nevertheless commands respect for her prophetic power and extraordinary visionary authority through an image of herself as a musical body.

The close association Hildegard made between music and the female body demonstrates the importance of going beyond the disciplinary boundaries of traditional medieval musicology when considering her musical compositions themselves. Despite the pervasive somatic significance Hildegard gave to music, however, most studies of her compositions have

<sup>6</sup> Hildegard graphically displays her acute awareness of the music/body dynamic in a miniature illustration of the twelfth vision of the *Scivias*, in which she depicts chunks of bodies—severed heads, hands, feet, and tongues—rising from the dead as a figure at the feet of God blows air through a trumpet (reproduced in Bynum 1991, 291). Here Hildegard is giving a literal interpretation of 1 Cor. 15:52 (“for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible”), which served as one of the bases for the church’s doctrine of bodily resurrection (see Bynum 1991, 239–97).

neglected to examine them as embodiments of her visionary experience, devotional practice, and Christian theology. Instead, scholars have focused primarily on the music's formal attributes without considering the abbess's religious experience, gendered identity, social milieu, and the enormous influence all must have had on her musical creativity. As examples of medieval plainchant, her compositions are often compared in detail to chants from the standard Gregorian repertory, resulting in a search for the unique and original attributes of her music. While this is certainly a laudable goal in itself, few scholars have gone beyond formalism to ask *why* her music is unique and original. In a recent study of one of Hildegard's antiphons, Robert Cogan, referring to Guido of Arezzo's eleventh-century writings on music, summarizes the problem as follows: "Candor compels us to recognize a wide-spread preference, then and now, for the Guidonian *mechanics* of musical performance and academic explanation to Hildegard's unconventional creative *fantasy*. . . . Guido aimed at certainty of concept and performance; Hildegard on the other hand still raises challenging controversial *questions*" (1990, 2; emphasis in the original). Mechanics and fantasy, certainty and controversy: Cogan's observation suggests that the conventional approach to medieval music I have discussed above, emphasizing as it does the music's deep mathematical structure and proportional order, is not an adequate model for interpreting Hildegard's compositions.<sup>7</sup> While I would argue against such an approach to medieval music generally, I hope this essay will demonstrate that it is especially inappropriate in reference to Hildegard's. We shall see that Hildegard's plainchant is indeed strikingly original by twelfth-century standards and deserves much more extensive treatment than it has received thus far in medieval musicology. As Cogan puts it, "all previous conclusions about this period's music may be subject to review as understanding of [Hildegard's] work matures" (1). For him, the answer is to see Hildegard as the "earliest appearance in the history of European music" of the "composer as star, *auteur*, quasi-mythical being" (2), one whose compositions reflect "the eternal timeliness [and] timelessness of the best music" the West has produced (16).

In this article, however, I am not concerned with establishing Hildegard's claims to greatness. Instead, I hope to recuperate her compositions as signifying and culturally meaningful, demonstrating how intertwined they are with her sociohistorical milieu, her religious identity, her understanding of human and divine bodies, and her recognition of both the

<sup>7</sup> For interpretations of Hildegard's music that emphasize its mathematical properties, numerical proportions, and even its "hidden geometry," see Escott 1984 and 1990. Interestingly, a similar debate in art history between "aestheticists" and "geometrical schematists" took place over half a century ago. See Schapiro (1932) 1977a and (1947) 1977b.

enormous distances and intimate proximities between the two. In no way is my argument intended somehow to question or diminish Hildegard's musical genius. Quite the contrary: music has always been a site of identity construction and social negotiation, and in her ability to use music to these ends Hildegard had no medieval rival. Discussing Hildegard's music formalistically or mathematically, however, would be to ignore how the abbess actually described and experienced music. Her compositions must be seen as inextricably bound up with her spiritual experience, partially constituting and intimately reflecting her cosmology and self-awareness as a woman, a visionary, and a Christian.

## II

*Ave, generosa* (fig. 1), one of the three of Hildegard's compositions classified as hymns, bears a close resemblance to her seven sequences. In the twelfth century, hymns and sequences were generally the longest and most expressive chants sung in mass or daily office, and they were placed at the moments of greatest devotional fervor within the service. This particular hymn makes it easy to see why, for its textual and musical elements convey Hildegard's sensual, corporeal understanding of religious devotion. Addressing the hymn to the Virgin Mary, Hildegard's language evokes the power she sees as inherent in the nature of the female body. In these lyrics, Hildegard voices a number of meanings that the female body held for medieval Christianity in general and for herself in particular. The first half of the hymn is a conventional, though elegant, description of the Virgin Birth. Although the hymn is addressed to the Virgin, the first four verses concentrate on God's choice of Mary and her role in giving birth to Christ. The Virgin's own thoughts and feelings on the matter do not seem significant at this point. Hildegard here reflects the common medieval notion of the Virgin's body as a vessel, a container into which God poured the substance of divinity. Hildegard uses the Latin words *intacta* and *castitas* to emphasize the Virgin's freedom from male penetration. While Mary's importance lay in her granting of flesh to the Son of God, in the traditional Christian view her own body is not permitted to experience sensual pleasure. Indeed, the orthodox doctrine of the Virgin Birth allowed God to become Man without the stain of postlapsarian sexuality as a counterexample to Eve.

In the fifth verse, however, Hildegard turns her attention away from God and Christ and toward the body of the Virgin herself, and, just as she does so, she mentions music for the first time in the hymn: "For your womb held joy, when all the celestial *symphonia* rang out from you." For Hildegard, as for Margery Kempe and the nuns of Unterlinden, it is music, the music echoing in and resonating from the Virgin's womb, that

Ave, generosa, gloriosa et intacta  
puella; tu, pupilla castitatis, tu  
materia sanctitatis, que Deo placuit!

Nam hec superna infusio in te fuit,  
quod supernum verbum in te carnem  
induit.

Tu, candidum liliu, quod Deus ante  
omnem creaturam inspexit.

O pulcherrima et dulcissima; quam  
valde Deus in te delectatabatur! cum  
amplexione caloris sui in te posuit ita  
quod filius eius de te lactatus est.

Venter enim tuus gaudium habuit,  
cum omnis celestis symphonia de te  
sonuit, quia, virgo, filium Dei  
portasti, ubi castitas tua in Deo  
claruit.

Viscera tua gaudium habuenu, sicut  
gramen super quod ros cadit cum ei  
viriditatem infudit; ut et in te factum  
est, o mater omnis gaudii.

