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# *The Church as a Woman*

## *The Gendered Rhetoric of the Feminine Divine*

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# Introduction

Hildegard of Bingen is not only herself one of the most famous women of the Middle Ages and a very strong historical female figure, she was also “the first medieval woman to reflect and write at length on women.” (Scholtz 361) With Hildegard, we find someone that, first, defied and redefined gender roles in shaping her own self-image, in the way she lived her life and in the way she led her community of Benedictines. Second, we find someone who wrote extensively not only about the biology and sexuality of men and women but also about theology, morality and cosmology. Not surprisingly, then, Hildegard’s person and her visionary and scientific works have been the focus of many studies about medieval ideas about sex, gender and sexuality. Her works have been popularized and are sometimes called proto-feminist. This study investigates just a small aspect of the subject, namely Hildegard’s use of gendered rhetoric in her portrayal of the personified church.

## 1.1 Hildegard’s life and works

Hildegard was born in 1098 in the Rhineland from parents of the lower nobility.<sup>1</sup> In an autobiographical excerpt from her *Vita*, she later claimed that her visionary experiences began at the age of five. At eight, she was entrusted to Jutta, a devout noblewoman who was only a few years older than Hildegard and who was herself at that time entrusted to the care of a certain widow Uda (Felten, “The Life of Jutta and Hildegard”; Staab). She became her mentor and learned her to read the Psalms and to write. Together with a small group of young women, they moved to the Benedictine monastery of Disibodenberg to live there as anchoresses (Sutherland). When Jutta died, Hildegard was chosen as head of the community. All that time, she continued having visions, but it took her more than forty years and the encouragement of a male mentor to finally put to parchment the *Scivias*, her first work of visions. Hildegard’s literary form is more intellectual than mystical: her visions are learned and systematic, and they are always explained by means of an extended exegesis. During the forty years of her writerly career, she (with the help of her co-workers)<sup>2</sup> wrote an astonishing amount of works: three books of visions, letters, homilies, liturgical symphonies and a liturgical play, medical-scientific works, two vitae, a commentary on the Rule of Benedict, theological tractates and a self-devised new language. She also went on preaching tours around nearby monasteries and cities, although women

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<sup>1</sup> For a biography of Hildegard, see Flanagan.

<sup>2</sup> For an overview of Hildegard’s secretaries and helpers, see Ferrante, “Scribe quae uides et audis”.

were officially not allowed to preach. Hildegard was exceptional in that she managed to win the support of both religious and secular powers, despite being a female visionary and as such potentially subversive. She managed to do this by carefully controlling her public image. Not only did she portray herself as a weak woman who received all the knowledge she had from God (which at the same time is a very powerful claim),<sup>3</sup> she also always stood firmly on the side of the pope's project of moral reform and always made sure to keep to orthodox teaching.<sup>4</sup> This does not mean that she never stepped on people's toes, however: quite on the contrary, she used her power as God's messenger both to urge moral reform and to have her way in her own life. For instance, she left Disibodenberg to found her own cloister at the Rupertsberg, against the wishes of both the monks of Disibodenberg and some of her own nuns. She chastised the clergy and other powerful people for dishonouring the Church, and her own community was excommunicated for a while because they had buried an excommunicated man, whom Hildegard claimed had died in a state of grace. In her own life, then, Hildegard found ways to either ignore gender roles or bend them to her own profit.

## 1.2 Sex, gender and sexuality in the Middle Ages

In 1990, Thomas Laqueur proposed a radically new way of looking at the history of gender in his seminal work "Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud". Building on Foucault's theories of sexuality and his own extensive study of historical accounts of anatomy, he posited that the western model of looking at sex and gender is only as old as the Enlightenment. Before that period, he claims, "men and women were arrayed according to their degree of metaphysical perfection, their vital heat, along an axis whose telos was male" (5-6). So, not only gender but also sex was a matter of degree and place in the hierarchy. In fact, Laqueur asserts that, whereas we now view the physical body as "real" and cultural meanings as "epiphenomenal", earlier periods would have seen sex as an epiphenomenon to the primary category of cultural gender: "To be a man or a woman was to hold a social rank, a place in society, to assume a cultural role, not to be organically one or the other of two incommensurable sexes. Sex before the seventeenth century, in other words, was still a sociological and not an ontological category." (8)

Medievalists have contested the extent to which Laqueur's concept is applicable to the Middle Ages. Joan Cadden, while admitting that there is much evidence for Laqueur's "one-sex model", points out that there is as much if not more evidence to be found for the existence of other models as well (*Meanings of Sex Difference*). She advocates a view in which several differing, overlapping and contrasting models exist within a culture at the same time. Laqueur not only generalizes in this aspect. He also focuses almost exclusively on anatomical treatises, especially the illustrations of female and male genitals as identical in form but reversed. There are of course other documents to take into consideration, even if one would only focus on 'biology'. Further, he sees the Middle Ages merely as the period that latently carried over ideas from Antiquity to the Renaissance. However,

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<sup>3</sup> See Newman, "Visions and Validations"; Bartlett; Flanagan.

<sup>4</sup> See Deploige, "Priests, prophets, and magicians"; Felten, "Reformbewegungen"; Mews, "Visions and Religious Reform", "Hildegard's Apocalyptic Imagination".



Galen's treatise *On the Use of Parts*, the classical work that supposedly spread this theory of genital homology through the centuries, "did not play a direct role in the main conversation about reproductive roles, sex determination, and sexual pleasure in the natural philosophy or medicine of the late Middle Ages", according to Cadden (108), and Katharine Park confirms that "before 1500 [she] could find no convincing expressions of the idea of genital homology at all, even as an alternative to be discarded ..." (4).

Laqueur's model does not completely get medieval conceptions about sex and gender wrong, but it needs to be modified. He is right, for instance, in stating that it is impossible to separate sex, gender and sexuality in medieval thought (Mazo Karras 6). For medieval people, as for most modern people, sex determines gender, and gender determines sexuality, so that people did not distinguish between biological and cultural factors. He is also right in stating that medieval gender was situated "along an axis whose telos was male" (6), because there certainly was a hierarchy within the two sexes, which also does not differ much from our time, where masculinity is still valued above femininity. However, this does not mean that medieval people did not keep to two sexes that normally remained stable throughout one's life: "... the binary opposition between men and women was extraordinarily strong in medieval society. Although theorists might write that females were defective males, their defects were significant enough that no one seriously considered them the same as males; they were in a quite different category." (Mazo Karras 5)

The idea of hierarchy and the binary model of sex were reconciled in the Middle Ages by the philosophy of Neoplatonism. This spiritual philosophical school emerged in late Antiquity as a reaction to the perceived materialism of the Stoic school (Moran 211). Christian thinkers drew heavily on Neoplatonist thought, which was carried over to and remained hugely influential throughout the Middle Ages. The Neoplatonist universe is constituted by an immaterial entity that is wholly transcendent, "the One". The One is the source of everything and contains everything that exists, but it is also situated above everything else. It creates the different dimensions of the universe by emanating "pure being" (Struck 59). The cosmos thus consists of ever-descending layers of meaning. A first level of emanation is the realm of Mind or intellectual reality, which was sometimes equated with Christ by Christian thinkers. A second emanation is the realm of the Soul, which was equated with the holy spirit. This level in turn generates the world and everything that is material. This last realm is closest to evil in that it is closest to non-being, as the Neo-Platonists and later Augustine defined evil. In such a scheme, everything in between pure being and non-being finds itself in a position of relativity: as an emanation from the One it is positive, but as a derived form of being it is negative. Such is also the case with men and women. Not only are they positioned within this hierarchy, with men at a higher level of being than women, but also "male" and "female" are used metaphorically to describe relations within the whole continuum. Maleness means spirituality, intellect and soul, a higher position, while femaleness indicates materiality, the senses and the body, or a lower position. Hildegard, for instance, says that "uir et femina unum sunt, quoniam uir est quasi anima, femina uero uelut corpus" (*Liber Diuinorum Operum* II 1.43) and that "uir diuinitatem, femina uero humanitatem filii Dei significat." (I 4.100).<sup>5</sup> At every level, two entities, a lower and a higher principle, come together to form a unity. In conclusion, women's lower place in the hierarchy does not imply that they are deficient men; they are different and have their own qualities, although these

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<sup>5</sup> "man and woman are one, because man is like the soul and woman like the body"; "man signifies the divinity and woman the humanity of Christ" [my translation]

are valued less positively. Medieval people did not see women as defective men but as complementary to them. And although they were lower in the hierarchy, they did have their own worth. Just as medieval people's view on body and soul was generally less dualistic than is always assumed, they tended to view the two sexes less as opposing than as complementing each other. Just as the soul needs the body and will be reunited with it at the Resurrection, men need women to give them a body in the first place, to be able to live at all (Bynum, "Why all the Fuss"). Thus, woman is accorded a place that is lower in the hierarchy, and she basically functions as the material for men to inhabit, but she is not a defective man: her position is viewed as positive inasmuch as it complements man's being. Also, Christianity values highly the self-sacrificing descent of a higher principle to lower regions, even if it does not value the lower principle in itself. Christ took on humanity to save all people, and his humanity corresponds to a female position. That women signified the humanity of Christ could be used to create a positive identity for themselves (Bynum, *Holy Feast and Fragmentation*). We often find imagery of gender reversals in medieval literature, although men use this rhetoric more than women, the latter stressing their humanity instead of their difference from men (Bynum, *Fragmentation*). Christina Cedillo explains its uses:

Women are framed as embodying literally and figuratively the position that men seek, that of the lowly servant who will inherit the kingdom of God. Men, being culturally authoritative, align themselves spiritually with the humble status of women by relinquishing rhetorically, but not socially, the prominence exerted in everyday life by describing themselves in terms of the abject aspect of humanity—woman. At the same time, they exhort women to "become male" or "virile" in the rise to God" to counteract the deficient nature of female embodiment, though they will gain no worldly power as a result. (3)

Medieval writers and artists thus used gender imagery "more fluidly and less literally than we do" (Bynum, "The Body of Christ" 434), which does not imply that social roles were any less strict or hierarchic, but which did open up symbolic possibilities for male and female writers alike.

Lastly, I turn to medieval ideas about sexuality. As with sex and gender, we encounter a "cacophony of discourses" (Bynum, "Why all the Fuss" 7), varying according to the period, the place, the status and occupation of the writer and so on. Naturally, writers of romances, doctors and theologians have different things to say about sexuality. By and large, we can discern two attitudes: an attitude of total repression and an "earthy, lustful, playful version" of sexuality (Mazo Karras 2). These versions were associated with different spheres of life, yet they influenced each other: "... the first, repressive attitude, associated with the medieval church, carried over into the secular culture more commonly with regard to women's sexuality; the second, earthy attitude, associated with lay culture, carried over into the ecclesiastical realm more commonly with regard to men's." (3) The result of this mutual influence was a gendered evaluation of sexuality, where "[w]omen's behavior was sinful and polluting, men's was obeying the dictates of nature." (3) However, the question of medieval sexuality has to be discussed with caution. There are many different and contrasting views. A first difficulty is the fact that, "in many cases, medieval people did not see what the two partners did in sexual intercourse as the same act at all" (3), neither in social or moral terms. Sexual acts were seen as what someone did to someone else, namely what an active partner (always male) did to a passive partner (mostly female). So, not having sex or having sex, within a marriage or outside of marriage, could have completely different social meanings for men and for women. Second, the sexual is not to be equated with the erotic. Chastity could be described in erotic terms but remained spiritual. On the opposite side of the spectrum, sexuality could be described as not erotic at all, for instance when one attributed women's sexual desire to a desire for children. Third, it is difficult to say which

symbols indicated sexuality and which did not: female breasts or male genitals do not necessarily denote sexuality (Bynum, “The Body of Christ”). Lastly, the conception of sexuality and sexual orientation differed greatly from ours. Sexuality was not seen as a separate sphere of life, belonging to the psychophysical domain of experience; rather, it was implicated in political, economic and social institutions and patterns of thought (Halperin 259). So, sexuality did not function as a “principle of individuation” of humans: sexual orientation was no identity (259). This means that homosexuality was not an identity, but also that we cannot speak about heterosexuality and heteronormativity in the Middle Ages in the same way as we do for our own time (Schultz). Sexual relations were classified to other criteria, such as procreation and sinfulness.

### 1.3 Sex, gender and sexuality in Hildegard’s texts

The focus of the debate on Hildegard’s ideas about sex, gender and sexuality is the degree to which Hildegard proposes new ideas instead of following the tradition and, related to that, the degree to which Hildegard’s image of women can be called a positive or even a feminist one within the context of her time.<sup>6</sup> Some scholars, like Elisabeth Gössmann, are convinced that Hildegard brought a subversive message under the guise of an acceptably traditional discourse. Generally, however, the consensus about the originality of Hildegard’s image of woman is that it was less what she said than the fact that she spoke about it that was novel: “Although her image of woman was largely conventional, she touched on matters seldom considered before her and at times differed from beliefs long accepted as beyond dispute.” (Scholz 369) Joan Cadden states that “Hildegard’s treatment of these subjects is not exceptional in its content. While her particular assertions may not be clearly traceable to specific sources, none can be called heterodox: nothing she says about gender, sexuality, or reproduction contradicts standard assumptions or oversteps the acceptable bounds of contemporary debate.” (“It takes all kinds” 152) What is extraordinary in the context of Hildegard’s time, however, is “the extent of the concern with gender differences, sexuality, and reproduction” (152). So, while Hildegard herself took great liberties with the restrictions imposed on women, she viewed herself as a God-sanctioned exception to the rule, and an exception that only confirmed the rule. God had sent a “weak little woman” (“paupercula femina”) to chastise the clergy in order to shame the men for their own “womanly weakness”.

I will now give a short summary of the scholarship on Hildegard’s ideas about men and women. We saw that, when body and soul are gendered as female and male, whether or not one entertains a positive notion of women - or rather, woman as a symbol - is hinged on one’s appreciation of the

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<sup>6</sup> A warning has to be issued here concerning the sources. Scholars base their evaluation of Hildegard’s ideas about these themes mostly on the visionary works *Scivias* and *Liber Divinorum Operum* and on the work of natural science *Causae et Curae*, which makes no claim to divine inspiration. About the *Causae et Curae*, however, we know with certainty that it has reached us under a completely different form than that of the book *Liber subtilitatum diversarum naturarum creaturarum* which Hildegard herself and her secretary mention. It was compiled after Hildegard’s death and was altered in significant ways. So, all statements based on this work must be treated with care. (Moulinier; Müller)

body.<sup>7</sup> With Hildegard, we mostly find a holistic view on body and soul, together with the notion of the human body as a microcosm, a symbol of the universe (Flanagan; Lautenschläger; Marron; Maskulak; Shipperges; Scholz). However, dualistic notions are never far away. Peter Dronke describes the tension between holism and dualism in Hildegard's work as an unreconciled issue in her thought. When writing about human beings in their empirical reality, "Hildegard's emphasis tends to be what in later periods would be called a materialistic and deterministic one." (171) Although there are many instances in which Hildegard evaluates the body very positively as the necessary complement of the soul, there are also instances where she cannot avoid opposing the sinful body to the pure soul.

