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*Induit me dominus ciclade auro:*  
The *Ordo Virtutum* as Liturgical Commentary

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*During the twentieth century historians have gone from dismissing mystic Hildegard of Bingen's poetic work as bad Latin to lionizing Hildegard for her anachronistic genius. The task of contemporary Hildegardian scholars is to honor her individuality while elucidating her significance for the twelfth-century "Renaissance." In this study of her musical drama, the Ordo Virtutum, I challenge and modify other historians' theories of when the play could have been performed to lay the foundation for an argument that the Ordo Virtutum can be interpreted as a liturgical commentary on the mass for the Consecration of Virgins and a detailed analysis of what comments Hildegard makes on this section of the liturgy, using the text of the play and the ordo in the Mainz Pontifical as my two primary sources. I conclude that the field of Hildegardian studies would benefit from more in-depth and highly detailed intertextual analysis focusing on her debt to the liturgy of the twelfth century along with other texts she alludes to, and that this more literary approach may be the key to decoding and articulating her role and significance in her historical context, thus ending her isolation as a peculiar visionary.*

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"Like all religions, Christianity is deeply paradoxical, because it must give significance to both life and death. Paradox is not, by definition, solvable; it can only be asserted, experienced, lived. Christian devotion is especially inflected with paradox, because it places at the very center the shocking, oxymoronic enfleshing of the divine. It is this coincidence of opposites that late medieval women sought to convey and live."<sup>1</sup>

**Historiography: *Ordo Virtutum***

In the introduction to a recent collection of critical essays on the work of Hildegard of Bingen, Maud Burnett McInerney, the editor of the volume, makes the following statement: "Abbess, virgin, prophet, poet, theologian, scientist, musician, natural historian, exorcist, excommunicate and saint—no

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<sup>1</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Patterns of Female Piety in the Later Middle Ages," in Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti, eds., *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 188.

other single figure of the Middle Ages embodies quite so many contradictions.”<sup>2</sup> These “contradictions” have fascinated and puzzled contemporaries and historians for centuries and have inspired differing opinions about Hildegard’s work, her role in monastic and lay society, and her underlying philosophy. Regarding her work, particularly her musical and poetic compositions, there has been a shift detectable on the critical barometer even during the twentieth century. In reaction to strict German and English grammarians who denigrated the “weak” Latin verse Hildegard employed in her collection of songs, the *Symphonia*, and particularly her musical drama, the *Ordo Virtutum*, two generations of historians set out to explicitly rehabilitate her reputation.<sup>3</sup> These historians thrived on and have been stymied by the attractive quality that initially drew them to study and promote Hildegard of Bingen: her prolific and apparently anachronistic talent—her singularity. As Hildegard’s modern-day defenders have struggled to extricate her poetic and musical work, especially the *Ordo Virtutum*, from the grasp of earlier criticism, they have been confronted again and again with the problem of her significance. They have, therefore, shifted their focus from trying to establish her in the canon of medieval literature to trying to find a way to incorporate her liturgical musical drama into the mainstream of twelfth-century monastic scholarship, an attempt that has yet to come to fruition.

Most early German and English works that pass harsh judgment on Hildegard’s verse and the *Ordo Virtutum* were published during the first third of the twentieth century and today are hard to find. Fortunately, they were so offensive to modern Hildegardian scholars that one can find a sampling of their observations in quite a few of their essays. From Gunilla Iversen, in a collection of critical studies on the *Ordo Virtutum*, we learn that Guido Maria Dreves “said in 1909 that [Hildegard] mastered neither the Latin language nor poetic form so that her own texts could only be considered ‘Kladden,’ not

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<sup>2</sup> Maud Burnett McNerney, “Introduction: Hildegard of Bingen, Prophet and Polymath,” in Maud Burnett McNerney, ed., *Hildegard of Bingen: A Book of Essays* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1998), xviii.

<sup>3</sup> McNerney, xxiii.

finished work but rough drafts or sketches.”<sup>4</sup> In McInerney’s introduction, she noted F. J. E. Raby’s “offhand treatment” of “Hildegard, the famous mystic, whose sequences are in prose”<sup>5</sup> in his 1927 text *A History of Christian Latin Poetry*. English historians of medieval liturgical drama ignored the *Ordo Virtutum*,<sup>6</sup> and a German arranger butchered Hildegard’s original musical vision by fixing “flaws” in Hildegard’s composition.<sup>7</sup> Beginning with Peter Dronke’s treatment of Hildegard in *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* (1970), the first wave of Hildegardian scholars felt the need to react against this seeming abuse and began to seriously analyze Hildegard’s works for the first time in light of her previous neglect.