Nunc omnis Ecclesia in gaudio rutilet  
ac in symphonia sonet propter  
dulcissimam virginem et laudabilem  
Mariam Dei genitricem. Amen.

Hail, noble, glorious, and virgin girl;  
You, the pupil of chastity, you,  
mother of holiness who was pleasing  
to God!

For it happened in you by the  
supernal one, that the supernal word  
was cloaked in flesh.

You, white lily, whom God viewed  
before all other creatures.

O most beautiful and sweetest one;  
how greatly was God pleased in you!  
with the embrace of his heat he thus  
made it happen that his son was  
suckled by you.

For your womb held joy, when all the  
celestial *symphonia* rang out from  
you, because, virgin, you carried the  
son of God, whereby your chastity  
burned brightly in God.

Your innards held joy, just as grass  
on which dew falls when greenness  
floods into it; thus did it happen in  
you, o mother of all joy.

Now let all Ecclesia blush in joy and  
sound in *symphonia* for the sweetest  
virgin and praiseworthy Mary,  
mother of God. Amen.

**FIG. 1** *Ave, generosa* (Latin text in Hildegard of Bingen 1988, 122)

fills the female body with *gaudium*, the joys, delights, and pleasures of devotion. Music explicitly eroticizes the Virgin's experience, allowing her the sensual pleasures denied her by Christian tradition. This verse tells us that the vessel imagery in the first few verses does not construct the Virgin's body as passive in any way. Rather, in this poetry, Hildegard realizes and appreciates the potential of the woman's body; to her as to many other woman mystics, it "scintillated with fertility and power" (Bynum 1987, 20).

Just as music is the medium of *gaudium* in the fifth verse, the liquid of dew is its bearer in the sixth: "Your flesh held joy, just as grass on which dew falls when greenness is poured into it." In medieval religious writings, of course, dew is a standard typological image derived from the biblical story of Gideon's fleece (see Judg. 6:36–40), and it was a common

trope for Christ's conception. But Hildegard's sensual identification with the Virgin's womb eroticizes the image of dew, expressing her own somatic understanding of spiritual experience. The Virgin's flesh, anything but a passive receptacle for the Word, is flooded with dew, feels the blissful joy it brings, and blooms in fertility and song.

In the final verse, Hildegard describes the figure of Ecclesia "blush[ing] in joy and sound[ing] in *symphonia* for the sweetest virgin and praiseworthy Mary." As a typological recapitulation of both Eve and Mary, Ecclesia was for medieval Christianity the Church on Earth, the Body of Christ—a body in which the faithful were housed and from which all could derive sustenance. Hildegard, moreover, saw Ecclesia as the Bride of Christ, a Virgin whose well-being is constantly threatened by human corruption and the evils of Satan.<sup>8</sup> Hildegard's double feminization of Christ as both body and bride allows Heaven's *symphonia* to echo within a specifically *female* body; the body of Ecclesia resonates with the same sounds that filled the Virgin's womb two verses earlier. Sharing the same sonorous experience, the bodies of the Virgin and Ecclesia are linked through the sensual, corporeal bonds of music and melodious pleasure.

These various textual images of the female body are reflected vividly in the hymn's music, for to Hildegard music gives the female body much of its fertile power and erotic potential. Conversely, the music that emanates from the female body reflects and reproduces the sensualities that it experiences in devotional practice. In the text to the fifth verse, music fills the Virgin's womb with delight and causes her body to resound in sonorous joy. And it is just at this point, on the word *symphonia*, that the music of the hymn reaches its highest point (see fig. 2). The hymn has ascended from a first-line E (in modern notation) in the first verse to a C above the staff at this point. This immense gap of an octave and a sixth is augmented in the culminating phrase itself: the highest note is approached by a leap of a fourth, a gesture emphasizing openness and breadth. Similarly, Hildegard begins every verse but one with a dramatic leap of a fifth. This kind of melodic gesture, in which the chant moves by leaps and bounds, is called "disjunct motion" by medieval musicologists (as opposed to "conjunct motion," in which single steps dominate the melody). As we can see, Hildegard foregrounds disjunction at several important moments in the hymn. In addition to the upward leaps I have already identified, the downward jumps of fourths and fifths in the fifth and sixth verses are especially noticeable.

To appreciate the significance of Hildegard's melodic gestures in *Ave, generosa*, it is necessary to understand the basic ways in which the hymn

<sup>8</sup> Newman 1987, 196–249, provides a detailed and excellent discussion of the significance of Ecclesia to Hildegard; see also the manuscript illuminations reproduced in this section.

diverges from the standard medieval chant repertory and its history. Beginning in the early tenth century, a number of music theorists, including Odo of Cluny and, later, Guido of Arezzo, began to formulate a set of basic rules and principles that would eventually standardize the already-existing body of religious chant and allow it to be taught more effectively to novices. Although much of this music had been written down a century earlier under the Carolingians, the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries saw for the first time a widespread effort to boil the chant down to its bare essentials and fit the existing pieces into new formulas. As Richard Hoppin notes, “the majority [of chant melodies] seem to have fitted into the new theoretical system with little difficulty” (1978, 68). Of the many results of this complex and lengthy process, there are two that interest me here. Perhaps most important was the development of the modal system, the means by which preexistent melodies could be classified by melodic type and new ones composed accordingly. This modal system led in turn to an implicit restriction on the musical style of plainchant, in terms of both permissible melodic range and musical interval. As a result, the melodies of almost all the surviving chants from the period stay within a quite limited melodic range. A majority of them move within the range of a seventh or an octave, although there are many whose range is confined to a fifth or sixth (see Hoppin 1978, 74). Similarly, almost all standard chants move primarily by conjunct motion. Repeated skips of a fifth (such as those in *Ave, generosa*) are uncommon, and downward skips of fourths and fifths are quite rare (Hoppin 1978, 7).

Much of the success of the modal system in standardizing (and thus controlling) the chant repertory was the direct result of the Cistercian Reform, a monastic movement that began in the first half of the twelfth century. Hoppin describes the reform as follows:

The Cistercians were noted for the severity of their monastic rule, and apparently they felt that the music of the Church should be equally pure. Taking a fundamentalist view of the Biblical passage “upon a psaltery and an instrument of ten strings will I sing praises unto thee” (Psalm 144:9), they decided that no chant should have a range of more than ten notes. To bring offending chants into line, the Cistercians generally resorted to transposition of the pertinent phrases. . . . Although scholars are divided as to the extent and importance of the Cistercian Reform, there can be no doubt that it marks the nearly successful completion of efforts to correlate the modal system and the preexisting plainchant repertory. [1978, 72]

Like Augustine, the Cistercian officials who promulgated the modal system were well aware of music’s ability to arouse the passions. The

1 A - ve, ge - ne - ro - sa, glo - ri - o - sa et in - tac - ta pu - el - la; tu, pu - pil - la  
cas - ti - ta - tis, tu, ma - te - ri - a sanc - ti - ta - tis, que De - o pla - cu - it!