Consequently, it is the same with her view on women and men. Some theologians may claim that the comparison of the female body and the male soul is not a matter of dualist division or hierarchic ordering but rather "relational integration", because everyone is body and soul and everyone must integrate feminine and masculine aspects (Lautenschläger 136), but the fact is that these relations *are* hierarchically ordered, and that such a hierarchical ordering quickly leads to dualist division. There is indeed a difference between seeing men and women as complements and seeing them as opposites, but in practice complementary characteristics seen in a hierarchical relation will easily be mistaken for opposing characteristics, and the characteristics that are lower in the hierarchy will then be seen as negative in opposition to the higher characteristics. Hildegard's merit lies in trying not to let her complementary view shift to an oppositional view, although she seems unable to avoid that.

Hildegard, then, values the union of a man and a woman in a marriage that is aimed at procreation. The woman must subject herself to her husband, but they are both dependent on each other. She explains it like this:

... Mulier propter uirum creata est, et uir propter mulierem factus est; quoniam ut illa de uiro ita et uir de illa, ne alterum ab altero discedat in unitate factorum natorum suorum, quia in uno opere unum operantur, quemadmodum aer et uentus opera sua inuicem complicant. Quomodo? Aer de uento mouetur, et uentus aeri implicatur, ita quod in ambitu eorum quaeque uiridia illis subdita sunt. Quid est hoc? Mulier uiro et uir mulieri in opere filiorum cooperatur.<sup>8</sup> (Scivias I 2.12)

Elsewhere, she says:

Vnde et Deus illi adiutorium dedit, quod speculatiua forma mulieris fuit; in qua omne humanum genus latuit, quod in ui fortitudinis Dei producendum erat, sicut et primum hominem in ui fortitudinis sue perfecerat. Vir itaque et femina sic ad inuicem admixti sunt, ut opus alterum per alterum est; quia uir sine femina uir non uocaretur, nec femina sine uiro femina

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. de Beauvoir: "Man seeks in woman the Other as Nature and as his fellow being. But we know what ambivalent feelings Nature inspires in man. ... Nature is a vein of gross material in which the soul is imprisoned, and she is the supreme reality; she is contingency and Idea, the finite and the whole; she is what opposes the Spirit, and the Spirit itself. ... And so it is in periods when there flourishes a vitalist romanticism that desires the triumph of Life over Spirit; then the magical fertility of the land, of woman, seems to be more wonderful than the contrived operations of the male ... But more often man is in revolt against his carnal state; he sees himself as a fallen God: his curse is to be fallen from a bright and ordered heaven into the chaotic shadows of his mother's womb." (175-177)

<sup>8</sup> "Woman was created for the sake of man, and man for the sake of woman. As she is from the man the man is also from her, lest they dissent from each other in the unity of making their children; for they should work as one in one work, as the air and the wind intermingle in their labor. In what way? The air is moved by the wind, and the wind is mingled with the air, so that in their movement all verdant things are subject to their influence. What does this mean? The wife must cooperate with the husband and the husband with the wife in making children." (Hart and Bishop 78)

nominaretur. Femina enim opus uiri est, et uir aspectus consolationis femine est; et neuter eorum absque altero esse posset.<sup>9</sup> (*Liber divinorum operum* I 4.100)

Woman is not an imperfect man, as the Aristotelian tradition would have it, but is “as much as man part of the creator’s design.” (Scholz 367). Hildegard paints them as biologically different: Adam was made from clay, while Eve was made from Adam’s flesh, so that men are strong while women are weak and passive (368). Women, then, are more easily seduced by sin and they must subject themselves to men. Women have their own strengths, however: “Hildegard credited woman with dexterity, artistry and a special vitality. She also associated woman with physical beauty and gaiety, with prudence and wisdom and with charity, solicitude and sensibility.” (368) Weakness can be women’s strength, just as strength in men can be used to do harm (Gössmann). Furthermore, because women are weaker, they have less sexual desire and are more able to control themselves, also because of fear and shame (Cadden, “It takes all kinds” 159). This is a point in which Hildegard differs strikingly from her contemporaries: she does not describe women as more lustful than men, although in many medieval stories women were pictured as lustful creatures who lead men to sin and who initiate sexual relations. Hildegard, on the contrary, sees women as less sensual. For her, women only respond to the sexual actions of men, and they hunger not after sex but only after children. This could be interpreted as a more positive attribute in a context where sexuality in itself is sinful.

Whereas the union of man and woman in marriage and procreation is thus positively valued by Hildegard, it is negatively valued in relation to virginity and chastity. In the hierarchy of things, laity is to the religious as woman is to man and body is to soul. So, while the laity contributes to humankind by procreating, they are valued far less than virgins. Hildegard’s exaltation of virginity is well documented, but as far as I can see no one has charted the intersection of femaleness and virginity in her texts. The problem is that such a topic as gender is rarely studied in relation to Hildegard’s moral or theological ideas. Virginity is not only a theological issue but also a social phenomenon, but theology is often treated as if it is uninfluenced by social categories like gender. Even feminist theologians tend to do this, partly because they wish to champion Hildegard and her theology as feminist *avant la lettre* and therefore stress the positive aspects of her image of woman.

## 1.4 The Feminine Divine

The problem is the same with the research on Hildegard’s female personifications. Their presence as female symbols in a patriarchal system of theology is viewed as a celebration of the symbolical feminine, and this celebration is opposed to women’s oppression in real life. So, ideational constructs are dissociated from gender constructs, from social roles, norms and relations. The scholar who explored the terrain of female personifications in Hildegard and later in the Middle Ages as a whole is Barbara Newman, a historian of religion. She published *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the*

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<sup>9</sup> “So God gave him a helper which was his mirror image, woman, in whom the whole human race lay hidden. It was to be brought forth in the power of God’s strength, just as the first man was produced by him. And the man and the woman were thus complementary, so that one works through the other, because man is not called ‘man’ without woman, nor is woman without man called ‘woman’. For woman is the work of man, and man the form of woman’s consolation; and neither of them can exist without the other.” (translation in Flanagan)

*Feminine* in 1987. Her framework is what she calls “sapiential thought”, which is “the perennial school of Christian thought that centers on the discovery and adoration of divine Wisdom in the works of creation and redemption.” (xvii) This tradition works with themes such as “divine beauty, the feminine aspect of God, the absolute predestination of Christ and Mary, the moral and aesthetic ideal of virginity, and the hope of cosmic redemption.” She describes how Hildegard extols the symbolical feminine in the figures of *Sapientia* (Wisdom), *Caritas* (Love), *Ecclesia* (the Church), Mary and even Eve, while at the same time reinforcing traditional gender roles for real women. In a later book covering a wider range of authors she further explains how these figures, which, in a bold move, she calls “goddesses”, fit into the theological system. Female personifications are “emanations of the Divine, mediators between God and the cosmos, embodied universals, and not at least, ravishing objects of identification and desire” (*God and the Goddesses* 2). As such, Newman argues that they are “female but not necessarily women” (38). She asserts that female personifications are not representations of woman but modes of religious imagination. They function as a safe and efficient way to theologize about divine concepts, for instance because they can represent “God’s inner conflicts, so to speak, in much the same way that allegory enabled them to dramatize human conflicts.” (39) Another reason for their existence would be the need to imagine divinity as both male and female, because “human beings come in two sexes” (19). She therefore insists that they “were not women: they did not have bodies, and although they were symbolically virgins, lovers, mothers, and brides, they bore no taint of mortal frailty” (310).

This kind of thinking is of course rooted in the feminist spirituality and theology that formed part of second-wave difference feminism. Newman does situate herself within that tradition but also rejects its ideas of “sex complementarity” and gender essentialism (“St. Hildegard and the Fate of Feminist Theology”). She wants to describe the celebration of feminine qualities in Hildegard’s theology but is faced with the problem that Hildegard spoke disparagingly of women’s autonomy in real life. Hildegard, of course, did believe in gender essentialism and complementarity. Barbara Newman, however, is determined to paint a positive image of Hildegard’s feminine theology. So, what Newman does, is separate female bodies and their roles in society from feminine symbolism. First of all, Newman supposes that modes of religious imagination do not have to be gendered, that “[t]o conceive of goddesses ... is not to evince any particular attitude toward women. It is simply to exercise the religious imagination” (38). At the same time, however, she describes a system of religious imagination that makes use of the gendered qualities of the feminine, such as being embodied, being immanent, being an object of desire, establishing relations (often erotic), and being virgins, lovers, mothers and brides. So, what does she mean by “female”, and what does she mean by “woman”, when she separates the two? She never specifies this, unless by pointing out that “Lady Philosophy suffers from no weakness of mind; Lady Poverty, though beautiful and nude, arouses no lust in St. Francis; Mater Ecclesia does not lack authority, nor is Frau Minne periodically unclean.” (*God and the goddesses* 310) These are all the negative aspects associated with women’s materiality as opposed to men’s more spiritual status: women are weak of mind, their bodies arouse lust and are unclean, and they lack authority. This is the view on women that arises when the gendered body and soul are seen in opposition to each other, and these are the qualities that do not get figuratively transferred to men in the symbolic realm. The aspects of the feminine that qualify for that realm are the aspects that are valued when body and soul are seen as a harmonic whole: in that case, the abstract concepts of the body, of complementarity, of erotic love, of gender roles can be used in the religious imagination. What Newman means, is that you can abstract women’s association with immanence and materiality from women’s lower place in society, that you can abstract motherhood and even the symbolism of

such body parts as the womb and breasts from real wombs, real breasts and real births,<sup>10</sup> that you can abstract the idea of being a daughter or bride from the legal position that daughters and wives held in medieval society and from the fact that their father or husband had total control over their bodies.

I do not think that such an artificial separation can be maintained. If you look at those abstract ideas of materiality or motherhood, you can ask the question of what is actually valued in those ideas. It is the celebration of a lower principle that upholds the higher principle: a celebration of the hierarchy itself. Women's base materiality on the one hand and female symbolic materiality on the other are two sides of the same coin. It is the same system looked at from different perspectives: if you look at women as opposed to men, you only discern negativity, but if you zoom out and consider how women are necessary to men's existence in providing the material from which they are formed, then you might find this positive.<sup>11</sup> Therefore, I would contest the view that we can separate positively valued femininity from negatively valued femaleness. I do not deny that this was probably what Hildegard tried to do, but I do not think that she could succeed in depicting divine female personifications without drawing on representations of real women and their roles in society.

Barbara Newman says that the goddesses have no bodies, but these personifications signify positive female characteristics by being female: their body is the symbol by which they communicate their meaning. Also, when female symbols are transferred to men, we often see that they remain associated with women's bodies, for instance when Christ takes on the role of a mother by being depicted with lactating breasts. Elsewhere, men are connected with female symbols because they deliberately want to take up a lower place in the hierarchy or they want to be able to relate to God as a woman to a man, meaning that traditional gender roles are implicated in these symbols. Even when authors stress positive female symbolism, this happens within a system that opposes female to male, and that values male over female. As was mentioned earlier in this introduction, holism can quickly turn into dualism, and a complementary view on men and women can quickly give way to an oppositional view. Female symbols do not stand on their own; gender relations are also at work in the religious imagination.

This master's thesis seeks to bring to light the human side of Newman's goddesses. It tries to verify the hypothesis that the figurative use of gender imagery in female personifications entails the use of both women's bodies as bearers of symbolism and gender roles in a patriarchal society. I define gender, following the definition of Joan Scott, as "a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes" (1067). Gender according to this definition constitutes cultural symbols, normative concepts, social institutions and subjective identity. It is also "a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated." (1069) I acknowledge that Hildegard's female personifications may be positive depictions of women and may be thought of as radical or empowering, but I also think that we should not situate them outside of gender relations, as if they have nothing to do with ideas about women's bodies, nature and sexuality.

Therefore, I will first describe my theoretical framework, which brings together existing theories about why personifications are so often female, situating them against the backdrop of Simone de

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<sup>10</sup> "Real" wombs and breasts that are also, of course, always already constituted as meaningful within the symbolic system of gender (Butler). When I say "real", then, I mean that these notions are connected to and influenced by the lives of women in the society that creates such symbolism and the way that their bodies are perceived and treated.

<sup>11</sup> This corresponds to what Simone de Beauvoir argues: when men are seen as positive, then women are negative (for instance, they are associated with death), but when men are perceived as the neutral 'human', then women can be associated with positive powers that help men, such as fertility (177-179).

Beauvoir's existential philosophy of women's othering. After that, I will look at one of Hildegard's personifications in particular, namely the figure of *Ecclesia* or the Church, because she is both divine and human. I will describe the metaphors that are used to animate this figure, namely Ecclesia as a wife, a mother, a virgin and a queen, in order to trace the rhetoric that these metaphors enable. A last chapter will compare my previous findings to one of Bernard of Clairvaux's parables in which Ecclesia figures and to a similar account of the Soul in Hildegard's *Scivias*, in order to elaborate two specific metaphors that are central to how this rhetoric functions, namely the metaphor of the body and the metaphor of clothing, which both denote the material covering of an immaterial essence. Here, I will use a deconstructive approach to show how the gendered opposition between body and soul breaks down because the figural sense, which is about divine concepts, inevitably returns to its literal function, which is connected to real women. So, first I will describe how Hildegard makes rhetorical use of gendered metaphors, and then I will describe how she loses control of them, precisely because positive femininity cannot be thought apart from negatively valued femaleness.



## 2 The gender of personification: some theoretical reflections

### 2.1 The Grammatical Approach

The most basic way of explaining the gender of the majority of late antique, medieval and early modern personifications is by pointing out that they materialise abstract nouns of the feminine grammatical gender. If personification allegory relies on the “reification of language itself” (Quilligan, *The Language of Allegory* 115), such as the animation of nouns, then of course feminine nouns would be reified as female persons:

... personifications of abstractions such as Philosophy and Nature take the feminine form primarily because allegory always works narratively by literalizing lexical effects. The gender of abstract nouns made from verbs in Latin is always feminine ... and so the personifications embodying these concepts take on the gender of the words: Lady Philosophy, Lady Fortuna.” (Quilligan, *The Allegory of Female Authority* 24-25)

This explanation was first attributed in modern times to Joseph Addison (Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 36) and has been used as a sufficient explication many times since.<sup>12</sup> Evidence that grammar plays a role in determining the gender of personifications is the fact that, when grammatical gender declined in European vernaculars around the turn of the millennium, male personifications started to appear more often. In English literature, for instance, Alfred the Great translated Boethius’ *Philosophia* as the male Wisdom, and both Langland and Bunyan employed a majority of male personifications (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 36; Cooper).