Peter Dronke is the acknowledged father of modern Hildegardian studies, followed closely behind by historians such as Barbara Newman and Carolyn Walker Bynum. The first wave of critical assessment of Hildegard’s work that followed the publication of his *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages* in 1970 concerned itself with her “overpowering, electrifying presence” as a theologian, poet, musician, and dramatist.<sup>8</sup> Dismissing earlier German criticism of Hildegard’s verse by commenting that detractors like Josef Gmelch “could not envisage principles of poetic form beyond the conventional ones of regular metre and rhyme”—in a footnote, no less—Dronke opined that her songs “contain some of the most unusual, subtle, and exciting poetry of the twelfth century” and that the *Ordo Virtutum* is “at the summit of twelfth-century dramatic achievement.”<sup>9</sup> No longer were Hildegard’s idiosyncratic Latin

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<sup>4</sup> Gunilla Iversen, “*Ego Humilitatis, regina Virtutum*: Poetic Language and Literary Structure in Hildegard of Bingen’s Vision of the Virtues,” in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 79.

<sup>5</sup> McInerney, xxiii.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Potter, “The *Ordo Virtutum*: Ancestor of English Morality Plays?” in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 31.

<sup>7</sup> Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, “Music and Performance: Hildegard of Bingen’s *Ordo Virtutum*,” in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 2.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages: A Critical Study of Texts from Perpetua (†203) to Marguerite Porete (†1310)* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 144.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Dronke, *Poetic Individuality in the Middle Ages: New Departures in Poetry, 1000-1150* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 151.

and unfamiliarity with the conventions of Latin verse a flaw, for Hildegard composed her songs “in a poetic *Kunstsprosa*, or ‘free verse,’”<sup>10</sup> and her poetry “achieves a visionary concentration and an evocative and associative richness that set it apart from nearly all other religious poetry of its age.”<sup>11</sup> In 1987, Barbara Newman wrote one of the first modern book-length studies on Hildegard’s work, calling her “a woman fascinating in the sheer breadth of her accomplishment, yet strangely alienated from her context.”<sup>12</sup> Newman decides to place her in what she calls the “sapiential tradition” that “will link her not only with contemporaries but also with kindred spirits of other times and places,”<sup>13</sup> after discarding mystical, “women’s writing,” political, or “prescholastic” frameworks for interpretation.<sup>14</sup> Both Dronke and Newman, while they differ in their method of approach to their subject—one by literary analysis, the other by feminist theology—have strikingly similar attitudes. They argue that Hildegard of Bingen is a person of significance in twelfth-century intellectual history who had been wrongly passed over, and that there is a supernal quality to her work that transcends her historical context and makes her unique. The second generation of Hildegard’s scholars inherited this conflict and has yet to resolve it.

The cohort of historians writing about Hildegard’s *Ordo Virtutum* in the past fifteen years, the self-named second wave or generation, has still continued to defend Hildegard’s reputation rather than make a serious attempt to place the drama in historical context. In the first and so far only collection of critical studies dealing specifically with the *Ordo Virtutum*, a collection published in 1992, each author makes the point of first defending the work as original and aesthetically significant. Audrey Ekdahl Davidson embarks on an in-depth analysis of the musical score, saying, “its remarkable text is set to music which is no less powerful in its aesthetic effect.”<sup>15</sup> Robert Potter disputes that the drama is an

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<sup>10</sup> Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, 157.

<sup>11</sup> Dronke, *Poetic Individuality*, 179.

<sup>12</sup> Barbara Newman, *Sister of Wisdom: St. Hildegard’s Theology of the Feminine* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), xv.

<sup>13</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, xvii.

<sup>14</sup> Newman, *Sister of Wisdom*, xvi.