2 Nam bec su - per - na in - fu - si - o in te fu - it, quod supernum ver - bum in te car - nem in - du - it.

3 Tu, can - di - dum li - li - um, quod De - us an - te om - nem cre - a - tu - ram in - spe - xit.

4 O pul - cher - ri - ma et dul - cis - si - ma; quam val - de De - us in te  
de - lec - ta - ba - tur! cum am - ple - xi - o - ne ca - lo - ris su - i in te po - su - it

i - ta quod fi - li - us ei - us de te lac - ta - tus est.

FIG. 2 *Ave, generosa* (from Hildegard of Bingen 1983, 3)

5 Ven - ter e - nim tu - us gau - di - um ha - bu - it, cum om - nis ce - les - tis

sym - pho - ni - a de te so - nu - it, qui - a, vir - go, fi - li - um De - i por - tas - ti, u - bi cas - ti - tas tu - a in De - o cia - ru - it.

6 Vis - ce - ra tu - a gau - di - um ha - bu - e - runt, sic - cut gra - men su - per quod ros ca - dit cum e - i vi - ri - di - ta - tem in - fu - dit; ut et in te fac - tum est, o ma - ter om - nis gau - di - i.

7 Nunc om - nis Ec - cle - si - a in gau - di - o ru - ti - let ac in sym - pho - ni - a so - net prop - ter dul - cis - si - mam vir - gi - nem et lau - da - bi - lem Ma - ri - am De - i ge - ni - tri - cem. A - - - men.

FIG. 2 Continued

Cistercian Reform, then, was not simply an effort to instill monastic simplicity into singing style. It was also an explicit attempt to regulate and discipline the singing bodies of the monks by bringing music into line with the proprieties of monastic life. As a Cistercian statute of 1134 puts it, "It befits men to sing with a manly voice, and not in a womanish manner with tinkling, or, as it is said in the vernacular, with 'false' voices, as if imitating the wantonness of minstrels. We have therefore stipulated that the mean should be adhered to in chant, so that it may exude seriousness and devotion may be preserved" (Page 1990, 156). Such polemics against the "feminization" of chant are echoed in the writings of any number of twelfth-century Cistercian leaders. In his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*, for instance, Bernard of Clairvaux commands his monks to sing "correctly and vigorously . . . not wheezing through the nose with an effeminate stammering, in a weak and broken tone, but pronouncing the words of the Holy Spirit with becoming manliness and resonance and affection" (1979, 9–10), and in his *Speculum caritatis*, Aelred of Rievaulx rants against contemporary singing practices, writing that the singing voice is often "forced into the whinnying of a horse, and sometimes it lays aside its manly power, and puts on the shrillness of a woman's voice. . . . The whole body is agitated by theatrical gestures, the lips are twisted, the eyes roll, the shoulders are shrugged, and the fingers bent responsive to every note" (cited in Hayburn 1979, 19). For the Cistercians and other twelfth-century reformers of the chant, musical excess is associated with bodily display and effeminacy. If the music that the body sings is out of control, the body itself, along with the distinctive markers of gender and sexuality that construct it (and which it performs), becomes the site of discursive transgression.

A simple glance at the melody of *Ave, generosa* makes it clear that Hildegard was decidedly *not* "adhering to the mean" demanded by the Cistercian statute, which was issued just a few years before she began composing her music.<sup>9</sup> Chants with the range of *Ave, generosa* represent the kind of musical excess that was anathematized by the Cistercian reformers while Hildegard was writing. The abbess's audacity in allowing her chant to exceed the proper melodic range for twelfth-century plainchant by an interval as large as a sixth is apparent throughout the *Symphonia*. In fact, several pieces, such as the responsory *O vos angeli*, exceed two octaves (Hildegard 1969, 59–62). We have already seen to what extent Hildegard celebrates the female body in *Ave, generosa*'s text, and here I mean to suggest that the hymn's music participates as well in this somatic panegyric. Drawing explicitly on the codes of corporeality

<sup>9</sup> The tenth-century treatise by Abbott Odo of Cluny sets forth most clearly the church's position on melodic range. See Strunk 1965, 113.

and femininity anathematized by the Cistercian reformers, Hildegard transgresses the melodic norms of plainchant and allows the musical bodies she has created in the text to open up and resound in actual music, the music sung by the choir of nuns for whom the hymn was composed. When it is sung, then, the hymn's music quite literally embodies Hildegard's poetic meditations on the female body. Unlike Augustine, however, Hildegard expresses no guilt at the sensual pleasures music allows for. The abbess gives a highly privileged place to music in *Ave, generosa*, granting it power to reflect the sensuality of the female body much more articulately and effectively than would be possible through poetry alone. Moreover, there is a subtle but deliberate sense of self-reflection in Hildegard's language, for she named her collection of music the *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum*, or "Symphony of the harmony of celestial revelations." Placing the word *symphonia* where she does in the hymn—at the height of musical ecstasy—lets us hear the entirety of the *Symphonia* as "mystic speech," a discursive practice that Michel de Certeau identifies as "an organization of erotic meaning [that] serves as the support for an organization of musical sounds" (1986, 99).