However, one of the earliest grammatical explanations from a ninth century commentary on Boethius’ *The Consolation of Philosophy* immediately makes clear that we cannot rest content with the explanation offered by grammar alone:

Configurat sibi mulierem Philosophiam; ideoque in speciem mulieris Philosophiam configurat, quia et apud Graecos et apud Latinos feminino genere pronuntiatur et auditores suos quasi quibusdam rudimentis adducit ad perfectam scientiam uel uti mater teneros lactat et nutrit

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<sup>12</sup> For instance by literary scholars on allegory like Maureen Quilligan and Helen Cooper. For a broader overview, see Newman, *God and the Goddesses*; Paxson, “Gender Personified” and “Personification’s gender”.

filios. Vel ideo quia mulieres allectrices sunt: sicut mulieres alliciunt uiros, ita Philosophia specie perfectionis suae allicit homines sapientes. (quoted by Cooper 31)<sup>13</sup>

Philosophia's gender is first connected to grammar, but then the author adds that it seems normal that philosophy would be represented as a woman because she feeds men with wisdom just like mothers feed their babies or because she allures men with the beauty of wisdom just like women allure men. The personification's function is compared to certain roles that women perform, in particular those of mother and seductress. It is futile to try and detach grammar from social meaning. It could be that, at first, personifications were female only because the nouns were feminine. Then again, you could go back far in time, to the people who created grammatical gender, and assume that these nouns received the feminine gender in the first place because they were associated with female gender roles (cf. Paxson, "Gender Personified" 67-68). However, these guesses are not very relevant, because we clearly see that feminine abstracta are associated with feminine characteristics time and again. From the moment that a word is personified, it becomes a person and thus it is assigned a gender and the corresponding social position, role and behaviour. From that moment, social gender is relevant to personifications' gender.

There are other arguments to refute the deterministic power of grammar. For example, Barbara Newman notes that male personifications are almost never of the kind she calls 'Platonistic' as opposed to 'Aristotelian', "reading the former as epiphanies or emanations of a superior reality, the latter as 'accidents existing in a substance,' personified only for the sake of analytical clarity." (Newman, *God and the Goddesses* 34) She claims that male personifications never become as real, emotionally accessible, numinous and serious as female personifications (34-35). Therefore, not only is it so that female personifications are linked to feminine roles and characteristics, but also the female gender of personifications apparently assures the trope's effectiveness in a way that maleness does not. Their gender is essential to the functioning of the personification as a literary device.

## 2.2 A broader approach: the role of gender

Many scholars have expanded the grammatical view on female personifications to explanations based on gender theory. In what follows, I would like to map the different theories that have been proposed and the underlying scheme that unites them. The problem with the literature on this topic is not that there is a lack of valuable propositions, but rather that most authors position themselves exclusively against the theory of grammatical determinism and not with respect to other theories. So, there exist multiple partial theories whose only lack is that they claim exclusivity, while actually they do not contradict each other, but can, on the contrary, be fitted into one framework. To describe that

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<sup>13</sup> "[Boethius] conjures up a picture of Philosophy as a woman; and he imagines her in the form of a woman, because the word was spoken in the feminine gender in Greek and Latin; and because she leads her listeners on as if with some elementary principles to perfect knowledge, or like a mother she suckles her infants and feeds her sons; or because women are seductresses, and just as women allure men, so Philosophy, with her appearance of perfect beauty, allures wise men." (translation cited by Cooper 31)

framework, I will use Simone de Beauvoir's existential philosophy of gender as developed in *Le deuxième sexe*.

Simone de Beauvoir's existential-phenomenological study of gender looks at Sartre's process of 'othering' in its most basic form, namely the relation between man and woman. Just as every individual is a radically free self who reduces others to the objects of his/her consciousness, woman has been made the object in relation to man the subject: "She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the Absolute – she is the Other." (de Beauvoir 16) Woman is thus defined as the object of a subject that is both positive and neutral. When she is opposed to man, she is viewed negatively. In a binary opposition, they are characterized as rational and irrational, transcendent and immanent, active and passive, productive and reproductive, individual and collective, spirit and body. However, woman is not only associated with the negative. Because she is everything that man is not, she is both what he fears and despises as what he hopes for and desires. De Beauvoir explains how woman, as "the Other", can be both evil and good: "The Other is Evil; but being necessary to the Good, it turns into the Good; through it I attain to the Whole, but it also separates me therefrom; it is the gateway to the infinite and the measure of my finite nature." (175) Nature and the bodily existence of humans can either be valued negatively or positively. What Simone de Beauvoir describes here is also applicable to the Neoplatonist worldview outlined in the introduction: when women are opposed to men and placed lower in the hierarchy, women are viewed negatively, but inasmuch as they complete men and provide the material foundations for humankind, they are viewed positively.

I will describe the role of gender in personification allegory on three different levels: the literal or the representation itself, the figural or the idea which is represented, and the metafigural or how the trope of personification works. I make these divisions because other scholars make them, but my goal is to show that the same concepts reappear at every level. Moreover, my hypothesis is that the role of gender on the figural and metafigural level is based on the role that gender plays on the literal level, where a female body is represented. So, the way that personification allegories function on the ideational and rhetorical level is grounded in the fact that personification allegories have female bodies and perform female gender roles.

### **2.2.1 The literal level: bodies**

I will first discuss the main ideas with which women are connected that contribute to the effectiveness of female personification allegory: these are, first, immanence and materiality, and, second, women's position as mediators due to their relational role in the hierarchy.

#### **2.2.1.1 Immanence and materiality**

In the relation between man and woman, the latter is defined as everything the former is not: she is immanent and passive, she is Nature, materiality and the body. It may appear strange, then, that divine concepts would take on a female shape. However, it could be that personifications are female exactly because they take on material shape. So, the fact that women personify positive and even divine concepts does not necessarily mean that they are no longer women. On the contrary, feminine characteristics such as immanence and materiality and their status as object in relation to a male subject assure the effectiveness of personification allegory.

For instance, Barbara Newman notes with regard to Hildegard that “while masculine imagery of the Creator tends to stress God’s transcendence, feminine metaphors place the accent on immanence.” (*Sister of Wisdom* 64, cf. Flisfisch) Personifications represent the workings of a transcendent God in his creation: *Sapientia*, *Caritas*, *Ecclesia* and the others are in their most elevated form emanations of God that are at the same time divine and active in people. Therefore, their immanence is best represented by the female form. As such, they become mediators between God and his creation: “Hildegard saw [the feminine] as the dimension in which mediation or, at a higher intensity, union between Creator and creature can be achieved.” (45) Newman further connects this mediating function to specifically feminine modes of time: “The feminine designations ... evoke God’s interactions with the cosmos insofar as they are timeless or perpetually repeated.” (45) She even claims that the principles of the feminine divine – theophany, exemplarity, immanence, and synergy – can be seen as conditions of the Incarnation, which in Hildegard’s view is “an event beyond time and history in the sphere of the eternal, of the feminine divine.” (46)

Second, women are connected with materiality, and materiality is coded as feminine.<sup>14</sup> Gordon Teskey, wondering why personification reverses the gender hierarchy by depicting elevated concepts as female, gives the following explanation: “It seems that by conferring on personifications the feminine gender, matter is surreptitiously raised up from its logical place, which is beneath the lowest species, into the realm of abstractions, giving these something solid to stand on. What is the stuff out of which Shamefastness is made? She is made of her gender.” (23) Materialisations of abstract concepts take the female form precisely because they take on materiality. When a higher principle descends and clothes itself in materiality, this is depicted as a gendered process: the male principle clothes itself in feminine materiality. Gordon Teskey connects this to Platonic ideas about male form and female matter: “the project of cultural idealism is typically encoded as the masculine imprinting of a feminine other” (23).

As a consequence of their belonging to the material realm, women are not allowed transcendence and are thus reduced to corporality. Because men’s bodies are the standard “human body”, women’s bodies are marked and more value-laden than men’s, both negatively and positively.<sup>15</sup> The female body, then, is a site for symbolism, and its parts carry meaning. Personifications, of which every body part and piece of clothing is read symbolically, can signify various things by means of their female bodies. For instance, giving birth and breast-feeding often serve as metaphors within a personification allegory. However, those meanings can sometimes be difficult to interpret. When a personification’s breasts are described, for example, they could signify her virginity, her motherhood or her sexuality. It is also hard to say how erotic, sexual, reproductive and nurturing capacities are distinguished and related. What we perceive to be sexual may not necessarily be so for medieval people (Bynum, *The Body of Christ*), nor what we perceive to be mutually exclusive features, like virginity and motherhood. Also, the spiritual may be expressed in the language of eroticism but is not therefore sexual, and while female sexuality is nearly always described as sinful, motherhood and eroticism are often applied to the divine.

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, Joan Ferrante refers to the linguistic similarity between *mater* (mother), *matrix* (womb) and *materia* (matter) (6).

<sup>15</sup> Two examples: first, while the old male body in medieval literature is mostly treated in a neutral way, rarely occasioning strong emotions, the old female body conjures feelings of fear and repulsion (Shahar); second, the “textual construction of the chaste body ... is predominantly that of the chaste female body” (Wogan-Browne).

In conclusion, personifications are female because they are material and immanent representations of *abstracta*, and materiality and immanence are coded as feminine, and also because women's bodies are more marked and value-laden than men's and can therefore be used as symbols.

#### 2.2.1.2 Hierarchy and Relationality

Women and their bodies are classified according to their sexual roles in relation to men. The female gender of personifications therefore also or even primarily serves to mediate relations between humans (implicitly: men) and the divine, and between humans through the relationship with the divine.

First, the individual human is either represented as female in relation to God or as male in relation to the female personification (Newman, *God and the Goddesses*). Rosemary Radford-Ruether, referring to Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, suggests "that the symbolism of the love relationship between male religious leaders and God is complicated in male monotheism by its anti-homoerotic ethos. This ethos prohibits imagining a male-male love relationship. Thus male monotheism constructs the human side of the God-human love relationship as female. This means that men imagine themselves in relation to God in female symbols, as brides and wives wooed and won by a male God as lover and husband." (234). However, it is ill-advised to speak of hetero- and homosexuality in pre-modern periods (Schultz), and I would say that the relation has to be male-female more because of the structure and hierarchy of gender as I discussed earlier. Neoplatonic theory, that provided the ontological premises of medieval allegory (Whitman), has interesting implications for the use of gender in allegory. On the one hand, the idea of a being that is wholly immaterial and transcendent, that is one and all in itself, is the ideal of the masculine self, to which feminine immanence and materiality are opposed. However, the idea of emanation leaves room for the reverse movement from lower to higher levels. So, instead of two opposing poles, one of which is existence and the other non-existence, we get, at the level of humans, a situation characterized by relativity. This relativity is gendered, and this is where the idea of gendered hierarchy comes to play a role: in relation to the man, woman is subordinated, but all humans together are the woman in relation to God. 'Masculine' and 'feminine' are then used as a metaphor for 'higher' or 'stronger' or 'more spiritual' versus 'lower' or 'weaker' or 'less transcendent'. Medieval sexuality, then, was seen less in the absolute terms of two opposite sexes than in the relative relation between the higher principle of masculinity and the lower principle of femininity (embodied by men and women) that are necessarily bound up with each other as a sign of both human fallenness and redemption.

Second, a group of people can be represented as female in relation to a male God. A very important precedent for medieval personifications is the Old Testament's depiction of the Israelites as God's beloved bride, which David Carr calls a "theological marriage matrix": "In this matrix the believing community is depicted as the female spouse of the male god - called on to love that God with the exclusive love of a wife and punished for failure to do so." (239) Christians replaced the figure of Synagoga with Ecclesia but kept this tradition, as witnessed by the interpretations of the *Song of Songs* as a love song between the Church and God (Astell; Matter; Ohly). Although interpretations of the *Song of Songs* put the emphasis on desire and love, elsewhere the "theological marriage matrix" draws on gender roles such as the requirement of absolute faithfulness from the wife and the man's dominance over. The people are represented as female, then, because of the hierarchy between them and God.

Lastly, a figure such as the Church does not only enable a group of people to enter into a relationship with God: they also, as individuals, enter into a relationship with the figure of the Church itself. Personifications of groups of people also connect the people in that group to each other and

against other groups via the figure of personification, and in this process gender plays an important role. This aspect of female personification allegory has not received any attention for the medieval period, but it has from theorists of the modern nation-state (Yuval-Davis; Sinha). Mrinalini Sinha lists four ways in which familial and gendered imagery – the nation as “domestic genealogy” – functions in a nationalist discourse. First, the imagery represents the nation “as an innate or organic community” whose members are related by family ties (17). Second, the nation represented as a relative can activate “instrumental passions”:

Thus the nation in the form of an abused or humiliated mother appeals to her sons and daughters, albeit often in differently gendered ways, to come to her protection and restore her honor. Similarly, the nation as fatherland calls upon its sons and daughters to obey the father and fulfil their respective gendered duties to the nation. ... Most often, perhaps, the nation is represented as a female body – ‘to love, to possess, and to protect’ – in the discourse of nationalism. (18)

Third, the imagery naturalizes hierarchies both within and between nations, and signifies “hierarchy within unity” (19). Fourth, the nation’s double role as a “force for both change and continuity” is negotiated via gender difference: women are identified with tradition and continuity and men with change and modernity (21). We can see that the core of these ideas could be applied to medieval personifications such as *Ecclesia* too, and that they build on the same concepts as I have used here, namely hierarchy and relationality.

### 2.2.2 The figural level: ideas

The functioning of female personification at the literal level revolves around embodiment, which is coded as female, and mediation, which is achieved through the means of female gender roles. To the question of why these concepts are materialised as female, I have answered that they do so because materiality itself is coded as female, and because they must mediate between humans and the divine, as well as between humans mutually. The second question now is whether the concepts themselves are coded as female even when they are not materialised. One aspect of this question was already mentioned, namely the immanence of concepts like *Sapientia* or *Ecclesia*. They represent the divine at work in the creation, the non-transcendent and therefore feminine features of the divine. Simone de Beauvoir adds another element: “Man feminizes the ideal he sets up before him as the essential Other, because woman is the material representation of alterity; that is why almost all allegories in language as in pictorial representation, are women.” (211) In other words, if concepts are external to man, they are pictured as feminine because they are Other, even if they represent partly transcendental ideals.

With regard to the personifications that represent collectivities such as a city, a nation or a religious community, we can add that the figure of a woman also represents the concept of collectivity itself. The female is the marked gender, so that men are more easily perceived as individuals (depending on the intersections with ethnicity, religion, class etc.) but women are always also perceived as a collective.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, a male personification would be viewed more as an exemplar, a

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<sup>16</sup> For instance, Hrabanus Maurus’ ninth century *De Rerum Naturis* links figures from the Old Testament to the New and figures from both to all sorts of individuals or groups that play a role in salvation history. A quick scan of these typologies reveals that men are mostly seen as prefigurations of Christ, the devil or groups of individuals such as the priests, the

historical figure or an autonomous power, but less as a collective entity or abstract concept.<sup>17</sup> Inasmuch as women are ‘the Other’, they are less differentiated, and inasmuch as they are the object to the male subject, they are granted less individuality, so that they can more easily be turned into symbols.