<sup>15</sup> Ekdahl Davidson, 1.

early morality play, stating that the “*Ordo Virtutum* stands alone and unprecedented, a unique creation of its kind.”<sup>16</sup> Pamela Sheingorn contends that Hildegard’s scheme of the Virtues is unique.<sup>17</sup> Julia Bolton Holloway claims that the *Ordo Virtutum* is a virtuoso play on the monastic tradition of vicarious disobedience versus actual adherence to the Benedictine Rule.<sup>18</sup> Gunilla Iversen opines that Hildegard, unlike her contemporaries, drew her “free verse” style from the psalms.<sup>19</sup> Clifford Davidson, who has produced several performances of the *Ordo Virtutum*, explains that its “originality of design is unparalleled, and hence it is vital that its structure and meaning be understood and respected.”<sup>20</sup> By emphasizing, again, Hildegard’s superior uniqueness, these scholars only manage to hint something of the *Ordo Virtutum*’s significance in the history of twelfth-century literature and monastic culture; other scholars of the second wave were left with the task of establishing her significance.

In the aforementioned recent book of essays on Hildegard’s contribution to twelfth-century literature published in 1998, McNerney boldly proclaims that the time has come “for Hildegard to be appreciated in the fullest context of medieval history.”<sup>21</sup> McNerney then proposes that the goal of today’s Hildegardian scholars is to “re-establish her as a complex, original and important contributor to the intellectual currents of the twelfth century, as a part of the mainstream rather than the margins.”<sup>22</sup> Although two of the wide-ranging essays of this volume touch on her verse and music, no essay focuses specifically on the *Ordo Virtutum*, leaving a more comprehensive word on the historical context of this liturgical drama, somehow so very significant and beautiful, unspoken.

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<sup>16</sup> Potter, 40.

<sup>17</sup> Pamela Sheingorn, “The Virtues of Hildegard’s *Ordo Virtutum*; or, It Was a Woman’s World,” in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 47.

<sup>18</sup> Julia Bolton Holloway, “The Monastic Context of Hildegard’s *Ordo Virtutum*,” in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 63.

<sup>19</sup> Gunilla Iversen, 80.

<sup>20</sup> Clifford Davidson, “The *Ordo Virtutum*: A Note on Production,” in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 111.

<sup>21</sup> McNerney, xxv.

<sup>22</sup> McNerney, xxv.

Critical attitudes toward Hildegard’s work as a poet, musician, and dramatist have shifted throughout the twentieth century from dismissive criticism, to eloquent and analytical apologetics, to a nascent attempt to appreciate works like the *Ordo Virtutum* within the context of the textually rich and vibrant twelfth-century “renaissance.” In 2004, an intriguing volume entitled *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars* was published in the University of Sydney’s *Making the Middle Ages* series with the aim of allowing scholars of medieval women to reflect on how they first encountered and became enamored with their subjects. Towards the end of Constant J. Mews’s invaluable retrospective on the course that both Hildegardian studies and her popular fame have taken in the past thirty years, he muses that Hildegard, while interesting, did not remain the “maistresse of his wit.”<sup>23</sup> Rather, she “expanded my area of awareness, by alerting me to a breadth of imaginative vision quite different from anything encouraged by the schools of Paris in the twelfth century. She was only one of a number of creative teachers in the twelfth century, each of whom has something to say.”<sup>24</sup> Perhaps this particular attitude, eschewing the temptation to become “narrow disciples of Hildegard,”<sup>25</sup> will guide the twenty-first-century scholars who continue to propose new models of interpretation and contextualization for her haunting music and Latin verse in the *Ordo Virtutum*. This essay will begin, therefore, to tentatively address this need for new models and approaches for analyzing the *Ordo Virtutum*—specifically, in this case, as a liturgical commentary, a traditional twelfth-century literary form.

#### **Source Description: *Ordo Virtutum***

The *Ordo Virtutum* is a musical drama composed sometime around 1151 by the Benedictine *magistra* Hildegard of Bingen (1058-1179). Hildegard of Bingen was the tenth child in a noble family and was given to the convent at Disibodenberg in the Diocese of Speyer, under the care of a mystic named

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<sup>23</sup> Mews. Constant J., “Encountering Hildegard: Between Apocalypse and The New Age,” in Louise D. d’Arcens and Juanita Feros Ruys, eds., *Maistresse of My Wit: Medieval Women, Modern Scholars, Making the Middle Ages*, vol. 7 (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers, Inc., 2004), 90.

<sup>24</sup> Mews, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Mews, 92.