What else is suggested by Hildegard's emphasis throughout her repertory on wide range and interval? In order to answer this question, it is necessary to see *Ave, generosa* for what it truly is: an expression of intense, loving, and erotic devotion to the Virgin Mary. In this piece Hildegard voices—or even, perhaps, performs—her desiring adoration for the Virgin as the simultaneously absent and present object of love. Measured against Gregorian norms, the medieval listener would have heard the extreme range of the hymn as an upward motion signifying an active and restless desire for the hymn's subject, the Virgin Mary. At the same time, however, this gesture relies on melodic openness, an unfolding of music's body for the entrance of divinity. Like the *orans* (or praying) figure of *Ecclesia* in the manuscript illuminations that accompany a number of her visions (see esp. Hildegard 1990, 199 and 491), the music reaches and opens simultaneously,<sup>10</sup> somatizing the female musical voice and infusing the musical body with desire. In this way, the abbess musically expresses her self-awareness as a site of corporeal, erotic exchange

<sup>10</sup> I would like to thank Ron Martinez for pointing out this visual parallel. It is tempting to read Hildegard's musical gestures through the lenses of modern semiotics. In *A Lover's Discourse*, for instance, Roland Barthes writes, "The discourse of Absence is a text with two ideograms: there are *the raised arms of Desire*, and there are *the wide-open arms of need*. I oscillate, I vacillate between the phallic image of the raised arms, and the babyish image of the wide-open arms" (1989, 16–17). While Barthes's bidimensional semiotic is clearly suggestive, it depends upon an implicit gendering of reaching and desire as masculine and infancy and need as feminine. Hildegard's notions of gender, however, were much more subtle and complex, disallowing Barthes's somewhat simplistic reading of erotic longing.

with the divine. While the prevalence in Hildegard's hymn of intervallic leaps reminds the listener that she is aware of the Virgin's ostensibly passive role as vessel, it nevertheless constitutes an assertion of the active power of femininity and the female body. In *Ave, generosa*, then, the acts of reaching and opening, as well as the construction of the body as sacred vessel within the music, reflect Hildegard's conscious understandings of religious devotion on many levels.

If we situate the reading (and hearing) of *Ave, generosa* I have proposed within the hymn's medieval context and consider the social meaning of its original performance, we see the following: a group of nuns, led by Hildegard, living in intimate proximity, raising their voices together in song, allowing music itself—the actual music produced by and resonating between the bodies of the nuns as well as the music that emerges from the bodies of the Virgin and the feminized Church on Earth—to create and enliven the social, devotional, and erotic bonds both between one another and between themselves and God. Music, always a somatic phenomenon for Hildegard, allows women to voice their fleshly and spiritual desires for the female body in a way that transgresses—textually and musically—the careful devotional boundaries established by the medieval Church. What are we to make of the vibrant and unabashed circulations of female/female desire in Hildegard's hymn, and how might they relate to the Christian tradition within which Hildegard lived, learned, and composed?

Here I would like to turn briefly to a recent discussion by Terry Castle of the modern lesbian novelist Sylvia Townsend Warner. Referring to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's highly influential argument in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), Castle proposes a compelling theoretical model for female homosocial desire that both builds upon and problematizes Sedgwick's analysis:

To theorize about female-female desire . . . is precisely to envision the taking apart of this supposedly intractable patriarchal structure [i.e., the male homosocial triangle]. Female bonding, at least hypothetically, destabilizes the "canonical" triangular arrangement of male desire, is an affront to it, and ultimately—in the radical form of lesbian bonding—displaces it entirely. . . . The male-female-male erotic triangle remains stable only as long as its single female term is unrelated to any other female term. Once two female terms are conjoined in space, however, an alternative structure comes into being, a female-male-female triangle, in which one of the male terms from the original triangle now occupies the "in between" or subjugated position of the mediator. . . . Within this new female homosocial structure, the possibility of male bonding is radically

suppressed: for the male term is now isolated, just as the female term was in the male homosocial structure. [Castle 1992, 132–33]

For Castle, in “the most radical transformation of female bonding—i.e. from homosocial to lesbian bonding—the two female terms indeed merge and the male term drops out. At this point, it is safe to say, not only is male bonding suppressed, it has become impossible—there being no male terms left to bond” (133).

Many of the characteristics of Hildegard’s music raise the subversive possibility of Castle’s “most radical transformation of female bonding.” In the erotic intermingling of female flesh that *Ave, generosa* produces when it is sung, “two female terms” (Ecclesia and the Virgin, Hildegard and her nuns, earthly women and divine women, etc.) are, quite obviously, “conjoined in space”; but they are also conjoined in music, and, as we have seen, in Hildegard’s view, musical bonds are always at the same time sensual, corporeal bonds as well. Within a religious tradition that set great store by its patriarchal heritage and male deities, it would be underestimating the force of Hildegard’s elaboration of female homosocial desire not to call it radical, as Castle suggests. Although the twelfth century saw a blossoming of discourses celebrating the importance of femininity to religious experience, the central role of the Virgin to Christian history and tradition, and even a new emphasis on the involvement of affectivity and the senses in devotional practice, most of these discourses were aimed at furthering the devotional aims of men. Very few allowed for the kinds of homoerotic bonds between women I have been discussing. *Ave, generosa*, by contrast, brings these bonds to the center of devotional practice.

Although her musical elaboration of religious experience is erotic and corporeal, Hildegard was not an ecstatic. Unlike figures such as Saint Teresa, Hildegard did not employ the language of heterosexual intercourse in writing of her own experiences of communion with the divine, and she insisted upon the fact that she maintained control of her senses at all times. But we should not assume, as many have, that spiritually erotic experiences for medieval religious women somehow depended on penetration by or submission to a dominant male figure. In fact, the lyrics of many of Hildegard’s compositions suggest that female homoerotic sensuality was much more central to her symbolic expressions of religious devotion than were heteroerotic images. These compositions profoundly express the abbess’s intense desire to embody in music the entire physical, sensual essence of the Virgin. In the sixth strophe of *Ave, generosa*, as we have seen, the Virgin flesh experiences the touch of the spirit as grass experiences dew: not by being penetrated, but by being coated and immersed in moisture and blossoming in fertility. Hildegard uses this

O viridissima virga ave, que in  
ventoso flabro sciscitationis  
sanctorum prodisti.

Cum venit tempus quod tu floruisti in  
ramis tuis; ave, ave sit tibi, quia calor  
solis in te suadavit sicut odor  
balsami.

Nam in te floruit pulcher flos qui  
odorem dedit omnibus aromatibus  
que arida erant.

Et illa apparuerunt omnia in  
viriditate plena.

Unde celi dederunt rorem super  
gramen et omnis terra leta facta est,  
quoniam viscera ipsius frumentum  
protulerunt et quoniam volucres celi  
nidos in ipsa habuerunt.

Deinde facta est esca hominibus, et  
gaudium magnum epulantium; unde,  
o suavis virgo, in te non deficit ullum  
gaudium.

Hec omnia Eva contempsit.

Nunc autem laus sit altissimo.

Hail, o greenest stem, which was  
brought forth in the windy blasts of  
the prayers of the saints.

Because the time comes when your  
branches have bloomed; hail, hail to  
you, because the heat of the sun has  
sweated into you like the scent of  
balsam.