### 2.2.3 The metafigural level : tropes

If we look at personification as a trope, we equally find gendered concepts that make plausible the choice for female personifications. For instance, the Jewish Platonist Philo and the Christian Platonist Origen connected the literal level of the text with the body of the reader and the figural level with the soul (Dawson). If the body is coded as female, then the literal level can be thought of as female. We can then not only connect the female body of the personification as a body to femaleness, but also connect the literal level of the trope *through* the metaphor of the body to femaleness.

James Paxson takes this reasoning a step further. He discusses how “personified characters in classical or early medieval literature were women because Personification as a concept (and itself personified) could be thought of as having the gendered qualities of the feminine.” (“Personification’s Gender” 157) First of all, tropes and figuration in general were characterized as feminine because women were associated with “ornamentation, seduction, excess” (168) and with masking, dressing up, concealing and translating. Woman thus becomes a metaphor for figuration itself. Second, personification is “the figure of figuration”, too, because “[i]t is always already constituted according to the imaginary features of concealment, clothing, cosmetics, facades, and so forth. These descriptive concepts hinge on the structural oppositions of insides/outside, substrates/surfaces, unseen/seen, content/form, primary/secondary.” (172) In conclusion, tropes work by means of concealment and covering; because both personification and woman are metaphors for denoting this process, personifications take on female shape.

Paxson gives yet another explanation on the metafigural level of personification: because personification involves “the radical suspension of fixed ontic categories such as bodily/abstract, human/non-human or living/non-living”, this rhetorical subversion spreads to the ontic category female/male (“Personification’s Gender” 164; cf. “Gender Personified”). This reminds of one of Barbara Newman’s hypotheses that “Christians, accustomed to thinking of God as three-yet-one, of Christ as God-yet-man, and of Mary as virgin-yet-mother, came to regard paradox itself as a touchstone of revealed truth” (323) and therefore saw the embodiment of a divine concept in female form as such an absurdity that it must be true. However, I do not think that we must take recourse to the concept of paradox as such to explain the seeming illogicality of female personifications. God becoming human is a paradox, but one that was explained by Salvation. Just so, divine concepts represented as female figures may be paradoxical, but their femaleness can be explained by the feminine associations of embodiment itself. Therefore, I would suggest that it is not so much

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apostles or the prophets, while women are predominantly interpreted as the Church, the Synagogue, the souls or abstract concepts.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Londa Schiebinger “Feminine Icons: The Face of Early Modern Science”. Schiebinger discusses the decline of female personifications of science at the beginning of the nineteenth century and their replacement by images of individual male scientists.

subversion that dictates personification's gender, rather than the association of femaleness with the corporeal and non-transcendent aspects of being human.



I concluded the previous chapter by noting that not only are female personifications associated with characteristics and roles assigned to women, but that personification itself is constituted by women's object position, social inferiority, complementary role and by their being associated with the body, matter and sexuality. To test this hypothesis, I want to look at a personification from the subcategory of personifications representing groups of people, namely *Ecclesia* or the Church. *Ecclesia* is an abstract concept, but at the same time she is more concrete and earthly than for instance *Scientia Dei*, or 'the Knowledge of God'. She is not an aspect of a person's mind, like the virtues are. She is a community of people living on earth and in the hereafter, consisting of sinners and saints alike. Unlike the virtues, she does not stand in opposition to her evil counterpart, but she embraces both good and bad. Therefore, I think that *Ecclesia* is a suitable figure for examining the humanity and the femaleness of personifications.

### 3.1 Ecclesia's history

I will first give a short history of *Ecclesia* as a personification, limiting myself to literature and thus leaving aside *Ecclesia*'s iconography in art. *Ecclesia*'s history as a personification begins in the Bible. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul represents the Church both as Christ's body and Christ's bride. He uses the analogy to urge women to obey their husbands and men to love their wives:

Quoniam vir caput est mulieris: sicut Christus caput est Ecclesiae: Ipse, salvator corporis eius. Sed sicut Ecclesia subiecta est Christo, ita et mulieres viris suis in omnibus. Viri, diligite uxores vestras, sicut et Christus dilexit Ecclesiam, et seipsum tradidit pro ea, ut illam sanctificaret, mundans lavacro aquae in verbo vitae, ut exhiberet ipse sibi gloriosam Ecclesiam, non habentem maculam, aut rugam, aut aliquid huiusmodi, sed ut sit sancta et immaculata. Ita et viri debent diligere uxores suas ut corpora sua. Qui suam uxorem diligit, seipsum diligit. Nemo enim umquam carnem suam odio habuit: sed nutrit, et fovet eam, sicut et Christus Ecclesiam: quia membra sumus corporis eius, de carne eius, et de ossibus eius. Propter hoc relinquet homo

patrem, et matrem suam, et adhaerebit uxori suae: et erunt duo in carne una.<sup>18</sup> (Ephesians 5:23-31)

From the beginning, then, the figure of Ecclesia is both shaped by social roles and reinforces those roles. The subservient position of Ecclesia as a bride is used to legitimate gender hierarchies, although she is only called a bride by analogy with human social orderings. On the other hand, Ecclesia's elevated position and her closeness to Christ are arguments for a positive view on the body and on women.

In Patristic writings, the image of the church as a mother appeared, a metaphor which lacks a biblical precedent (Peper 1). Four elements are constantly used in relation to the maternal metaphor: conception, birth, nourishment and abortion (5), which shows that the metaphor is grounded in (the reproductive function of) the female body. The function of this metaphor was both to represent Christians as a family and an organic community and to exclude others from this community. The metaphor "first arose and was primarily utilized in polemical and persecutory contexts" (3), so that the image was mainly used "to delineate who constituted the true church vis-à-vis those who were not included." Its meaning, then, "was not conciliatory and inclusive, but rather polemical and exclusive." (4)

Around the same time, Christian exegesis began to allegorically interpret the *Song of Songs*, the biblical love song attributed to Solomon. The Christians took over the habit of the Jews of interpreting this poem as a love song between God and his people. The bride of the *Song of Songs* was thus most often interpreted as Ecclesia (but also as Mary or the individual Christian's soul). This further influenced the imagery of Ecclesia as Christ's bride.

The first use of the personified Ecclesia in an allegorical story and not merely as a trope occurs in the visions of the *Shepherd of Hermas*, written about the year 160. This book was almost certainly read by Hildegard and influenced her own visionary imagery (Deploige "In Nomine"; Dronke). Ecclesia appears in it as a prophet and Hermas' spiritual guide (Bogdanos). She appears to him in a moment of crisis, lecturing him in Christian doctrine in order to make him a better person. Although Hermas consistently calls her "domina" and not mother, Bogdanos argues, referring to E. O. James, that she can be situated in the long tradition of mother goddesses (36). He argues that she is both archetypal and human: "To Ecclesia's archetypal characteristics of venerability, wisdom, and oracular authority is added that of maternal femininity." (36) But Ecclesia appears also as the symbol of cosmological, theological and social order when she shows herself as a tower being built by humans (38-40). Lastly, she is the symbol of Hermas' inner state, because she grows younger in appearance as the moral state of his soul progresses (40-41). Thus, Ecclesia is a spiritual guide, a prophet, someone who enters into a relationship with Hermas and shows him what is the true nature of things, but at the same time "she becomes herself the symbolic embodiment of cosmic, social, and psychic order rather than its mere discusser." (42) We will see this same double function return in Hildegard's portrayal of Ecclesia.

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<sup>18</sup> "For the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior. Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. In this same way, husbands ought to love their wives as their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. After all, no one ever hated their own body, but they feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church— for we are members of his body. For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh."

In conclusion, Ecclesia has an extended family history and bears many different faces. She is often called the daughter of God, just like other personifications (Newman, *God and the Goddesses*). Some say that *Synagoga*, the representation of the Jews, is her mother, others that she is her sister. It may also be that she is only obliquely related to *Synagoga* through her marriage with Christ, who is then referred to as *Synagoga's* son. According to some accounts, *Synagoga* is Ecclesia's former self. Augustine, for instance, says in a sermon that we should praise Christ, because “meretricem inuenit, uirginem fecit”: he found a whore (*Synagoga*), and made her a virgin (*Ecclesia*) (sermo 213). The core of her identity, however, is that she is the bride of Christ, whom she either married on the Cross, or will marry at the end of times when she is fully grown. She is the mother of all Christians and is continually giving birth. She is also represented as their queen, the wife of their king to whom they owe their loyalty. Ecclesia as a type has parallel figures in Eve, Mary, *Sapientia*, *Caritas* and the human soul. Also, she is the heavenly city Jerusalem or the temple of Wisdom from *Proverbs* 9:1.<sup>19</sup> We see that she is entangled in a web of relations where only one thing remains constant: that the personified church mediates between different groups (Christians, Jews, Christ, God ...) who are established as a family. I will look at the most important of these relations as they appear in Hildegard's visionary trilogy, while asking the question of how her female form determines how the personification functions.

### 3.2 Ecclesia and Synagoga

The personified figures of the Synagogue and the Church developed out of the habit of the Jews to represent themselves as a woman in relation to God and out of the habit of imperial Rome to picture either Rome as a woman in relation to the glorified ruler, or conquered lands as women delivered into the hands of that ruler (Rowe). The Church fathers described *Synagoga* as “rejected, blind, and carnal” in opposition to a “beloved and spiritual” Ecclesia enjoying a mystical marriage with Christ (48). They heaped upon *Synagoga* all the vices and faults that their culture accorded to women. In artistic representations of the Middle Ages, however, we initially see that, in line with not explicitly negative attitudes to Jews generally (Rowe), *Synagoga* was depicted as a “mature, veiled and dignified figure”, more similar to Ecclesia (Lipton 129). The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a shift towards a negative and antagonistic depiction of *Synagoga*, portraying her as “the embodiment of hideous and perverted female sexuality, as an alluring seductress, and/or as a disobedient or carping wife, sister, or daughter” (134). With Hildegard, however, we encounter the earlier and more positive attitude. Hildegard describes having seen *Synagoga* in the fifth vision of the first book of *Scivias*.

POST HAEC uidi uelut quendam muliebre[m] imaginem a uertice usque ad umbilicum pallidam, et ab umbilico usque ad pedes nigram, et in pedibus sanguineam, circa pedes suos candidissimam et purissimam nubem habentem. Oculos autem non habebat, manus uero suas sub ascellas suas posuerat, stans iuxta altare quod est ante oculos Dei, sed ipsum non tangebatur. Et in corde ipsius stabat Abraham, et in pectore eius Moyses, ac in uentre ipsius reliqui

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<sup>19</sup> “sapientia aedificauit sibi domum excidit columnas septem” / “Wisdom has built her house; she has set up its seven pillars.”

prophetae, singuli signa sua demonstrantes et pulchritudinem ecclesiae admirantes. Ipsa uero tantae magnitudinis apparuit, uelut aliqua turris alicuius ciuitatis est, habens in capite suo quasi circulum similem aurorae.<sup>20</sup> (*Scivias* I 5)

In the commentary to the vision, “God’s voice” explains that Synagoga’s feet are bloody because she killed Christ, which caused her own downfall but equally the emergence of Ecclesia. Also, the lower part of her body is black because she sinned many times and was often driven by carnal desires, and she does not have eyes because she did not see the truth when it was right in front of her. This last element, however, indicates Hildegard’s charity towards Synagoga: while in the manuscript’s illustration of *Scivias*, Synagoga was painted with eyes closed, the version in the text indicates her incapacity, not her unwillingness, to recognize her faults (Rose 198). Furthermore, other aspects of Synagoga are explicitly positive: her upper body is white and she wears a sunset-like crown around her head, because she prefigures Christianity, which will be like the sun absorbing the sunset’s faint light with its resplendent rays (*Scivias* I 5.6). Hildegard uses this metaphor because she believes that the Jews will be converted at the end of time and Synagoga will at last be united with Ecclesia. We read in the vision that Synagoga and the patriarchs and prophets inhabiting her body look with admiration at the figure of Ecclesia, which we should imagine standing opposite them in the vision. Synagoga’s stance towards Ecclesia betrays no trace of envy or hatred, as in later depictions of her. Thus, Hildegard’s symbolic view of the Jews is very mild, as is the view of many other twelfth century writers.<sup>21</sup>

Concerning the family relations at play in this figure, we can say that Synagoga is primarily depicted as the mother of the Jews, who are called her sons. The most significant among them are literally incorporated by her, standing in her heart, breast and womb. Synagoga’s relation to Christ, however, is not that of a mother and a son. Hildegard says that she is “mater incarnationis Filii Dei” (I 5.1), “the mother of the Incarnation” as an event and not of Christ as a person, thus avoiding having to number Christ, as a Jew, among Synagoga’s sons. Synagoga is not his mother but his former wife. She is compared to two biblical women. First, she is Delilah, because she scorned Samson/Christ after his blinding/death, which he repays by destroying her temple. Here, the antagonism and violence between Jews and Christians comes to the fore. In the eleventh vision of book three, Synagoga is not Delilah but Samson’s first bride, and this story reveals these tensions even more. On the one hand, Hildegard blames Synagoga for betraying the secret that Samson/Christ entrusted to her, which makes him leave her. On the other hand, it is not she but her father, “diabolic seduction”, that gives her to another man, the devil, after Samson/Christ leaves. The patriarchal control over his daughter takes away part of Synagoga’s, and with her the Jews’, responsibility. However, many Jews are killed in this second story, and Synagoga is “burned with her father”, be it in a figural sense, meaning that “her perverse infidelity was overthrown” (Hart and Bishop 509). Second, she is king David’s first wife Michal, who, in Hildegard’s account, “defiled herself with another man” (the devil) (I 5.8), and so she

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<sup>20</sup> “After this, I saw the image of a woman, pale from her head to her navel and black from her navel to her feet; her feet were red, and around her feet was a cloud of pure whiteness. She had no eyes, and had put her hands in her armpits; she stood next to the altar that is before the eyes of God, but she did not touch it. And in her heart stood Abraham, and in her breast Moses, and in her womb the rest of the prophets, each displaying his symbols and admiring the beauty of the Church. She was of great size, like the tower of a city, and had on her head a circlet like the dawn.” (translation by Hart and Bishop 133)

<sup>21</sup> Bernardus of Clairvaux, for instance, applies the *Song of Songs* 3:4 to the theme, “Tenui eum nec dimittam, donec introducā illum in domum matris meae et in cubiculum genitricis meae”/ “I held him and would not let him go till I had brought him to my mother’s house, to the room of the one who conceived me”: he interprets the verse as Ecclesia seeking to share one mother and one bridegroom with Synagoga, so that they can become one (*Sermones super Cantica Canticorum* 79).

too betrayed her husband out of free will and not ignorance. These typologies indicate a harsher judgment of Synagoga than was made earlier in the vision. However, the story of king David does end with David taking Michal back and forgiving her. The message here is that, had Synagoga obeyed her husband like a good wife does (I 5.7), she would never have been rejected, but would have been Ecclesia, the loyal and obedient wife. What we see is that the Israelites' habit of picturing themselves as God's beloved but sometimes unfaithful wife in order to enter into a relationship with their God, is turned against them by the Christians, who usurp their place as God's new bride. All of this imagery and the emotions it is meant to inspire is dependent on hierarchical gender roles and ideas about what constitutes a good woman. We also see that in this process some notions of womanhood, like the absolute obedience to father and husband, may interfere with theological questions of responsibility and free will.