Jutta. After Jutta's death in 1136, Hildegard was elected *magistra* of her community at Disibodenberg. Around 1150, she established a community for twenty young women of noble birth in Rupertsberg, where the *Ordo Virtutum* was most likely performed. Since she was a young girl, Hildegard experienced waking visions that accompanied severe physical weakness.<sup>26</sup> In her first *vita*, begun when she was still alive by one of her loyal scribes and containing several autobiographical sections, she writes, "whenever I saw these things deep in my soul I still retained outer sight, and that I heard this said of no other human being."<sup>27</sup> Though Oliver Sacks has argued that Hildegard's "visions" were migraine-induced,<sup>28</sup> she still differs from other mystics in that her visions of the future and "unfathomable" things occurred when she was awake and lucid; therefore, one can read works like the *Ordo Virtutum* with relative certainty that the words and the music and imaginative vision behind them are those of an artist in full mastery of her craft.

Scholars studying the *Ordo Virtutum* today have a fortunately reliable manuscript tradition on which to rely. The music and text of the *Ordo Virtutum* is the last entry in the *Riesenkodex*, MS 2 in the Hessische Landesbibliothek, Wiesbaden,<sup>29</sup> and most scholars believe that this "collected edition" of her works was compiled toward the end of her life in her own scriptorium.<sup>30</sup> There are also two other copies of the *Ordo Virtutum* extant: one written for Johannes Trithemius in 1487, probably copied from the *Riesenkodex*, and another in a gathering of the MS Dendermonde 9, which is currently missing.<sup>31</sup> Although the original copy is still intact and accessible, there is currently no critical edition of the text of *Ordo Virtutum*: the closest equivalent is Peter Dronke's meticulous translation and introductory essay in

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<sup>26</sup> Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 145.

<sup>27</sup> Dronke, *Women Writers of the Middle Ages*, 145.

<sup>28</sup> Oliver Sacks, *Migraine: Understanding a Common Disorder* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 106-108.

<sup>29</sup> Peter Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 156.

<sup>30</sup> Marianna Schrader and Adelgundis Führkötter, *Die Echtheit des Schrifttums der heiligen Hildegard von Bingen* (Cologne-Graz: Böhlau-Verlag, 1956), 154-79; Guibert of Gembloux, *Guiberti Gemblacensis, Epistolae quae in codice B.R. Brux. 5527-5534 inueniuntur*, ed. Albert Derolez (CCCM 66, 1988), xxx-xxxi; *Hildegardis Bigensis: Epistolarum I*, ed. Lieven Van Acker (CCCM 91, 1991), xxvii-xxix, quoted in Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, footnotes 2 and 3.

<sup>31</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 156.



his *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*. The text of the play itself is quite short, and as it unfortunately was passed over for full inclusion in the critical editions of *Scivias* and of the *Symphoniae*, a collection of Hildegard's other songs, one cannot be sure when a critical edition of the play will be released. The scholar of the *Ordo Virtutum*, however, is blessed with much more certainty as to the authorship and origin of her text than the texts many other historians study, and he or she can proceed to study the work with confidence that he or she is truly engaging with a twelfth-century text composed by a twelfth-century woman named Hildegard of Bingen.

The *Ordo Virtutum* occupies a curious position in the history of medieval drama. The play, recorded during the last few decades of Hildegard's life in the *Riesenkodex* or "giant codex" that contains her visionary and lyrical works,<sup>32</sup> seems to be clearly kin to both earlier medieval allegories such as Prudentius' *Psychomachia*, written in the fifth century, and later medieval morality plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance* or *Everyman*, from the fifteenth century. The play features seventeen solo roles for female vocalists (sixteen embodied virtues and *Anima*, the Every soul protagonist), one spoken male role (*Diabolus*), a female chorus, and a male chorus,<sup>33</sup> and it tells the story of *Anima's* fall from innocence and her redemption through the intervention of the embodied virtues, in particular *Humilitas* and *Castitas*. Certain elements of the *Ordo Virtutum*, however, have prompted spirited inquiry since Peter Dronke reintroduced the *Ordo Virtutum* to an English-speaking academic audience in 1970. Scholars have investigated whether the play can, in fact, be considered a true morality play in the same tradition as the English vernacular dramas of the fourteenth century and onward and also whether the play was ever performed, among many other critical questions of genre and significance within the history of performance.

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<sup>32</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 156.

<sup>33</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 154.