For in you the beautiful flower  
blossomed, which gave scent to all  
the spices that were dry.

And they have all appeared in  
pregnant greenness.

Whence the heavens bestowed dew on  
the grass and all the earth was made  
fruitful, because its very womb  
brought forth grain, and heaven's  
birds made their nests in it.

Finally there is made food for  
humanity, and great joy for the  
feasters; whence, o sweet virgin, in  
you there is no shortage of joy.

All of these things Eve despised.

Now let there be praise to the  
highest one.

**FIG. 3** *O viridissima virga* (Latin text in Hildegard of Bingen 1988, 126)

image to delight in the flesh, the body of the Virgin herself. Thus, the hymn subverts the conventional insistence on Christ's conception as a noncarnal, purely spiritual, yet allegorically bridal experience and affirms the centrality of the Virgin's fleshly, feeling, homoerotic body to Christian experience.

### III

Another striking example of Hildegard's musical elaboration of the homoerotics of devotion is the song *O viridissima virga* (fig. 3).<sup>11</sup> In this piece, Hildegard is again very conscious of the fertile power of the female

<sup>11</sup> This text of this song has been treated by Barbara Grant in this journal (1980). The liturgical genre of *O viridissima virga* is unclear; according to Grant, it is "one of only two songs in the whole collection with no designation as to liturgical form or function" (1980, 563).

body. The Stem of Jesse, the *virga* described in the first line, was a “favorite motif in manuscript paintings and cathedral windows,” as Barbara Newman writes: “As the father of David lies sleeping, the Messiah’s family tree is seen to rise from his loins, with prophets and ancestors of Christ seated on the several branches and pointing to Mary enthroned in the crown” (“Commentary” in Hildegard 1988, 276). Hildegard begins by praising the *virga*, the stem itself, at first glance a seemingly unmistakable signifier for patriarchal phallocentrism (the Latin *virga* is a common word for *penis* in both classical and medieval sources [Adams 1982, 14–15]), and Hildegard appears to be celebrating male fertility and its regenerative capabilities.

As the text progresses, however, we see that Hildegard is actually celebrating the female body and female fertility. The spices described in the third verse appear in “pregnant greenness” (*viriditate plena*) in the fourth. By the fifth verse, it is clear that the womb of the Earth is the bearer of the joy, greenness, and fruitfulness described in the hymn. The dew on the grass celebrated in *Ave, generosa* reappears, and, by a clever word-play, *virgo*, the Virgin Mary, has replaced *virga*, the phallic stem, as well as the Earth, as the central image. Although this text could be read as Hildegard’s “appropriating the phallus” for female use, I would argue that it actually represents a simultaneous acknowledgment of the unique powers, pleasures, and fruits of the female body and, indeed, the radical irrelevance of the phallus. The heat of the sun, the aroma of balsam, the beautiful flower, wheat from the womb served at a banquet: Hildegard experiences the Virgin’s body as taste, touch, sight, smell, and, most important, sound, for all the other senses are set within the frame of a musical composition. Again, as the nuns sing, their bodies produce the music that captures all the other corporeal senses in words. The somatic nature of music to Hildegard conveys the feelings and sensualities of the Virgin and earthly womb.

Hildegard’s vibrant imagery, which depicts the female body as vibrant and pansensory, is well served by the melody of the chant (fig. 4). The tune modulates noticeably from strophe to strophe, mirroring the many powers Hildegard sees emanating from the Virgin’s womb. A through-composed piece (i.e., one in which whole melodies do not repeat from verse to verse), *O viridissima virga* conveys a sense of fluidity through Hildegard’s adept employment of internal centonization. This is a process, quite common in the standard chant repertory, in which short melodic fragments appear several times in the course of a composition, connecting different sections of the chant to the listener’s ear. But Hildegard’s use of internal centonization differs markedly from standard examples.<sup>12</sup> Instead of using the same melodic fragment over and over as a simple

<sup>12</sup> Thanks to D. Martin Jenni for taking the time to point this out to me in a letter.

1 O vi - ri - dis - si - ma vir - ga a - ve, que in ven - to - so  
flab - ro scis - ci - ta - ti - o - nis sanc - to - rum pro - dis - ti.

2 Cum ve - nit tem - pus quod tu flo - ru - is - ti in ra - mis  
tu - is; a - ve, a - ve sit ti - bi, qui - a ca - lor so - lis  
in te su - da - rit si - cut o - dor bal - sa - mi.

3 Nam in te flo - ru - it pul - cher flos qui o - do - rem de - dit

FIG. 4 O viridissima virga (from Hildegard of Bingen 1983, 10–11)

om - ni - bus a - ro - ma - ti - bus que a - - ri - da e - - rant.

4 Et il - la ap - pa - ru - e - runt om - ni - a in vi - ri - di - ta - te ple - - - na.

5 Un - de ce - li de - de - runt ro - rem su - per gra - men et om - nis ter - ra le - ta  
,  
fac - ta est, quo - ni - am vis - ce - ra ip - si - us fru - men - tum pro - tu - le - runt,  
et quo - ni - am vo - luc - res ce - li ni - dos in ip - sa ha - bu - e - - - runt.

**FIG. 4** *Continued*

6 De - in - de fac - ta est es - ca ho - mi - ni - bus, et gau - di - um  
mag - num e - pu - lan - ti - um; un - de, o sua - vis vir - go,  
in te non de - fi - cit ul - lum gau - di - um.

7 Hec om - ni - a E - va con - temp - sit.

8 Nunc au - tem laus sit al - tis - si - mo.

FIG. 4 Concluded

reference point, she alters slightly its original form each time it appears, a gesture that allows the music to achieve a high degree of expressiveness.

In this respect, *O viridissima virga* is indicative of Hildegard's general derigidification of chant melody. As noted by Marianne Richert Pfau, author of the only full-length musicological study of Hildegard's compositions (1990), the abbess allows for great melodic freedom in her longer liturgical songs, such as *O viridissima virga*. According to Pfau, these pieces are characterized by "considerable melodic contractions and expansions, changes in text declamation, registral extensions and compressions, modifications in the disposition of internal articulations, and in some instances different internal tonal goals. On the whole, these pieces are not locked into fixed parallel structures. As a result, they command a dynamic model of form that emphasizes the concepts of relation over repetition, change over static identity, and process over fixed form" (1989, 1). Although some have called such compositional strategies regressive and unrefined in comparison to those of Hildegard's contemporaries, Pfau persuasively argues that there is much more going on in the abbess's longer compositions than a return to the style of earlier sequence composers.<sup>13</sup> If we accept that a composition such as *O viridissima virga* is a musical expression of devotional desire and embodiment, then the many contractions, expansions, extensions, compressions, modifications, and goal changes Pfau notes take on new significance. They are compositional strategies Hildegard employs in order to express her profound awareness of the sonorous richness of the female body. Hildegard musically invests the female body with a plethora of possibilities, and the constant refusal to repeat melodies and render them static throws the relationship Hildegard constructs into continuous flux.