### 3.3 Ecclesia as a mother and a bride

In the third vision of the second book of *Scivias*, the figure of Ecclesia that Synagoga was looking at is finally revealed:

POST HAEC uidi quasi muliebrem imaginem tantae magnitudinis ut magna ciuitas est, habentem caput miro ornatu coronatum, et brachia de quibus splendor uelut manicae pendebat, a caelo usque ad terram radians. Venter autem eius erat in modum retis perforatus multis foraminibus, in quibus maxima multitudo hominum discurrebat. Crura uero et pedes non habebat, sed tantum super uentrem suum ante altare quod est ante oculos Dei stans, ipsum expansis manibus circumplectebatur, et oculis suis per omne caelum acutissime uidebat. Sed nulla uestimenta eius considerare poteram, nisi quod tota lucidissima serenitate fulgens multo splendore circumdata fuerat, in pectore eius uelut aurora rubeo fulgore rutilante; ubi etiam multimodo genere musicorum audiui de ipsa 'quasi aurora ualde rutilans' decantari. Et eadem imago expandit splendorem suum uelut uestimentum dicens: 'Me oportet concipere et parere'.<sup>22</sup> (*Scivias* II.3)

Most aspects of this description recall Synagoga, either in contrast or in analogy to her. In contrast with Synagoga, Ecclesia does have eyes, which she directs towards heaven, and she embraces the altar instead of placing her hands under her armpits. More majestic than Synagoga, she is crowned in a more splendid manner, her height is that of a whole city instead of only one tower, and her brightness is more radiant. In fact, she is so bright that her clothes cannot even be seen, which means that the mysteries of the Church are incomprehensible to humans (*Scivias* II.3.8). This is strange, because a

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<sup>22</sup> "After this I saw the image of a woman as large as a great city, with a wonderful crown on her head and arms from which a splendor hung like sleeves, shining from Heaven to earth. Her womb was pierced like a net with many openings, with a huge multitude of people running in and out. She had no legs or feet, but stood balanced on her womb in front of the altar that stands before the eyes of God, embracing it with her outstretched hands and gazing sharply with her eyes throughout all of Heaven. I could not make out her attire, except that she was arrayed in great splendor and gleamed with lucid serenity, and on her breast shone a red glow like the dawn; and I heard a sound of all kinds of music singing about her, "Like the dawn, greatly sparkling.' And that image spreads out its splendor like a garment, saying 'I must conceive and give birth!'" (Hart and Bishop 169)

personification's clothes are an important locus for symbolism, and clothes are a metaphor for what is visible and created in opposition to what is invisible and eternal.<sup>23</sup> Of course, it could be that the aspect of the Church represented here is not the visible and earthly but the invisible and heavenly part of her. However, Hildegard may not see Ecclesia's clothing, but she does see the inside of her body, where Christians are given life inside her womb. We should not see the outside of her body because the naked female body is associated with shameful materiality or sexuality, but we need to see the insides of her body to recognize her motherhood. Invisible on the outside, opened up on the inside: the paradox of unsexual motherhood. "Both Eve and Mary are recapitulated in Ecclesia": Ecclesia shares with Mary her "fruitful virginity", but with Eve she shares her potentially sinful corporality (Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 196-197). This tension between majestic intangibility on the one hand and corporality on the other is never resolved. In fact, it is the key to how the figure of Ecclesia functions rhetorically, as we shall see later.

Ecclesia represents collectivity through the metaphor of motherhood: she bears children in her womb, she gives birth to them (through baptism) and she breastfeeds them (with the church's doctrine). The community of Christians is thus established as "an innate or organic community" (Sinha 17), bound not only by shared beliefs but by unbreakable family ties. Her belly has multiple openings and is likened to a fishnet, presumably the fishnet with which the apostles had to be "fishers of men" (*Matthew* 4:19).<sup>24</sup> Strong emphasis is placed on Ecclesia's urge and desire to be a mother: "I must conceive and give birth" (*Scivias* II.3). Again, social roles form the blueprint for how humans relate to the divine:

... Vt sponsa sponso suo in subiectionis et oboeditionis obsequio subiecta fertilem donationem cum foederis amore ab eo in procreatione filiorum accipiens eos ad hereditatem suam educat, ita etiam ecclesia Filio Dei in humilitatis et caritatis officio coniuncta regenerationem spiritus et aquae cum saluatione animarum ab eo ad restaurationem uitae suscipiens eas ad superna transmittit.<sup>25</sup> (*Scivias* II.6.1)

This only goes one way, though: motherhood provides the imagery to describe the relations between clergy and people and the people and God, but non-symbolical motherhood is not idealized. Only the aspect of relationality of woman as a mother in relation to her children and her husband is transferred to men and divinity. Although Ecclesia is continually giving birth, like Mary she remains a virgin: she "suffers no hurt (*laesionem*)" and remains "forever in the wholeness of virginity (*in integritate uirginitatis*), which is the catholic faith" (*Scivias* II 3.12). Barbara Newman concludes that "what we see throughout the abbess's treatment of Mother Church is a consistent feminizing of ecclesial and clerical acts, sharpened by the willing exclusion of nonvirginal maternity and femininity from the sacred sphere." (*Sister of Wisdom* 229).

The metaphor gives rise to another problem. When Ecclesia is depicted as the Christians' mother, a tension exists between the metaphor of motherhood and the trope of personification. The metaphor

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<sup>23</sup> The creation is sometimes compared to Wisdom's, Christ's or God's clothing (Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 71-75), and an important Neoplatonist metaphor likens the body to the soul's clothing (Moran).

<sup>24</sup> For an extended discussion of this imagery, see Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 229-30.

<sup>25</sup> "As a bride, subjected to her bridegroom in her offering of subordination and obedience, receives from him a gift of fertility and a pact of love for procreating children, and educates them as to their inheritance. So too the Church, joined to the Son of God in the exercise of humility and charity, receives from Him the regeneration of the Spirit and water to save souls and restore life, and sends those souls to heaven." (Hart and Bishop 238-239)

of motherhood depicts Ecclesia in relation to her children, but the trope of personification would have her represent her children as a group. So, Ecclesia is the equivalent of all the Christians united, and at the same time she is external to them. The heavenly voice states this clearly when he talks about Ecclesia's marriage to Christ being the symbol of the Eucharist: "Vnde etiam carne et sanguine eius nobiliter dotata est: quia idem Vnigenitus Dei corpus et sanguinem suum praecllentissima gloria fidelibus suis *qui et ecclesia et filii ecclesiae sunt* ita contulit, ut uitam in superna ciuitate per ipsum habeant [emphasis added]." <sup>26</sup> (*Scivias* II.6.1) The Christians are at the same time the bride and the sons of Christ, who is the son of God but also God himself. Through him, they attain the life in the heavenly city, which is their mother but also themselves. In the stage of pregnancy, of course, the metaphor of motherhood does capture the interdependent unity that characterizes the Church and her children. After having giving birth, however, the Christians are external to their mother and can be placed in different relations to her. In the relation of Ecclesia to her children, both the principles of relationality and collectivity are at work: the female body represents a collective but also functions as a mediator between the collective and a divinity, which makes her external to the collective she represents. The situation is of course not unusual within Christian theology: it resembles the "interpenetration of persons" of the Trinity or of Mary and the Church, who are also identical but not one and the same (Peper 2). Barbara Newman would leave it at that: the Christian faith is paradoxical. I would say that we can still hypothesize about how gender roles and relationality shape the conditions for this paradoxical situation.

The problem with the metaphor of motherhood to represent the community of Christians is that Ecclesia represents the whole group and at the same time is external to them as their mother. It is not only the principle of collectivity that clashes with the principle of relationality, however, but also those principles with that of hierarchy. Representing humans in relation to the divine, Ecclesia is female because humans stand in an inferior position to God. However, representing the divine as mother of the Christians, Ecclesia stands in a higher position to them. She is majestic, venerable and wise, but she is also corporeal and human. She is different than other personifications in Hildegard's works because her female body is much more visible. However, it is precisely the combination of high status and female corporality that Hildegard uses rhetorically to create a strong emotional response in her readers. The intersection of her hierarchical positions as female and queen – gender and class – is used by Hildegard and others to activate "instrumental passions" in the readers (Sinha 18). In the same way that Mrinalini Sinha describes the modern rhetorical use of a nation personified, we see with Hildegard that the Church "in the form of an abused or humiliated mother appeals to her sons and daughters, albeit often in differently gendered ways, to come to her protection and restore her honor." (18) But the Church is not only a mother and a queen, she is also a virgin, and she is all three at the same time. The Church appears as a mother, as a queen, and as a virgin in order to inspire the desire to love, to possess and to protect. We will now look at four instances in Hildegard's works – three excerpts from *Scivias* and one letter- in which this rhetoric is employed.

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<sup>26</sup> "Therefore, she is nobly dowered with His body and blood; for the Only-Begotten of God conferred His body and blood in surpassing glory on His faithful, who are the Church and her children, that through Him they may have life in the celestial city." (Hart and Bishop 239) The Latin version puts more emphasis on the Church and her children being the same: "who are the Church as well as her children".

### 3.3.1 Ecclesia abandoned

After having given birth, Ecclesia looks at her children and grows sad because she is reminded of the fact that they must all turn to dust again. She explains:

Multos tamen concipio et pario qui me matrem suam diuersis tempestatibus fatigant et opprimunt, uidelicet me impugnantes in haereticis et schismaticis ac inutilibus proeliis, in raptoribus et homicidis, in adulteris ac fornicatoribus atque in aliis his similibus erroribus. Sed plurimi de istis resurgunt in uera paenitentia ad uitam aeternam, et plurimi cadunt in falsa obduratione ad aeternam mortem.<sup>27</sup> (*Scivias* II.3)

So, sinning is not only a crime against themselves, which leads to the punishment of eternal death, but it is also the neglect of their duty towards a mother. Christ speaks to his children as well, but on a very different tone: he commands them to be good (“Exue uetustatem iniustitiae”), he reminds them of their responsibilities (“Ego suscepi te, et tu confessus es me.”), he promises them their inheritance, but warns them that if they run to the devil “as if he were your father”, they will be doomed and disinherited (*Scivias* II.3). The mother weeps and implores, while the father demands obedience. The people’s duties towards God and towards the Church are represented as familial duties. A community of individuals united by faith becomes a family tied together by unbreakable and natural bonds.

The same effect is witnessed in a letter that Hildegard wrote to abbot Werner of Kirchheim (CXLIXr), in which she describes a vision she saw of a “most beautiful image, which had a female form”. The woman she sees is sweet, lovely and of such beauty that no human mind can grasp it. She occupies the whole space between earth and heaven. Her white clothes are trimmed with the most precious jewels, but her face is soiled with dust, her robe is cut and her cloak no longer clean. The figure directs her voice to heaven and laments: “Vulpes foueas habent et uolucres celi nidos, ego autem adiutorem et consolatorem non habeo, nec baculum super quem incumbam et a quo sustenter.”<sup>28</sup> She claims her high status as the one who married Christ on the cross and who received his blood as a bridal gift. But her dignity was taken from her by “[n]utricii autem mei, uidelicet sacerdotes”.<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, “nutricius” can mean both the one who fosters and the one who is fostered: the priests were fostered and loved by their mother the Church, and now it is time that they support her in her old age, which they fail to do. Not only have they abandoned her, they have soiled her face and clothes by fornicating, by selling their offices and by breaking every rule that was given them. So, she is left without the dignity and reverence that she is entitled to on the grounds of her high status. At this point, Ecclesia takes over the role of Christ as a father and threatens her children with revenge. An apocalyptic image of the earth darkening and shaking is followed by the highborn and lowborn people alike throwing themselves upon the priests and banishing them. They take their riches in compensation of the fact that they did not do their duties towards them, and they resolve to throw those “adulterers and robbers” out of the Church, saying that they “polluted the Church”. Issues of duty and righteousness are thus mixed up with issues of dignity, status, honour and disgrace.

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<sup>27</sup> “I conceive and bear many who oppress me, their mother, by heretical, schismatic and useless battles, by robberies and murders, by adultery and fornication, and by many such errors. Many of these rise again in true penitence to eternal life, but many fall in false obduracy to eternal death.” (Hart and Bishop 170)

<sup>28</sup> “Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but I have no one to console or help me and no cane on which to lean and which could sustain me.”

<sup>29</sup> “my children, namely the priests”



Ecclesia's disgrace reflects badly on the Christians both because she is their mother and because she is of noble birth.

### 3.3.2 Ecclesia desecrated

In the fifth vision of the second book of *Scivias*, the image of Ecclesia is used again to admonish the people not to sin. However, Ecclesia's position and situation are very different here, and the reason seems to be that her sexuality is brought into play. The excerpt is a parable in which Christ is represented as a king, Ecclesia as his queen and the Christians as their serfs. The incentive not to sin is no longer based on family bonds, but on loyalty, property and honour.

Nam si aliquis magnus princeps sponsam ualde sibi caram habet, quam seruus seruorum suorum adulterando corrumpit, quid dominus ille facit? Vere in maxima ira exercitum suum mittit ut illum perdat, quoniam eum in propriis uisceribus suis confudit. Quod si tunc seruus ille timens omnem exercitum illum exorat ut pro ipso intercedat, et insuper ad pedes domini sui flebiliter cadit quatenus sibi parcat, tunc idem rex propter bonitatem suam et propter petitionem illorum eum uiuere sinens, societatem conseruorum suorum illi reddit, sed tamen eum ita ut ceteros interiores et familiares amicos suos non remunerat, quamuis ei inter alios illi consimiles conseruos ipsius debitam gratiam exhibeat. Ita et huic erit qui aeterni regis sponsam seducendo uiolauerit. Idem enim rex in rectissimo zelo iudicia sua exercens illum ad perditionem transmittit, quia eum in hoc facto quasi illusorem in obliuione mentis suae habuit.<sup>30</sup> (*Scivias* II 5.11)

The first thing we notice is the absence of any activity, emotion or speech from Ecclesia. Whereas she was an independent person in speaking to her children, here she is reduced to an object of exchange that mediates the relations between men. That the serf "corrupts" her by having sex with her, is seen as a grave breach of trust and a gross insult to her husband alone, not to her. God is represented as "a paterfamilias, whether as husband or as father, with rights over His 'family.' The violation of those rights diminishes His honor and constitutes an insult both to Him and to his 'household,' that is, to the entire Christian community." (Nirenberg 1068) Class also plays a major role: it is the difference in status between king and "servant of servants" that makes the sexual encounter such a grave crime. Gender roles and class difference combine to make the insult all the more abhorrent.