The *Ordo Virtutum*, according to Robert Potter, bears some superficial similarities to later morality plays, but this resemblance is deceptive.<sup>34</sup> Like later plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, *Mankind*, and *Wisdom*, the *Ordo Virtutum* focuses “on the progress of the Soul from innocence into sin and on to repentance—the pattern of action which embodies the definitive structure of the later vernacular moralities.”<sup>35</sup> Several scholars, however, have noted two important differences worth discussing: the unique constitution of the *dramatis personae*, and the *Ordo Virtutum*’s “philosophical, musical, and poetic elevation.”<sup>36</sup>

Robert Potter points out that the sixteen embodied virtues are “arrayed against a single and badly outnumbered opponent, the Devil,” unlike later morality plays such as *The Castle of Perseverance*, in which God Himself is outnumbered by the forces of evil.<sup>37</sup> Furthermore, as Pamela Sheingorn argues, Hildegard’s array of powerful virtues is unique in that the Virtues do not have to oppose their antithetical vices, as in the *Psychomachia*, and that “the selection of Virtues does not correspond to any scheme or list of Virtues devised by medieval thinkers.”<sup>38</sup> The language and “lofty tone”<sup>39</sup> of the *Ordo Virtutum*, furthermore, is distinct from the feel of later morality plays. Unlike later morality plays such as *Wisdom*, in which the *Anima* character degrades herself “in prodigal scenes of London underworld debauchery and legal satire, culminating in a dance of Vices, devils, gallants, whores, and perjured jurymen,”<sup>40</sup> the *Ordo Virtutum*’s *Anima* falls from grace tastefully offstage. The language of the *Ordo Virtutum*, praised with both sympathetic and apologetic eloquence by scholars such as Peter Dronke,

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Potter, “The *Ordo Virtutum*: Ancestor of English Morality Plays?”, in Audrey Ekdhahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 33.

<sup>35</sup> Potter, 32.

<sup>36</sup> Potter, 34.

<sup>37</sup> Potter, 33.

<sup>38</sup> Pamela Sheingorn, “The Virtues of Hildegard’s *Ordo Virtutum*; or, It Was a Woman’s World,” in Audrey Ekdhahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992), 47.

<sup>39</sup> Potter, 34.

<sup>40</sup> Potter, 38.

demonstrates Hildegard's "special gift for fusing and compressing images";<sup>41</sup> Pamela Sheingorn suggests that despite "the implication of direct and simple action given by [the] plot summary, Hildegard's text is filled with metaphor and allusive language susceptible to a variety of interpretations."<sup>42</sup> These elements of the *Ordo Virtutum* lead many scholars to remark about comparing the drama to later morality plays, perhaps most evocatively said by Robert Potter, that "[i]t is the difference between a Byzantine icon and a Bruegel painting. Both indeed may be devotional works of art, but they are of a different order."<sup>43</sup>

### Performance Theories

Turning to the problem of the performance of this "elite ceremony of innocence,"<sup>44</sup> there are two schools of thought: a more conservative view of the role of women in medieval productions, and Peter Dronke's alternative performance theory, which many Hildegardian scholars accept or modify slightly today. As there is no direct evidence for a performance of the *Ordo Virtutum*, scholars such as Ekehard Simon claim that "it is poor sociology to claim [...] that Hildegard and the nuns of Bingen would have staged the Ordo in the convent cloister," as "theatre was the province of men."<sup>45</sup> Peter Dronke and his successors, however, point to a persuasive body of circumstantial evidence that suggest that Hildegard of Bingen and her nuns did in fact put on such a production.<sup>46</sup>

Peter Dronke's argument, reiterated by other recent essays on Hildegard's play, aims to "remove certain historical misconceptions."<sup>47</sup> First of all, if "it was unusual for medieval religious women to perform plays, Hildegard was far-reachingly unusual," which, considering her

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<sup>41</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 150.

<sup>42</sup> Sheingorn, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Potter, 38.

<sup>44</sup> Potter, 38.

<sup>45</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 152.

<sup>46</sup> In addition to the following summary of Peter Dronke's theory, it should be noted that every single scholar in Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, ed., *The Ordo Virtutum of Hildegard of Bingen: Critical Studies* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Medieval Institute Publications, 1992) assumes or explicitly states that the *Ordo Virtutum* was staged. The scholars featured in this book are Audrey Ekdahl Davidson, Robert Potter, Pamela Sheingorn, Julia Bolton Holloway, Gunilla Iversen, and Clifford Davidson.