Such an appreciation of the female body for its boundless fertility and potential rather than for its static utilitarianism characterizes all of Hildegard's expressions of personal devotion to the Virgin's corporeality. This specifically twelfth-century experimentation with the erotics of description resonates with a number of contemporary women's writings, particularly those of the French novelist Monique Wittig. In *The Lesbian Body*, for example, Wittig explores the possibilities of creating a language of lesbian sensuality; she has written of her book that "the body of the text . . . subsumes all the words of the female body. *The Lesbian Body* attempts to achieve the affirmation of its reality. . . . To recite one's own body, to recite the body of the other, is to recite the words of which the book is made up. The fascination for writing the never previously written

<sup>13</sup> Hildegard's regression to ninth- and tenth-century sequence style has been argued in, among other places, Bent 1980, 553, and Schmidt-Görg 1956, 111.

and the fascination for the unattained body proceed from the same desire" (1976, vi). Although it is important to be cautious in comparing works from radically different cultures and historical periods, it is arguable that Wittig does with language what Hildegard did with music eight centuries earlier. In every passage of her novel Wittig expresses a desire to know completely the female body, a knowledge central to her construction of lesbian eroticism: "THE OESOPHAGUS THE BRAIN THE CIRCULATION THE RESPIRATION THE NUTRITION THE ELIMINATION THE DEFAECATION THE REPRODUCTION [XX + XX = XX] THE REACTIONS PLEASURE EMOTION VISION SMELL TASTE TOUCH HEARING THE VOCAL CORDS THE CRIES THE WAILINGS THE MURMURS THE HOARSENESS THE SOBS THE SHRIEKS THE VOCIFERATIONS THE WORDS THE SILENCES THE WHISPERINGS THE MODULATIONS THE SONGS THE STRIDENCIES THE LAUGHS THE VOCAL OUTBURSTS THE LOCOMOTION" (126). Wittig imagines the female body as a source of erotic stimulation involving all five senses; indeed, the many physiological functions of the body are not to be despised and rejected, but recuperated and elaborated upon. Similarly, Hildegard's compositions express her desire to capture in sound the Virgin's sensuous corporeality and reveal her intense "fascination for the unattained body" of the Virgin. Within her own religious and sociohistorical context, Hildegard's language reveals a bold and unashamed proximity to the female body that is reflected in the music that frames it. Like Wittig, one of a number of current women writers who "wrestle with and within the language which they feel is alien to them" (Marks and Courtivron 1980, xii), Hildegard reacted through music to the constraints of the male-dominated church—the church to which she was devoted but whose leaders she criticized over and over in her visions and letters—by constructing powerful alternatives to patriarchal traditions, alternatives centered around the female body, sensuality, and homoerotic desire.

#### IV

Hildegard's theological tracts and the poems she set to music are the best-known of her writings, and in her lifetime it was these for which she was famous outside of her community. Within her own geographical locale, however, Hildegard had a well-deserved reputation as an authority on traditional folk medicine, herb lore, and human physiology. In addition to writing two full-length treatises on these subjects, she was sought out regularly by her nuns, the local peasantry, and even the nobility on a wide variety of medical concerns.

Hildegard's many musical insistences on the Virgin body as fully and sensually physical suggest connections with other parts of the abbess's cosmology that modern scholars do not define as strictly spiritual or devotional. A significant portion of Hildegard's scientific writings

(mostly in the *Causae et curae* [1903]) is devoted to lengthy explication of the nature of human sexuality as well as the ways in which sexual desire and reproduction shape gender difference. Although it has been remarked that Hildegard gave “scarcely a nod toward theological interpretation” within her physiological writings,<sup>14</sup> I would argue that her theorizations of female erotic desire actually illuminate her treatments of spiritual desire, such as those we find in *Ave, generosa* and *O viridissima virga*.

Several modern scholars have written about Hildegard’s conceptions of gender and sexuality (see esp. Cadden 1984 and Dronke 1984), noting that the abbess constructed a system dependent on well-defined and thoroughly explained causalities. Especially fascinating for our purposes is the abbess’s discussion of female sexual pleasure, which she ascribes to breezes circulating in the womb: “When the breeze of pleasure proceeds from the marrow of a woman it falls into her womb, which is near the navel, and moves the woman’s blood to pleasure; and because it spreads out around the womb, and is therefore more mild, because of her moisture where she burns in pleasure, or from fear or shame, she is able to restrain herself from excessive pleasure more easily than a man” (Hildegard 1903, 76). To Hildegard, although *pudor*, or shame, is certainly one of the consequences of erotic desire, the womb itself is the locus of sexual pleasure.

I would like to make three brief points in connecting Hildegard’s ostensibly distinct representations of sexual and spiritual desire. First, in her view, winds and breezes within the female body are the source of erotic desire (Hildegard uses the Latin *ventus delectationis*, or “winds of pleasure”). *O viridissima virga* (fig. 3) begins, “Hail, o greenest branch, sprung forth in the airy breezes of the prayers of the saints.” The verses go on to explore the many ways in which the female womb is a source of life, heat, scent, and the joy of devotion for the Christian devout. It is significant that Hildegard begins this text with reference to “airy breezes” (the Latin *ventoso flabro*): in her naturalistic writings, such as *Causae et curae*, these same airy breezes issue forth from the marrow and cause sexual desire to be inflamed within the womb. *O viridissima virga* serves to remind us that the physically sexual and the spiritually erotic are perhaps identical for Hildegard.

<sup>14</sup> Newman 1987, 121. But Newman has also suggested that Hildegard’s most intense concentration on both natural science and music may have occurred at roughly the same time. Especially interesting is Newman’s positing of a “middle period” in the abbess’s musical composition that would have included both *Ave, generosa* and *O viridissima virga*. According to Newman’s own chronology, then, Hildegard’s composition of these two songs may have taken place while she was at work on the *Causae et curae*. See Newman’s “Introduction” to Hildegard 1988, 7 and 10.