This sort of discourse is not unusual in medieval literature. However, the image of Ecclesia or a Christian woman being sexually threatened or assaulted is mainly used to demarcate the boundaries

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<sup>30</sup> "If some great ruler had a bride exceedingly dear to him, who was adulterously corrupted by a servant of his servants, what would that lord do? He would certainly send his army to destroy him in greatest wrath, since this man had struck him to the very viscera. But if this servant, fearing the army, should beg his master to intercede for him, and fall at his feet with tears to ask him to spare him, then that king would suffer him to live because of his own goodness and the other's petition, and restore him to the society of his fellow-servants. But he would not reward him like his close and familiar friends, even though he did show him the favor he deserved among his fellow-servants of the same rank. So it will be for one who seduces and violates a bride of the eternal King. For that King, issuing his judgments in righteous zeal, will send him to perdition, because in this deed he disregarded Him and held Him in scorn." (Hart and Bishop 208) Note that the translation makes the bride the subject of the sentence "who was adulterously corrupted", while the Latin has "whom a servant of his servants adulterously corrupted."

between different groups, for instance Christians and non-Christians.<sup>31</sup> David Nirenberg analyses this metaphor in the literature of medieval Spain. He states that the image of Ecclesia “provided a strong foundation for a discourse of anxiety about interfaith sex.” (1067) Sexual relations of any nature between Christian women and Jewish or Muslim men were depicted as the violation of the brides of Christ and the daughters of God, and their violation as the violation of God’s rights. In Hildegard’s example, however, this is not the case. Hildegard uses the concepts of familial and feudal honour to put to shame sinners *within* the Church. The point that she wants to make is how horrible it is for a Christian to betray his own lord by sinning, but she also chooses to represent this by means of “[t]he sexualized boundaries inscribed on the bodies of women in order to demarcate familial honor” (1071).

What emerges from this excerpt is a changed view of Ecclesia’s status. I said earlier that, logically, because Ecclesia has a higher place in the hierarchy than humans, she should be male in the relations between the humans and herself. We now begin to see how she can both be superior and female in the relationship with humans. As a woman, her status always depends on her father or her husband, so Ecclesia is only superior to humans in that she is the daughter of God and the bride of Christ. She derives her high status from them but is still connected to materiality and is still vulnerable as a female figure, so that she can be assaulted and wounded, although the high status of her husband assures that the assault will be considered a grave crime. In this way, the divinity of the concept that is personified and the material femaleness of the personification itself work together in order to conjure feelings of shame and anger.

### 3.3.3 Ecclesia assaulted

Ecclesia, who was shown to us in book II of the *Scivias*, appears again in book III, but now Hildegard also sees the lower part of her body. That change of view shockingly brings about “an image of gross, repellent perversion” (Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 245). What happens in this passage is unusual, and opinions on precisely what is depicted differ.

Sed et illa muliebris imago quam ante altare quod est ante oculos Dei prius conspexeram, nunc etiam mihi ibidem iterum ostensa est, ita tamen quod eam modo etiam ab umbilico uentris sui deorsum uiderem. Nam ab umbilico suo usque ad locum illum ubi mulier cognoscitur uarias et squamosas maculas habebat. In eodem autem loco muliebris cognitionis monstruosum et nigerrimum caput apparuit, igneos oculos et aures ut aures asini et nares et os ut nares et ut os leonis habens, ac magno hiatu frendens, et uelut ferreos ac horribiles dentes horribiliter acuens. Sed ab eodem capite usque ad genua sua eadem imago alba et rubea et uelut multa contritione tunsata erat, ab ipsis autem genibus usque ad duas zonas, quae per transuersum superius tangentes talum albae uidebantur, sanguinea apparebat. Et ecce idem monstruosum caput se

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<sup>31</sup> Ruth Mazo Karras gives some examples: first, Christian exempla had stories of men who married and converted Jewish women, while in the *Chansons de geste* it was Saracen women who were being converted by marriage. Second, the Fourth Lateran Council (anno 1215) compelled Jews to wear a badge “for the purpose of avoiding miscegenation”, and Jews were forbidden to frequent Christian prostitutes (25). She concludes that “[p]enetration symbolizes power. For men of one group to have sex with women of another is an assertion of power over the entire group.” (25)

tanto fragore a loco suo dissoluit, quod omnis eadem muliebris imago in omnibus membris suis inde concuteretur.<sup>32</sup> (*Scivias* III 11)

It is unusual for a personification like Ecclesia, who represents a divine concept, to be pictured so physically and intimately. Whereas in the letter to abbot Werner it was only Ecclesia's face and clothes that were soiled and stained, here we see her skin covered in "scaly blemishes", her genitals covered by a devil's head and her legs bloodied.

The head is later identified as belonging to the Antichrist. Ecclesia in this passage mirrors the pregnant woman in *Apocalypse* 12 being assaulted by a dragon, as that figure was often equated with the Church. However, there is one great difference, which some call "Hildegard's most original and startling contribution to medieval eschatology" (Emmerson 98): Ecclesia is not assaulted by an external force, but the evil is part of her, occupying the place of her genitals. There is some disagreement, however, concerning this point. Barbara Newman claims that the Antichrist's aim is to seduce the Church "just as the devil corrupted Eve" and that Ecclesia falls victim to the "attempted rape of Christ's virgin" (245). The image could be read in both ways, with the devil either as an external force or as the symbol of Ecclesia's internal corruption. In the light of what we saw about the personification's double function, we may assume that both meanings should be read into the text. When Ecclesia coincides with all Christians, she is herself corrupt. When the Christians are seen as her children, they are external to her, and then the presence of the devil's head can be seen as an assault. So, on the one hand, this could be interpreted as a sexual assault, because sinners in the bosom of the Church threaten her with their perverse and polluting sexuality. On the other hand, the attack is not only *aimed* at the genitals, but it also *develops* in that place because the genitals are the symbol of sexuality, which is seen as perverted and polluting. Moreover, Ecclesia probably appears here in her function of humiliated mother as well as virgin threatened by perverting sexuality. The case is not so clear, because Ecclesia herself does not act nor speak. Just as with the parable of the king, the queen and the serf, the woman whose sexuality is at stake appears passive and almost of no consequence. As we saw in the parable, there is no way to know whether medieval writers are speaking about consensual or non-consensual sex: they do not make the distinction because the passive partner's consent is of no concern. Also, contrary to medieval lore that women were more sensual than men, "Hildegard believed that woman is passive in love and sex and responds only to male initiatives." (Scholz 376) I also think that Ecclesia's silence is an attempt to preserve her dignified and majestic image by undergoing the humiliation sternly and unmoved. She never acts or speaks in the entire vision: the continuation of the passage focuses on the Antichrist and the people. The Antichrist tries to raise himself up to heaven, but is struck down by thunderbolts. At this, the people repent, and all is good. The absence of any reaction from Ecclesia's part makes it harder to conjecture what emotions the image is expected to arouse. What we can say, however, is that Ecclesia "becomes herself the symbolic embodiment of cosmic, social, and psychic order rather than its mere discourser.

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<sup>32</sup> "And I saw again the figure of a woman whom I had previously seen in front of the altar that stands before the eyes of God; she stood in the same place, but now I saw her from the waist down. And from her waist to the place that denotes the female, she had various scaly blemishes; and in that latter place was a black and monstrous head. It had fiery eyes, and ears like an ass', and nostrils and mouth like a lion's; it opened wide its jowls and terribly clashed its horrible iron-colored teeth. And from this head down to her knees, the figure was white and red, as if bruised by many beatings; and from her knees to her tendons where they joined her heels, which appeared white, she was covered with blood. And behold! That monstrous head moved from its place with such a great shock that the figure of the woman was shaken through all her limbs." (Hart and Bishop 493)

This order is upset by man alone whose spiritual perversity is depicted in sexual and therefore very elemental terms.” (Bogdanos 42) That the meaning of this passage remains dubious is probably due to the fact that Hildegard had to reconcile the divine figure of Ecclesia, exalted far above humankind, and the “sexual and therefore very elemental” perversity by which she is threatened. So, on the one hand, Ecclesia’s high status could contribute to the rhetorical effectiveness of portraying her in danger, but on the other hand, there is also a point at which Hildegard draws the line because Ecclesia’s dignity is compromised beyond what she deems acceptable.

### 3.4 Ecclesia as a site for symbolism

As a relational figure, Ecclesia connects God and the people by filling in the female (relational) roles in a patriarchal family. She is a mother to her children, a bride to Christ and a daughter to God. In an extended patriarchal family, she is a bride and queen. She relates the humans, Christ and God to each other by symbolizing their honour, which depends on their ability to guard her dignity and sexuality, which are constantly endangered. By representing Ecclesia as the bride of God and the mother of the Christians, Hildegard is able to demand that the people show loyalty and obedience towards the institution of the Church. This use of the personification was not uncommon: it was also used as an argument in the investiture contest. In the dispute about whether the pope or the emperor was the head of the Church and could thus appoint clerics, jurists used civil marriage law as a model for canon law: “... they argued that if the church is Christ’s Bride ... then the church is also husbanded by Christ’s special representatives – the popes, the bishops, and priests.” (Astell 50, cf. Matter 106) Moreover, they argued that the church’s property was inalienable because it was Ecclesia’s bridal dowry and that priests had to observe celibacy because they owed it to their wife, the Church (51). Hildegard made a similar argument. She said that women could not be priests because priests are married to the female Church: “The church is likened to a field and the sacramental ministry to husbandry; as the gift of rain waters the field under the husbandman’s care, so God’s gift of grace waters the church under the care of the priest.” (Thompson 355) Women cannot perform this male role, so they cannot be priests.

As a representative figure, Ecclesia represents a community that is organic, hierarchic and situated in a purposeful history. First, because every Christian is born of her body, the Christian community is an organic and natural whole. Christians all pass through her womb and are nurtured at her breasts. Second, hierarchies within Christianity are projected onto her body. In the fifth vision of the second book, Ecclesia’s head glows with a crystal light signifying priesthood, her chest down to her navel glows pink, purple and blue to signify the highest order of virginity and monastic life, and down from her navel a white cloud indicates the secular life, which is situated where new life grows. Here, her female body provides the symbols with which to depict and naturalize hierarchies. The replacement of Synagoga by Ecclesia signified the hierarchy between groups, while the division of Ecclesia’s body signifies “hierarchy within unity” (Sinha 19). Lastly, Ecclesia’s body is also a timeline, as is often the case with Hildegard’s personifications. The crystal light of the priesthood also stands for the time of the apostles, and the rosy glow of virginity also stands for the beginning of monasticism. The *Scivias* itself is a timeline: book I treats of the time before Christ, book II is the here and now, and book III is the book showing the edifice of salvation and describing the end times. So, in book I we meet Synagoga, in book II we see Ecclesia, although her body is not yet complete but stops at the waist, and

in book III we can see below the waist of Ecclesia the times that lead to the end of history. The head of the Antichrist does not only denote sexual depravity and evil, it also predicts the coming of the Antichrist, which is followed by bloody times (her legs are bruised and bloodied) but results in the Day of Judgment (her feet are radiantly white). Ecclesia thus embraces all past and future generations of Christians, and she symbolizes salvation history.

### 4.1 Bernard of Clairvaux's "Ecclesia in Egypt"

Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) was one of the most famous intellectuals of Hildegard's time. He was a Cistercian abbot best known for his mystical interpretation of the *Song of Songs*, his intellectual fight with Abelard and his preaching of the Second Crusade. His parables are short allegorical narratives carrying a spiritual message. They make use of diverse rhetorical techniques "such as allegory, grand-scale soteriological history, and biblical mimesis with streaks of everyday life." (Bruun 135) They feature personifications, mostly of virtues and vices, but also biblical figures and stock characters such as the king's son or the monk. The parables were meant to be read by monks and serve as an introduction to monastic life (139). They also offer an introduction to the allegorical method of interpreting the bible, by presenting an allegorical narrative based on the Bible which is easier to decipher than the Bible itself. The parables have a pedagogical value but are also meant to entertain. The pleasure of reading them is in being able to discover the hidden allegorical meaning.

Parable four is one of the longest in the collection. It likens God to a "human king who celebrated the nuptials of his son." The story begins with a king who, having organised a wedding for his son, asks the bridegroom whom he would like to marry. The son responds that he chose Ecclesia as a bride before the beginning of times. The father points out that the chosen bride is being held captive in Egypt, where she was sold as a slave and where she now labours in filth, but the son sees no problem, because he plans to put in the balance a higher price than the "the pleasure of sinning" for which she was bought: he means to buy her back with his own blood.

The way Ecclesia is represented as a slave in Egypt reminds of *Exodus* and the Jews' captivity in Egypt, all the more because the first parable of the collection shows the Pharaoh chasing after the runaway Israelites. The parallel indicates that Ecclesia is equated with Synagoga. Before the coming of Christ, Synagoga/ Ecclesia had been sold into slavery by the people's sins. The captured Synagoga will be transformed into Ecclesia through her marriage with Christ, who will buy her freedom at the price of his own blood. Egypt stands for worldliness and corporality, with the Pharaoh as the devil. And it is the humans, because of their sinful behaviour, who are guilty of her humiliation.

Continuing their conversation, the king reminds his son that according to the law, he must have the bride's consent for the wedding. This is treated as an important point because it stands in strong contrast to the Pharaoh's but also the Christians' later treatment of Ecclesia. Here, we see an example not of men's rights over women but women's rights over their own bodies being used as an argument in prescribing the relations between the Christians and the institution of the Church. In order to win his bride's approval, the king's son then sends David to the earth to "soften their souls" with his cither.

Note that Ecclesia is spoken of as the collection of all individual souls in this phrase (cf. Bruun 256), as the parable easily switches between the literal and the allegorical level.

Ecclesia rejoices that Christ has not forgotten her and wholeheartedly assents to the marriage. She then “mounts an ass, meaning that she subdues her flesh” and rides to meet him. The king’s son takes her to “the city of his kingdom and into his chamber”, “leading her there in accordance with her own will and receiving her with glory”, again stressing Ecclesia’s free will. Ecclesia’s consent is an important aspect in two ways. First, Ecclesia as external to the Christians must be treated with respect by them because the institution of the church must be respected by them. Second, Ecclesia as the representation of the Christians must possess a free will because the believers must be able to choose freely to love God. Again, this simple story relates simultaneously to difficult theological problems, to social order and to gender roles. All of these aspects are intricately bound together.