<sup>47</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 153.

accomplishments—preaching tours, performing exorcisms, correspondence with popes and emperors—is not that far-reaching of a claim to make.<sup>48</sup> A woman who dressed her nuns “in white veils, rings, and elaborately designed tiaras” on feast days despite criticism from her contemporaries was probably not going to shy away from putting on a play.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, there are certain clues in the text of the *Riesenkodex*—compiled during the last years of her life—that suggest a stage production.<sup>50</sup> Not only does the text of the play have carefully written music accompanying it, but it also contains guiding phrases more intended for performers than readers.<sup>51</sup> Expressions such as *felix*, *gravata*, *infelix*, *Querela penitentis*, and *penitens*—in addition to the constant *strepitus* applied to *Diabolus*—are unnecessary to the reader, as the lyrics convey these emotions quite well by themselves: they would be useful, however, as stage directions.<sup>52</sup> Dronke also suggests a direct correspondence between Hildegard’s twenty nuns (“*viginti puellis nobilibus et de divitibus parentibus natis*,” and therefore more likely to be musically trained) and the female roles in the *Ordo Virtutum* (*Anima*, the sixteen Virtues, and three women left over for the chorus of embodied souls).<sup>53</sup> This correspondence and the very specifically rendered “costumes” for these same sixteen Virtues in the miniatures accompanying the text of *Scivias*, probably composed around the same time, all suggest to Dronke and other Hildegardian scholars that the play was performed.

Upon what occasion this play would have been performed, however, is open to debate. Several scholars have suggested that the most likely opportunity would have been the inauguration of Hildegard’s monastery at Rupertsberg,<sup>54</sup> without much justification for this claim beyond the fact that such an event would have fit several dramatically felicitous criteria: a special ceremony which many

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<sup>48</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 153.

<sup>49</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 153.

<sup>50</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 153.

<sup>51</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 154.

<sup>52</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 154. In English: happily, depressed, unhappily, lamenting penitently, penitently, and the Devil, “shouting.”

<sup>53</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 154. In English: “twenty noble girls and born of wealthy parents.”

<sup>54</sup> Sheingorn, 51.

people, lay and religious, were bound to attend. A more interesting theory advanced by Pamela Sheingorn suggests another alternative that also fits these criteria: that it was performed at the ceremony for the consecration of virgins.

The ceremony for the consecration of virgins was perhaps the most important rite of a nun's life, during which her parents handed her over to the Bishop, as though in marriage to Christ, and she received the robe, veil, and crown of a nun, pledging and receiving certain assurances in return, much like any other marriage ceremony. The text of this liturgy, which will be addressed in far more detail later on in this essay, will be drawn from the most influential and complete published version of the liturgy that most closely resembles what would have been used in Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg during Hildegard's lifetime, *Le Pontifical Romano-Germanique Du Dixième Siècle*, edited by Cyrille Vogel. This text will be referred to as the Mainz Pontifical for the remainder of this essay.<sup>55</sup>

Sheingorn suggests that the *Ordo Virtutum* would be performed directly before the mass for a nun's consecration would begin.<sup>56</sup> She argues that there are "many ways in which [the *ordo* for the consecration of virgins] and Hildegard's play form an appropriate whole, echoing and re-echoing similar themes," and that the ending of the play "provides a perfect transition to the *Ordo* for the Consecration of Virgins."<sup>57</sup> Sheingorn then proceeds through the ritual elements of this *ordo*, pointing out the corollaries she perceives between them and the dramatic action of the *Ordo Virtutum*. The similarities she points out between the *Ordo Virtutum* and the *ordo consecratio sacrae virginis* are indeed striking, and any reader who examines both texts is bound to agree that they are related both dramatically and

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<sup>55</sup> Of course, to use a text even closer to that used in Hildegard's lifetime, one would have to travel to Disibodenberg and Rupertsberg in order to examine the original manuscripts that may have been in local use at that time—manuscripts that may or may not exist. Where applicable, version "B" of the rite in the Mainz Pontifical will be used, a version associated with Bamberg, because this is the closest fit geographically. The Mainz Pontifical, as edited by Vogel, is a monumental work for which space does not permit a full source description. However, Vogel gives a full and thorough background of the documents that would eventually constitute this version of the liturgy in a companion volume; see Cyrille Vogel, *Medieval Liturgy: An Introduction to the Sources*, trans. William G. Storey and Niels Krogh Rasmussen, O.P. (Washington, D.C.: The Pastoral Press, 1986).

<sup>56</sup> Sheingorn, 52.