The second point is closely related. The airs and breezes that produce desire do so in women through dispersal and diffusion, a process that gives them room to spread out and allow women to achieve a kind of tranquil fertility. In Hildegard's own words, "Pleasure in a woman is comparable to the sun, which gently, calmly, and continuously spreads the earth with its heat, so that it may bring forth fruit."<sup>15</sup> This recalls the passage from *O viridissima virga* in which Hildegard describes "the sun sweat[ing] into" the Virgin's womb. This physiological description also sheds light on the melodic gestures Hildegard employs in her compositions. As I argued above, in *Ave, generosa*, every word of which is devoted to the Virgin and the sensuous, erotic, and fertile qualities Hildegard ascribes to her womb, the melody is integral to the central message of the text. The hymn begins with a rising fifth that is allowed to expand almost immediately by the middle of the first verse to span the entire octave. Expansion is accomplished, again, not through conjunct motion (i.e., step-by-step progression) but, rather, through disjunct motion, where a rising fifth is followed immediately by a rising fourth. In a very real way, then, Hildegard is giving this music that celebrates the Virgin maternal womb a spaciousness of its own; it is diffused, dispersed, and spread out in a kind of cartography of female desire.

Third, as in her musical constructions of the erotics of spirituality, Hildegard's elaborate descriptions of female desire and sexuality do not depend on male penetration. Although there are passages in the *Causae et curae* that discuss heterosexual intercourse in a positive light (see Dronke 1984, 176), it seems clear that Hildegard sees the ability of women to feel sexual desire and pleasure as an attribute of the female body itself, not as the result of stimulation from an external source. For both women and men, desire arises from the marrow (*ex medulla*)—not the bone marrow, but, according to Joan Cadden, the "person's core or innermost part" (1984, 157). Like the texts and music of *Ave, generosa* and *O viridissima virga*, Hildegard's discussion of female sexuality in *Causae et curae* is a tribute to the female body and its sensual, erotic attributes.

The argument I am making—namely, that Hildegard's poetic texts and musical compositions demonstrate a fundamental affinity between female spiritual devotion and female sexuality—is directed explicitly against recent interpretations of the abbess's Marian works. Commenting on the "themes that pervade all Hildegard's writing about the Virgin," Newman writes, "If we step back for a moment from the details, what

<sup>15</sup> "Delectatio . . . in muliere soli comparatur, qui blande et leniter et assidue terram calore suo perfundit, ut fructus proferat, quia si eam acrius in assiduitate incenderet, fructus magis laederet quam eos produceret" (Hildegard 1903, 76; trans. in Cadden 1984, 158).

seems most distinctive about this body of prose and song is the near-total absence of Mary as a person. She is rather a state of existence, an embodied Eden. Her flesh is the garden where God dwells; everything about her is joy, innocence, asexual eros. Her beauty is not that of a human form but that of intangible essences—light and fragrance and song” (1987, 187). Here Newman is following Peter Dronke, the first major scholar of Hildegard in the English language, who writes that “she who wrote so openly about women’s sexuality in the context of medicine nonetheless retained an asexual concept of love in her ideal realm” (1984, 170). Both Newman and Dronke see Hildegard’s devotional verse and music addressed to the Virgin as somehow asexual, divorced from her naturalistic appreciation of the female body and erotic desire. Similarly, by arguing that Hildegard sees Mary as a “state of existence” rather than as a “person,” Newman elides the corporeal, erotic delight in the Virgin’s body that inspires and pervades the abbess’s music. Perhaps this is because Newman sees music, like light and fragrance, as an “intangible essence” rather than the unabashedly somatic phenomenon Hildegard found it to be. I would agree with Newman that Hildegard’s Marian compositions are *aheterosexual*. But if we are to accept the argument that they are simply asexual, period, we also have to ask the question, Asexual to whom?

A good friend recently told me that she likes to think of the Virgin Mary as the first teenage lesbian mom. While undoubtedly Hildegard would not have used these words to describe her own view of the Virgin, it is important to realize the extent to which modern readings of medieval devotional texts have failed to take into account the centrality of homoerotic desire to women’s religious experience and expression. Much of the secondary literature on women’s religious discourse uses phrases such as “unashamedly erotic” or “even sexual at times” when describing female devotion to God or Jesus Christ, but when a woman expresses an intense longing for and devotion to the Virgin Mary or other female figures, the language is described, in Newman’s words, as “asexual eros.”

Despite the cautious comparisons I have drawn between Hildegard and modern lesbian novelists, however, I am not suggesting that she herself was a lesbian. Like many medieval writers, Hildegard saw carnal desire as a sign of the Fall, and her monastic vow of chastity was one of the ways in which she demonstrated this view. Indeed, at one point in the *Scivias* Hildegard explicitly attacks sexual activity between members of the same sex in language that resonates with contemporary homophobic diatribes from the religious Right (1990, 279). Moreover, a number of scholars are beginning to see that homosexuality and lesbianism are modern conceptual categories that are not adequate terms for describing premodern behavior and self-understanding. David Halperin has made

this argument most succinctly: "The very concept of homosexuality implies that there is a specifically sexual dimension to the human personality, a characterological seat within the individual of sexual acts, desires, and pleasures—a determinate source from which all sexual expression proceeds. . . . Sexuality effects the conceptual demarcation and isolation of that domain from other areas of personal and social life that have traditionally cut across it, such as carnality, vengery, libertinism, virility, passion, amorousness, eroticism, intimacy, love, affection, appetite, and desire—to name but a few of the older claimants to territories more recently staked out by sexuality" (1990, 24–25). As demonstrated above, Hildegard did not make a conceptual demarcation between what we include under the rubric "sexuality" and many of the other parts of her life and writings. Indeed, the two liturgical compositions I have discussed demonstrate both musically and textually that homoerotic desire is integral to the discursive strategies through which Hildegard expressed her devotional sensibility. To follow Newman and insist on a strict divide between spiritual and sexual desire in Hildegard's Marian works, then, is to misrecognize the polymorphously erotic nature of the bodies she enshrines in melody. Hildegard's music—how it sounds, how it works, what it does, and what it means—pressures us to consider the ways in which she and other medieval religious writers eroticized the entire body, not simply the genitals.<sup>16</sup>