A love scene ensues which is completely made up of quotes from the *Song of Songs*, as if it were a summary of that biblical love song:

Et in lectulo caritatis suae collocans eam, et gratiae suae ornamentis eam condecorans, laevam que suam sub capite eius ponens, et dextera sua eam amplexans: “Adiuro vos”, inquit, “filiae Ierusalem, ut non suscitetis, neque evigilare faciatis sponsam, donec ipsa velit.” Posuitque sexaginta ex fortissimos Israel, qui ambirent lectum eius, ad bella doctissimos; et uniuscuiusque ensis super femur suum, propter timores nocturnos. Osculans que eam osculo oris sui, et valedicens ei abiit in regionem longinquam accipere sibi regnum, et reverti.<sup>33</sup>

After her husband has left, a time of hardship and danger begins for Ecclesia. The two main metaphors are wandering and doing battle. She wanders both through the world and through the times of the world with the Pharaoh/ the devil at her heels, who is constantly inventing new ways to damage her. First, the Pharaoh openly assaults her. He kills her guards (the apostles) and many soldiers of her army. Whenever a martyr is killed, though, hundreds or thousands of new soldiers sprout from the ground that is fertilized by the blood. The Pharaoh therefore decides on a new course: he will put away his sword and plant discord among the enemy by seducing them with words. The Christians now become divided by heresies and schisms, leaving Ecclesia bitterly lamenting that “her bowels are being torn out by her own sons”. Here we notice the same metaphor of motherhood and the same dynamics of care and ingratitude that we saw in Hildegard’s text. But Bernard pictures the people both as Ecclesia’s army and her children. The duties of the Christians towards their mother are to defend, to fight and to kill (remember Bernard’s preaching of the Second Crusade), not to support and foster, as it was with Hildegard. Just like Hildegard, however, he leaves Ecclesia’s daughters out of the picture: Ecclesia only bears sons. This second period is saved by “Christian soldiers” such as Augustine and Jerome defeating the heretics.

The Pharaoh then resorts to the most dangerous tactic of all: spiritual evil. He gathers the most distinguished leaders of his army, “the spirit of fornication, the spirit of gluttony and the spirit of avarice” and instructs them to raid Ecclesia’s camp at night, when all are drunk and asleep. At once, Ecclesia’s soldiers all begin to love themselves more than they love Christ. They give way to their own pleasures and desires and take for themselves what was dedicated to God. They take from the

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<sup>33</sup> “And he set her on his bed of love and decorated her with the ornaments of his grace. Placing his left hand under her head and embracing her with his right, he said: ‘I adjure you, daughters of Jerusalem, do not rouse or waken the bride until she wills it.’ He posited sixty of the most valiant of Israel’s men to guard her bed, all of them experienced in war and each with his sword at his side, prepared for the terrors of the night. He kissed her with the kiss of his mouth and bade her farewell. Then he left for a distant land to obtain the kingship and to return again. [my translation]”

protesting and resisting Ecclesia the seamless tunic of charity, the purple mantle of faith and the other ornaments with which “her nakedness was covered”.

We saw that with Hildegard clothing symbolizes honour and ornaments symbolize status. Invisibility is better than clothes, but clothes are better than nudity. Nudity is defined as the absence of clothing and thus of virtue. It is associated with sexuality and therefore shameful. Hildegard’s personification thus carries two layers of meaning: the body stands for the materiality (birth) and also for the essence of the Church (baptism, salvation), while the clothing refers to the practices of faith that constitute the honour and status of the Church. With Hildegard, nakedness is negative while the body is positive (or at least not necessarily negative). Clothes both cover nakedness and adorn the body.

In general, clothing may be perceived either as a positive or a negative thing. In the opposition of body and soul, the body is seen as inessential and material, and it is appraised negatively. The shameful body then has to be covered by clothes, which preserve the honour of a person (particularly a woman). Alternately, clothes may indicate the pureness of the body that it covers. In that case, clothing directly symbolizes what is underneath. This can be exemplified by contrasting the figures of Eve and Mary:

Within visual media, artists often represented Eve as naked, yet unrepentant, as she and Adam are driven from the garden. In contrast, these same painters consistently placed Mary as respectfully clothed, humble, and within an interior space. In these visual representations, the artists contrast the blessed with the punished by means of the physicality of the clothed versus the naked female body. Eve appears as the uncontrollable, sinful female body in contrast with the enclosed, incorruptible Virgin Mary. (Garber 104)

However, clothing could also indicate an underlying defect. Clothes could be seen as a disguise, a way to seduce or deceive. The early Church Fathers constantly drew the parallel between an excessive concern for personal appearance and women’s deceitful nature. Clothing and cosmetics were “a sign of women’s worldliness and lack of spiritual discernment.” (Polinska 49; Bloch) In conclusion, clothes may either cover up a shameful body, betray a sinful body or adorn a virtuous body.

On a higher level of symbolism, clothing signifies materiality and visibility itself. “Images of clothing ... naturally lend themselves to illustrate the relation between God’s invisible essence and his visible glory” (Newman, *Sister of Wisdom* 72). Clothing was used as a metaphor for both the materiality of creation and the human body: both are materiality covering an underlying essence. There is a problem here: when the body that covers the soul is likened to clothing covering the body, then the body stands for the spiritual in this metaphor. When clothing signifies the body, then the body signifies the soul. We have two metaphors that relate materiality to spirituality, and the problem is that they share one term, the body, once as the figure and once as the ground of the metaphor. When a personification signifies both by being embodied and by being clothed, she becomes a double metaphor where two signifiers signify the same thing: both body and clothing signify Ecclesia’s being in the world. The difficulty lies not necessarily in the combination of the two. We saw in Hildegard’s *Scivias* II 3 that clothing may simply indicate a more external meaning, such as the Church’s honour instead of her material being itself. The difficulty only arises when body and clothing are put in opposition to each other, when Ecclesia’s naked and shameful body is contrasted with her clothed and virtuous body. In that case, the body can no longer represent the abstract concept, but is constricted to signifying merely the concept of materiality.

The problem emerges in Bernard’s fourth parable. First, Ecclesia is stripped naked by her children. Her clothes symbolize various virtues, which are taken away from by her children because they do



not practice them anymore. So, her clothes are the visible symbols of an invisible reality, but her body is literally a female body which gives rise to shame and derision when it is exposed: “she bewails the fact that all her secret and shameful parts are exposed to everyone’s derision” (“omnia occulta et pudenda sua risui omnium deflens exposita”). The personification’s body is nothing but the symbolization of her materiality itself, its being made up of human bodies. The naked body alone is a pitiful sight. But the personification’s clothing is what actually represents the abstract reality that the personification is supposed to represent. The body is the symbol of materiality, while the clothing fulfils the task of representing abstracta. This also means that here it is not the female figure herself who stands for a divine reality. Her body is mere materiality: what conveys meaning is that which covers her materiality and sexuality. For instance, Ecclesia holds on to two pieces of cloth to cover her: “And with both hands and all her force she clasps some pieces of cloth of the canonical or monastic religiosity to her heart and vital parts, barely being able to keep them in place” (“Et utraque manu totis viribus panniculos quosdam canonicae vel monasticae religionis, qui vix manus diripientium effugerant, circa cor et vitales illas partes astringens ...”). It is the faithful that constitute the Church, so the Church is actually represented by the clothing. What the faithful do, is to make up with their chastity for the harmful circumstances in which the Church must exist. The female body of Ecclesia does not represent salvation or divinity, but baseness and the shame of material existence. What we see, is that a female personification can only personify divine concepts to the extent that her body remains covered or invisible. In that state, she can represent the essence of the church. But when being either clothed or naked means being either virtuous or sinful, her body must represent corporality and shame. The abstract concept is made concrete in the form of a personification, but the concrete visualization is again divided into a body and a covering. Because a female body in itself must be sinful, all positive qualities of the abstract concept are then ascribed to the covering, so that the body itself is left with the one negative aspect, namely the materiality itself. Here, ideas about the female body interfere with the working of the personification. I would say that Hildegard drifted in the same direction by representing shame as an uncovered female body. However, she seems to recognize the problem and does not mention Ecclesia’s clothing, so that Ecclesia’s body still constitutes the Christian community. For Hildegard, Ecclesia may be tainted, but that does not render her whole body sinful.

However, there is a type of clothing that is even worse than being naked:

Fingentes tamen nonnumquam se misereri, vestem, de simulatione virtutum et dissimulatione vitiorum manu hypocrisis utrimque contextam, inicere illi conantur. Quam illa detestans et abominans, non suscipit, non recognoscit, nisi illam sapientiae manibus contextam, tinctam et sacratam agni sanguine, a sponso sibi derelictam, a filiis sublatam.<sup>34</sup>

While bare materiality without any claim to religiosity is bad, it is not as bad as pretending to be religious while living sinfully. Fortunately, although Ecclesia is not able to prevent her children from taking away her virtues, she does have the power to reject hypocrisy. The Church is made up of human bodies, which makes her material, but her identity is defined by the virtuousness of the faithful (her proper dress, even if there remain only two pieces of cloth); if she would put on the dress of hypocrisy,

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<sup>34</sup> “Often, pretending that they pity her, they attempt to throw a dress over her, woven by the hands of hypocrites of both the simulation of virtues and the dissimulation of vices. She however, detesting and despising it, does not pick it up and does not acknowledge it, because it is not the dress that was woven by the hands of wisdom, painted and consecrated by the blood of the lamb, that was left for her by her bridegroom and taken away by her sons. [my translation]”

she would no longer be the Church. This proves that her identity really lies in her clothing and not in her body. The community of faithful can symbolically reside in a female body, but not when it is naked. So, the metaphor breaks down less because it is doubled (by adding clothing as a second covering of an underlying essence) than because the literal level interferes with the figural sense: the female body cannot denote any kind of essence when it is seen as shameful. As Paul de Man has demonstrated, figural language always returns to its literal level and consequently can often not assert what it claims to assert. Also, as Barbara Johnson has demonstrated, binary oppositions, which state that there is an insurmountable difference between two entities, are built on the repression of differences *within* entities, and so “certain subversions ... are logically prior to it and necessary in its very construction.” (x-xi)

Connected to Ecclesia’s shameful body is the fact that she plays a passive role, which is the same as in Hildegard’s text. She cries and begs, but her only real power lies in passively resisting. A similar problem of interpretation as we saw with Hildegard arises from this passage: is the threat posed to Ecclesia sexual or not? Mette Bruun does not hesitate to call the attack “the rape of Ecclesia” (264), but while it is evident that the image of a woman whose clothes are torn off against her will conjures the threat of sexual violence, this does not have to be the main signified. First, throughout the passage it is repeated that the attackers are Ecclesia’s children. Second, the attackers’ ultimate goal is to clothe Ecclesia in a new dress. Third and most importantly, the reactions to her nakedness are laughter and derision. Their goal is to put her to shame, so that she will run from the world and hide. As with Hildegard, her nearly-exposed genitals refer less to sexual threat than to shamefulness. The text should shame Christians into giving Ecclesia back her dignity. We would expect to find the sexual threat employed as a rhetorical strategy, because it such a common theme in both the *vitae* of early female martyrs and in rewritings of classical myths (Lienert), but the fact is that, at least in Ecclesia’s story, it is relegated to a suggestion at best. Could it be that both Hildegard and Bernard hesitate to subject such an elevated figure as Ecclesia explicitly to the threat of sexual assault, that they shy away from this last humiliation? We notice here, then, the tension between Ecclesia as a divine and awe-inspiring figure and Ecclesia as a vulnerable and violable female figure. We see that Hildegard evades the dilemma one time by making invisible Ecclesia’s outer body and another time by depicting the devil’s assault in a very ambiguous manner.

## 4.2 Hildegard’s wandering Anima

I would now like to focus on a figure in the *Scivias* that is in many ways very similar to Ecclesia, namely Anima or the soul. The personification of the soul is featured in a remarkable passage in the fourth vision of book I, which is about procreation. Barbara Newman calls this passage a “myth”: it depicts Anima as she wanders around, is persecuted and tortured by her enemies, and at last reaches a safe haven where she is able to escape the enemy. It is exceptional in that it is a longer narrative with more dramatic action than anywhere else in the visionary trilogy and also in that its meaning is not explained further in the text. Anima is similar to Ecclesia because she too is a spiritual concept captured in materiality and because she too represents people. However, whereas Ecclesia represents the Christians as a group and enters into a relationship with them individually, Anima represents every person individually and the abstract concept of soul collectively.

My question is how the soul can be female, although the spiritual aspect of being human is usually coded as male in opposition to female corporality. It is the same for many other abstract concepts that are personified, not in the least such aspects of God as “Caritas” (Love) or “Sapientia” (Wisdom). In the first chapter, I explained how the concept of personification itself can overrule the ideational value of the concept that is personified: on the literal level, because personifications have bodies and relate people to one another through their female bodies, on the figural level, because transcendental ideas are externalized as “the other” when they are personified, and on the metafigural level because figuration itself is coded as female. Almost all of these things apply to the personified soul also. What is more, we notice in this passage the same rhetorical use of the noble woman threatened by corruption as we saw in the texts about Ecclesia.

First, we have seen in the passages we discussed that there is one metaphor that always returns, namely the metaphor of enclosing and covering. A body encloses the soul, a female body encloses her children, and clothing covers a female body. We also saw that the combination of two of such metaphors, namely body and clothing, could lead to confusion, especially because all of these metaphors are gendered. And now, in Anima’s story, Hildegard takes the inside/outside imagery a step further. Like Bernard’s Ecclesia, Anima is pictured as a wanderer, a lost soul. She says she “should have had a tabernacle adorned with five square gems more brilliant than the sun and stars, for the sun and stars that set would not have shone in it, but the glory of angels ... For I should have been a companion of the angels, for I am a living breath, which God placed in dry mud; thus I should have known and felt God.”<sup>35</sup> (Hart and Bishop 109) Anima’s tabernacle is, of course, her body. The metaphor fits in with the theme of wandering and refers to *Exodus* and the tabernacle of Moses, which housed the divine presence during the Jews’ wanderings. In Hildegard’s allegory, the soul is forced to live in a provisional tabernacle which is weak and leads a sinful life in Babylon. After the soul has wandered far and wide and has conquered many obstacles, she arrives at a new tabernacle (though, logically, she never left her body) and fortifies it with columns of steel, stone walls and mighty towers. This new tabernacle is modelled after the temple of Jerusalem that replaced Moses’ tabernacle, and its tower refers to the tower of David from the *Song of Songs* 4:4.<sup>36</sup> The tabernacle is a symbol of Mary’s and Ecclesia’s motherhood, because it is the material that envelopes the divine. The tower of David likewise was interpreted as Mary, and the *Song of Songs* as a whole was interpreted as the love song of Christ and the Church or God and the soul. Further, Jerusalem and the temple are symbols for the church, and the lonely soul longs to return to “her mother”, Sion, also a symbol for mother Church. Barbara Newman adds: “Attentive readers will hear echoes of Job, Jeremiah and other biblical sufferers. There is also a strong Platonic coloring, for the soul grieves that it is oppressed by the sinful and burdensome flesh; the mother-daughter dynamics may even suggest Demeter and Kore, with the devil cast in the role of Pluto.” (“Introduction” 28-29) The figure of the soul, then, is surrounded by other female figures, most notably Ecclesia and Mary as both her body and her mother. The soul can have no relation to the male Christians, because she *is* the Christians; therefore, when those Christians are represented as Ecclesia’s children, this relationship is one of a mother and a daughter.