<sup>57</sup> Sheingorn, 52-53.

thematically. The claim, however, that the *Ordo Virtutum* is somehow incomplete, that the ending of the *Ordo Virtutum* provides a “perfect transition” into the *consecratio virginum*, or that the two texts “form an appropriate whole” is a bold one, and bears far greater scrutiny.

### ***I. Incomplete Ordo?***

Sheingorn interprets the fact that the *Ordo Virtutum* “echoes and re-echoes” themes in the *ordo* for the consecration of virgins as evidence for her theory that the *Ordo Virtutum* was performed in preparation for that specific mass. In the process of making an argument on timing, however, she makes an implicit argument about the *Ordo Virtutum*’s literary character that remains unexamined throughout the rest of her article: if the *Ordo* and the *ordo* form “an appropriate whole,” then the *Ordo Virtutum* must be in some way incomplete as a dramatic work. This assumption proves puzzling after even the most cursory reading of the *Ordo Virtutum*; the play has a clear beginning, middle, and end. Happy *Anima* is unable to resist *Diabolus*’s temptation to enjoy the world she has foresworn, then she falls and the Virtues lament her and sing of themselves; finally, a battered *Anima* returns, the Virtues bind *Diabolus*, and everyone joins in one final choral number proclaiming Christ’s mission in the world. Beyond a superficial coherency, furthermore, there is a strong internal structure to the work, a thematic integrity that does not rely on that of the *ordo* for the consecration of virgins.

Looking at the opening and close of the *Ordo Virtutum*, we find that Hildegard has posed and answered her own questions independent of the mass for the consecration of virgins. The *Ordo Virtutum* begins with the Patriarchs and Prophets asking the Virtues, “Who are these, who are like clouds?”<sup>58</sup> The rest of the drama is an in-depth answer to this question and to *Diabolus*’s counterpoint that “none of you even know what you are!”<sup>59</sup> Each of the seventeen Virtues introduces herself independently, but the overall theme of the Virtues’ identity revolves around very specific imagery

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<sup>58</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 161.

<sup>59</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 165.

regarding Christ's body ("we shine with him, building up the limbs of his beautiful body"<sup>60</sup>), plant imagery ("fruits of the living eye"<sup>61</sup>), and martial activity ("We must fight [*militare*] with you, royal daughter [i.e. *Anima*]."<sup>62</sup>), and eroticism (as *Humilitas* says, she will "keep [the Virtues'] place in the royal wedding-chamber"<sup>63</sup>) that simply does not occur in the *ordo*.<sup>64</sup> Furthermore, these initial themes are not random: they are resolved in the final scene, in which the cast, as Christ, the "fiery fountain of love"<sup>65</sup> and "champion,"<sup>66</sup> speak of His body, the loss of *viriditas* (Hildegard's word for Edenic greenness), and the ultimate significance of this struggle against the flesh: healing and restoration of what was lost.

Sheingorn has presented no compelling argument as to why we should believe that the *Ordo Virtutum*'s final word is not, in fact, the final word that Hildegard had in mind, which makes Sheingorn's argument that the *Ordo Virtutum* is only the first half of a nun's consecration seem tenuous. I would argue, in fact, that her argument about the sequence of and transition between these two events is in fact logically untenable, or at the very least logistically impractical.

## ***II. Transition between the Ordo and ordo?***

Sheingorn cites Audrey Eckdahl Davidson's argument that the last chorus of the *Ordo Virtutum* is a procession within the same church in which the mass for the *consecratio sacrae virginis* would take place, doing so in order to argue that *Anima* would be received by the bishop as the Christ who spoke at the end of the *Ordo Virtutum*, calling it "a perfect transition."<sup>67</sup> Looking carefully at the text of the *Ordo Virtutum* and Cyrille Vogel's published version of the Mainz Pontifical, however, complicates this

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<sup>60</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 161.

<sup>61</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 161.

<sup>62</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 163.

<sup>63</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 167.

<sup>64</sup> Although the *ordo* is essentially a marriage ceremony, with the nun as bride and Christ as bridegroom, the nuptial imagery in the liturgical text is not erotic, and does not refer to Song of Songs.

<sup>65</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 179.

<sup>66</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 181.