Acknowledging this fact might allow scholars seeking to recover lesbian and gay history in the Middle Ages to move beyond concern with genital sexuality and recognize how insistently "queer" medieval Christianity can be at times. To put it another way, rather than looking for "actual" lesbians and gay men in the Middle Ages, why not try outing medieval devotion itself? Doing so would not trivialize the specificity of queer experience but, rather, broaden this experience to include the magnificent medieval array of texts, musics, and desires that have been viewed thus far exclusively through the lenses of compulsory heterosexuality, a modern invention. In E. Ann Matter's words, "We can only find 'medieval lesbians' among the landmarks of medieval culture, on that particular continuum, not ours." Although according to Matter "the overwhelmingly patriarchal nature of medieval culture significantly modified the evidence for, or even the experience of, women whose primary emo-

<sup>16</sup> Bynum has made a somewhat complementary argument (with the opposite result, however) in a reply to Leo Steinberg's study of what he called the "sexuality of Christ" in Renaissance art (Bynum 1991, 79–117). Distinguishing between sexuality and "genitality," she questions whether we are "entitled to associate genitality with sexuality" in the Middle Ages, and whether "medieval people immediately [thought] of erections and sexual activity when they saw penises (as modern people apparently do)" (85).

tional and erotic relation was to other women,”<sup>17</sup> the “continuum” to which she refers might easily be seen as the lesbian continuum that Adrienne Rich describes as “includ[ing] a range—through each woman’s life and throughout history—of woman-identified experience [and] not simply the fact that a woman has had or consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman” (1980, 648). For Rich, as for Wittig and Hildegard, the erotic “is unconfined to any single part of the body or solely to the body itself, an energy not only diffuse but . . . omnipresent” (650). While her discussion is certainly flawed by an essentialist stigmatization of male homosexuality and a purification of lesbianism,<sup>18</sup> Rich quite powerfully urges critics and historians to recover the “breadths of female history and psychology which have lain out of reach as a consequence of limited, mostly clinical, definitions of ‘lesbianism’ ” (649). I hope this essay will contribute to such a recovery.

## V

Because singing does more than woodenly recapitulate a prior system called “sexuality,” let us consider “voice” to be the master-discourse, and “sexuality,” its appendage; if “sexuality” seems to be the term on top, and “voice” the term below, let us reverse the hierarchy, if only to see the two concepts more clearly. Rapt in this reversal, we might discover that the ramifications of “voice” are more majestic and shattering than the effects of “sexuality.” What if “voice” were, finally, a more useful rubric than “sexuality”? Dispense with our sex rhetorics, and think of desire as articulated air, a shaped column of breath passing through a box on its way to a

<sup>17</sup> Matter 1992, 3. Matter’s comments introduced a forum titled “Gay and Lesbian Concerns in Medieval Studies” that appeared in the Spring 1992 edition of the *Medieval Feminist Newsletter* while I was in the process of revising this essay. The short commentaries by Matter, Simon Gaunt, Carolyn Dinshaw, Sylvia Huot, Susan Schibanoff, and Mary Anne Campbell are all centrally concerned with the issues raised in Halperin 1990, specifically as they relate to the study of medieval culture and literature. Campbell’s comments on the thirteenth-century homily *Hali Meidenhad* are especially relevant to the issues under consideration here: “Precisely so as not to misread women’s import in medieval literature, we must begin to accept in earnest that medieval women did live truly different lives when not bound to husbands. And we must begin to consider their own senses of their virginal lives as possibly akin to lesbianism. ‘Holy maidenhood’ provided for medieval women not only a rejection of physical heterosexuality but also a rejection of spiritual heterosexuality—in favor of women-only physical spaces and women-identified spirituality” (1992, 15).

<sup>18</sup> She notes, for instance, “the prevalence of anonymous sex and the justification of pederasty among male homosexuals” (Rich 1980, 649) and argues that “so-called lesbian pornography, created for the male voyeuristic eye, is . . . devoid of emotional content or individual personality” (641). For a good summary of Rich’s critics, see Sedgwick 1990, 36–38 (text and notes).

resonator. Are we experiencing “voice” or “sexuality” when we greet or hold a controlled shaft of air moving from a dark place out into the world? [Koestenbaum 1991, 211]

Although they appear in a discussion of modern opera and male homosexuality, Koestenbaum’s rapturous words could just as easily have been written as an introduction to Hildegard’s devotional music. By inviting us to deprive what Halperin calls the “conceptual domain” of modern sexuality, Koestenbaum raises the possibility of putting voice—the site at which music and body coincide most radically—“on top.” Doing so encourages both the degenitalization of sexuality discussed above as well as the recognition of music’s central role in locating body, desire, and eroticism in culture and society. As Susan McClary has argued, “To the large extent that music can organize our perceptions of our own bodies and emotions, it can tell us things about history that are not accessible through any other medium” (1991, 30).

Hildegard’s images of embodiment and homoerotic desire provided her monastic community with a means of participating in the relationships she established through music itself. That is, the nuns in Hildegard’s abbey who sang from or listened to the *Symphonia* were actively involved in their leader’s ideal religious matrix of music and body. For the music used for the worship of God in medieval Europe was not an isolated part of the monastic experience. As the writings and lives of medieval monks and nuns demonstrate, music framed monasticism, and for many faithful, such as Hildegard, it provided the most intense means of experiencing divine love. Finally, music may have been the only discourse that allowed Hildegard to express fully—and us to recuperate—the embodied depth of her desire for the Virgin Mary. Most scholars who have written about the history of Christianity have glossed over those expressions of religious devotion in which women have voiced their physical and spiritual desire for the Virgin or other women as the object of love rather than for Christ or another male figure. (For exceptions see Brown 1989 and Campbell 1992.) But such expressions may be the most challenging and subversive of all. In the context of medieval Christianity, a religion whose orthodox proponents constantly insisted on the miracle of Christ Himself as its kernel of legitimacy, Hildegard’s music was for herself and the women in her abbey an escape into a form of spirituality that centered around the female body and female homosocial and homoerotic desire. Although Hildegard described herself as a “poor little female,” complained of living in an “effeminate age,” never advocated female ordination, and was never accused of heresy, her music is nonetheless a many-layered site of struggle with the patriarchal traditions of Christianity and the church. Framing expressions of desire within an exclusively feminine context, Hildegard’s

music exceeds and transcends the norms of twelfth-century plainchant and refuses to fit into the neat, mathematical models constructed by medieval music theorists and contemporary musicologists. Hildegard gave flesh to the voice and voice to the flesh not for aesthetic gratification, but for the affirmation of femininity and the sonorous expression of body, sexuality, and devotional desire.

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