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<sup>35</sup> “Ego enim debui habere tabernaculum quinque quadris lapidibus sole et stellis lucidioribus ornatum, quia occidens sol et occidentes stellae non debebant in eo lucere, sed in eo debuit esse angelica gloria ... Nam ego debui esse consors angelorum, quia sum uiuens spiraculum quod Deus misit in aridum limum. vnde deberem deum scire et ipsum sentire.” (Scivias I 4.1)

<sup>36</sup> “Your neck is like the tower of David, built with courses of stone; on it hang a thousand shields, all of them shields of warriors.”/ “sicut turris David collum tuum quae aedificata est cum propugnaculis mille clypei pendent ex ea omnis armatura fortium”

Consequently, the metaphor of enclosing is not represented here as the female enclosing of a male essence.

Second, the metaphor that is used for the soul itself is the metaphor of the body. Although in the beginning of the vision, the soul is pictured as a “globe in a body” (“sphaera in forma”), which spreads its energy through all the body parts, the soul is later personified in order to tell the story. Its body is then pictured as a building, the tabernacle, but this building is associated with the figures of Mary and the personified Ecclesia. The soul, then, is a body in a body. Even later in the vision, where Hildegard explains the workings of the soul plainly and so does not need the soul to be personified anymore, she still compares it to a human body, male this time, with the two arms of intellect and will, standing in a corner of his house (the body). This imagery is consistent with Hildegard’s teaching about the body and the soul in this vision and elsewhere. She depicts the two as closely interwoven and mutually dependent. The soul is not opposed to the body, but they work together: the body houses the soul, and the soul invigorates the body with its life-giving power. What Brianna Marron concludes with regard to Hildegard’s *Causae et Curae* can also be said about this passage: “Hildegard places the soul in both the carnal and spiritual categories. In fact, the soul is the agent that binds the body together with the other elements, both physical and spiritual. The soul moves the body from the earthly elements toward God.” (56) To conclude, the metaphor of the body can no longer denote the material covering of an essence when it is applied to the soul, because the soul is the essence. Not only do the gendered dynamics of the metaphor break down, the metaphor itself does too.

However, these gendered dynamics reappear later in the story. The myth of the soul contains a passage that is very recognizable after having read the texts about Ecclesia:

Sed heu! cum tabernaculum meum intellexit se posse oculis suis in omnes vias uidere, instrumentum suum ad aquilonem posuit; ach, ach! ubi capta sum et spoliata oculis et gaudio scientiae, ueste mea tota scissa. Et sic de hereditate mea pulsa, ducta sum in alienum locum qui omni pulchritudine et honore carebat, ubi pessimo seruitio subiecta sum.

Sed et hi qui me ceperant, colaphis percutientes cum porcis fecerunt me manducare, ac ita in desertum locum me mittentes amarissimas etiam herbas melle intinctas mihi ad manducandum dabant. Postea quoque super torcular me ponentes multis tormentis me affligebant.

Deinde autem uestibus meis me exuentes et multas plagas mihi inferentes uenatum me miserunt, ubi pessimos et uenenosos uermes uidelicet scorpionum aspidum et aliorum similium uermium me capere fecerunt, qui me totam suo ueneno ita conspuerunt, quod inde debilis efficiebar. Vnde illi me deridentes dixerunt: ‘Vbi est honor tuus nunc?’ Ach, sed ego tota contremui et magno gemitu maeroris silenter dixi: ‘O ubi sum? Ach, unde huc ueni? Et quem consolatorem huius captiuitatis quaeram? Quomodo has catenas dirumpam? O quis oculus uulnera mea uidere poterit? Et quae nares foetorem hunc aegrum sufferre poterunt? Aut quae manus ea oleo perungent? Ach, quis dolori meo misericordiam impendet?’<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> “But alas! When my tabernacle saw that it could turn its eyes into all the ways, it turned its attention toward the North; ach, ach! and there I was captured and robbed of my sight and the joy of knowledge, and my garment all torn. And so, driven from my inheritance, I was led into a strange place without beauty or honor, and there subjected to the worst slavery. Those who had taken me struck me and made me eat with swine and, sending me into a desert place, gave me bitter herbs dipped in honey to eat. Then, placing me on the rack, they afflicted me with many tortures. And stripping me of my garments and dealing me many wounds, they sent me out to be hunted, and got the worst poisonous creatures, scorpions and asps and other vermin, to hunt and capture me; and these spewed out their poison all over me so that I was made helpless. Therefore they mocked me, saying, ‘Where is your honor now?’ Ach, and I trembled all over and with a great groan of woe said silently

We have read this story before: a high-born woman loses her rightful inheritance, her beauty and her honour. She must serve as a slave, she is humiliated and cries for help. The humiliation reminds of the parable of the prodigal son, especially the part about eating with the swine, but there are elements and references that suggest a more gendered experience of humiliation. I am thinking particularly about the vitae of early Christian female martyrs. A common theme in these stories is how these women are sexually desired by some powerful pagan ruler but refuse to marry him or give in to his desires, either miraculously escaping from torments or heroically undergoing the torments, sometimes even inflicting them on themselves in order to destroy their own beauty. Their resistance lies in passivity and endurance. Furthermore, the most important means of humiliating these women is stripping them of their clothes. Margaret Miles discusses how religious meanings of nakedness could differ from social meanings of nakedness. "Religious representations of nakedness were generally statements of committed resistance to secular or "fallen" society. Thus, many were unambiguously positive." (81) She notes that "[n]akedness in martyrdom, in ascetism, and in medieval practices of evangelical poverty was voluntary and active, the result of an adamantly confessed faith." This could also be the case for female martyrs, but not always: "Only when gender is engaged as a category of analysis do we begin to see that our impression of the positivity of religious nakedness must be revised to account for female nakedness presented as symbol of sin, sexual lust, and dangerous evil." (81) Some female martyrs such as Perpetua were said to "have become male" when their clothes were taken from them: this was the only way to represent their nakedness as an act of courage. We saw in the introduction that there generally were two attitudes to sexuality, a positive and a negative one, and that the repressive attitude associated with the church "carried over into the secular culture more commonly with regard to women's sexuality", while the more positive attitude associated with lay culture "carried over into the ecclesiastical realm more commonly with regard to men's." (Mazo Karras 3) In this case, however, Miller proposes that the opposite movement took place, and that positive religious attitudes with regard to nakedness were influenced by the negative social meanings of female nakedness: "Social meanings of nakedness in the Christian West were, on the other hand, generally negative. The mark of powerlessness and passivity, nakedness was associated with captives, slaves, prostitutes, the insane, and the dead. Also, as we have seen in martyrdom accounts, the prerogative of imposing nakedness on others to humiliate, torture, or punish was an important social power. In social meanings, the humiliation of nakedness was emphasized." (81) The humiliation of nakedness is something that returns in almost every text about Ecclesia as the damsel in distress that we have read, together with the image of Ecclesia as a slave. Her distress is heightened by her powerlessness and vulnerability, which is symbolized by her naked female body.

We now have two contrasting accounts of the same story: on the one hand, the story breaks down the gendered metaphor of body and soul, while on the other hand, it reinforces the idea that a woman's naked body is shameful. However, we must remember that Hildegard makes a difference between the evaluation of nakedness and the body: it is Anima's nakedness that is revealed, not her body. Illogical as it sounds, it appears that Hildegard manages to evaluate the body positively at the same time that she evaluates nakedness negatively. Nakedness is the absence of clothing; because clothing with Hildegard mostly signifies honour and virtue, nakedness is the humiliation of having one's honour taken away. This account of the shameful body appears when the female figure is seen

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to myself, 'Oh, where am I? Ach, from whence did I come here? and what comforter shall I seek in this captivity? How shall I break these chains? Oh what eye can look on my wounds? And what nose can bear their noisome stench? and what hands will anoint them with oil? Ach, who will have mercy on my affliction?'" (Hart and Bishop 109-110)

in relation to others, so when the principle of relationality is at work. In that case, the virtuousness of the female figure represents the honour of the men to which she is related (in the case of Anima, the people whose souls she represents). Their honour is dependent on whether they can protect her virtuousness or revenge the loss of it. On the other hand, we have the principle of embodiment: the personification then represents with her body the principle that is personified. We see this in the vision where Ecclesia bears the Christians in her womb and feeds them with the milk from her breasts. We also see it when Ecclesia is corrupted from the inside. In Anima's story, we notice it when Anima herself, the essence of the human being, is represented as a body. In these cases, the essence of the abstract concept actually resides in the personification and not in her clothes or her relations with others. This contrast between negative nakedness and the positive body, between the principles of relationality and embodiment, is also the contrast between a dualistic and a holistic worldview. I mentioned in the introduction that Hildegard oscillates between the two, and that the way one looks at body and soul determines the way one evaluates women. We see here that Hildegard's personifications produce this same oscillation between a negative and a positive view of the body and of women.

## Conclusion

My aim was to look at symbolical structures of gender in Hildegard's texts instead of her straightforward discussions of gender roles and sexuality. Critics like Barbara Newman posit that Hildegard creates a theology of the feminine divine that values positively the feminine principle as such, as opposed to Hildegard's less positive view of earthly womanhood. I assumed, however, that the feminine divine is also shaped by both the symbolic use of female bodies and traditional female gender roles.

Ultimately, the question is whether female symbols can be positive and empowering if they are embedded within a culture that views women as inferior creatures. Barbara Newman believes that it is possible for the religious imagination to create powerful and empowering female symbols despite the fact that real women are looked down upon. However, there is no correlation between the representation of women in symbolism and in the public arena, in fact: "[i]t may be that the more women are absent from the public arena, the more abundant the representations." (Duby x) Most critics are sceptical of the idea that the presence of female personifications is automatically positive for women (Honig; Radford-Ruether; Teskey). An exception, however, is usually made for female personifications in the work of female authors; in that case, as we see with Hildegard, the presence of female personifications is interpreted as a celebration of the feminine aspect of the divinity.

I would say that it is not possible to condemn or extol female symbols as such, without looking at the way that they are used. On the one hand, we see that the concept of personification itself is connected to the concept of femaleness in a myriad of ways. This has to do with the fact that women are associated with the body and with materiality. It is true, then, that personification is established within a system that ascribes to women a lower level of being, that of corporality instead of rationality. In this sense, personification can never really be empowering. However, within such a system there is still a large difference between structures that value women and structures that are outright misogynistic (Bloch). Whether or not female personifications advocate a positive view on women depends a great deal on whether the body is valued positively or not. When spirituality and rationality are opposed to irrational materiality, there tends to be an aversion to the body, and this aversion is often expressed as an abhorrence for female bodies specifically. Conversely, when materiality is valued because it accommodates spirituality, then the body and women are valued as well. In the passages that we have read, we encounter both attitudes.

On the one hand, we can link the first, dualistic, attitude to the principles of hierarchy and relationality. It does not necessarily have to be so, but every time that the female personification functions as a mediator of honour between men, we see that the authors portrays her as being humiliated, derided and put to shame. There is one instance where Ecclesia urges her children to be good to her because of her love for them, but this is an exception. In all other examples, Ecclesia's femaleness is used to represent her vulnerability and the shameful of having her naked body

revealed. We saw in Bernard's parable that the consequence may be that the personification's female body can no longer signify what she represents and that the signifying function is then transferred to the clothes which cover her shameful materiality. Hildegard evades the problem by making Ecclesia's clothes and outer body invisible. So, when Barbara Newman says that "Mater Ecclesia does not lack authority" (*God and the Goddesses* 310), she cannot be referring to Hildegard's texts. It is true that Ecclesia is a majestic, resplendent and noble figure, but my analysis has shown that it is exactly the intersection of her femaleness and her high status that determines the functioning of the personification. Hildegard's rhetoric is aimed at sparking outrage and shame because the daughter or bride of the king is humiliated by low-born rascals. Her femaleness makes her vulnerable, while her divine status should grant her inviolability: the two together are used to urge people to protect and defend the church. Not only, then, is Ecclesia's authority wholly dependent on her relation with her husband and father, but she is also continually depicted while losing her authority and dignity.

On the other hand, we can link the second, holistic, attitude to the principles of materiality and immanence, and also collectivity and alterity. The female personification is then considered by herself and not in a hierarchical relation to others. She is the embodiment of a divine essence. The focus is not on the outside but on the inside of her body. We saw this in *Scivias* II 3 where Ecclesia is represented as a mother, partly in *Scivias* III 11 where Ecclesia is corrupted from the inside (which, paradoxically, proves that her body contains the essence of Christianity), and partly in the story of Anima, where the gendered metaphor of body and soul is broken down because the soul is a female body within another female body. These examples make clear that Hildegard does want her female personifications to positively represent feminine qualities and femininity itself. In this respect, Barbara Newman is right about Hildegard's use of the feminine divine. However, I object to her view that female personifications do not have female bodies and are therefore not associated with negative aspects of femaleness. I do not think that Hildegard could avoid these associations. First, we saw that personifications do get associated negatively with the perceived shameful of female bodies. Second, even the most positive evaluations of Hildegard's female personifications are grounded in the reproductive capacities of female bodies and their subordinate roles in relation to men. So, it is clearly Hildegard's intention to shape majestic and divine female personifications, but because she works within a system in which femininity is subordinated to masculinity and because she chooses to put conceptions of the female body as shameful and vulnerable to rhetorical use, her efforts are bound to fail.

I deconstructed the metaphors of body and clothing in Bernard's parable in order to show what Hildegard tries to avoid. Bernard multiplies the binary opposition of inside and outside by combining the metaphor of body and clothes as the material coverings of an immaterial essence. However, in relation to the clothing, the personification's body would then have to represent the essence, but the fact that a naked female body is seen as shameful (and this fact is used by Bernard and Hildegard rhetorically) forbids this. Thus, the female body of Bernard's personification ultimately represents nothing more than bare materiality itself. Hildegard tries to get around this by not showing her personifications' clothing. Further, she abandons the gendered notions of female materiality and male essence by representing the soul as a female body within a female body, although she simultaneously uses the rhetoric of the shameful female body, whereby she reinstates the binary opposition of body and soul. Lastly, both Hildegard and Bernard exploit the rhetoric of the female body's shameful and vulnerability, but they ultimately shy away from subjecting such a lofty figure as the Church to an explicitly sexual threat. To conclude, Hildegard uses gendered metaphors to make her message emotionally compelling, but these metaphors also escape her control. The binary oppositions on



which they are built break down, and the literal level breaks into the figural level time and again, so that there arise meanings that Hildegard thinks go too far and meanings that would contradict what she tries to say (cf. de Man; Johnson). This is due to the fact that the binary opposition of male and female is ultimately untenable and to the fact that femininity cannot be abstracted from femaleness.

In conclusion, it is not possible to separate negatively valued, embodied femaleness from positively valued, disembodied femininity in Hildegard's texts. More generally, it is not possible to create and interpret personifications that are not implicated in the gender dynamics of the society in which this is done: there are no personifications that do not have a gender.

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