<sup>67</sup> Sheingorn, 52.

interpretation. Sheingorn asserts that the “final speech” of the *Ordo Virtutum* is in Christ’s voice;<sup>68</sup> yet this assertion is only partially accurate. Most of the final chorus is indeed in Christ’s voice, as embodied by eighteen to twenty female singers, but according to Dronke’s edition of the play, the final sentence is not—it is in the voice of the Virtues and Souls. “So now,” the nuns would sing, “all you people, bend your knees to the Father, that he may reach you his hand.”<sup>69</sup> At this point, according to Sheingorn, the bishop as *Sponsus* would take “*Anima*” into the pseudo-marriage ceremony of a nun’s consecration. This act does not quite make sense in terms of the end of the *Ordo Virtutum*, as the Virtues and Souls themselves speak as Christ, and the only aspect or “Person” of God that is outside this performance is God the Father, not God as *Sponsus*. They are not offering *Anima* to Christ: *Anima*, with the other Virtues and souls, is Christ, urging *omnes homines* to humble themselves before God. At this point, *Anima*’s character development is complete, and her role as an individual irrelevant; she is a part of Christ’s body. Therefore, from the perspective of the *Ordo Virtutum*, a transition into a ceremony for “*Anima*’s” consecration does not logically follow.

Coming from the perspective of the Mainz Pontifical text, a transition also does not seem inevitable. Sheingorn notes that before the mass for her consecration, the girl receives the bishop’s hand as a bride would her husband’s at the church door, given by her parents.<sup>70</sup> She does not make clear in her argument, however, whether she believes that the role of *Anima* would be played by the girl herself; if so, the logistics of how an independent *Anima* would extricate herself from her role in the chorus within the church, go outside, and in the care of her parents, receive the bishop at the door, sound convoluted. More likely, Sheingorn believes that the character of *Anima* represents the girl who is to be consecrated; in other words, the girl playing *Anima* and the girl undergoing consecration are not the same person. This separation already creates a disconnect, not a transition, between the action of

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<sup>68</sup> Sheingorn, 53.

<sup>69</sup> Dronke, 181.

<sup>70</sup> Sheingorn, 54.



the *Ordo Virtutum* and that of the mass to follow. And perhaps this disconnect is a necessary one, considering that *Anima* falls from purity (whether she falls from chastity remains ambiguous) and that the ceremony to follow is that of a wealthy virgin of good family! If we are envisioning the bishop moving down the aisle of the church to receive the girl's hand at the door during the finale of the *Ordo Virtutum*, we are confronted, again, by the last lines of the *Ordo Virtutum*: the *Father* will reach you his hand. If God the Father is to take the girl's hand, then how does the audience turn the outstretched hand of the bishop into that of God the Son, the *Sponsus*? A transition between the *Ordo Virtutum* and the *ordo*, assuming they were performed on the same day and in that order, as Sheingorn argues, is possible despite these subtle but jarring symbolic difficulties and disconnects, but it is by no means "perfect," which undermines her assertion that the two performances form "an appropriate whole."

### III. Symmetry between the *Ordo* and the *ordo*

Sheingorn's argument that the *Ordo Virtutum* leads into the *ordo* depends upon the two works' essential symmetry ("echoing and re-echoing themes"), which is odd considering that the two texts cannot be parallel and continuous at the same time. In both dramatic productions, the female protagonist receives a garment that signifies her commitment to virginity and the work of a nun, she is promised to the divine *Sponsus* and receives a crown, virtues of various kinds are to aid her in this religious life, and she resists the devil. If the *Ordo* and the *ordo* are to be two halves of one dramatic event, then it would seem that the second half recapitulates the first, which would be a strange choice for a public entertainment: why, exactly, would Hildegard reinvent the wheel? Furthermore, while the intertextual dialogue between the two texts is distinctly audible, a closer examination reveals that they are not, actually, symmetrical or parallel at all. In the liturgy as printed in the Mainz Pontifical, the focus of the action is on the maiden's veiling and robing itself—multiple blessings are said over the dress, the veil, the crown, and the ring. Only afterward does the girl put them on and lead the congregation in

various antiphons.<sup>71</sup> Upon a close reading of the *Ordo Virtutum*, the reader notices that *Anima* has already been robed.

In fact, in the beginning of the play, *Anima* laments the “grievous toil [and] harsh weight” that she bears “in the dress of this life.” *Anima* is already clothed with a “dress” that she is tempted to take off, and *Scientia Dei* tells her to look at the dress she is wearing to help her remain steadfast;<sup>72</sup> considering that any reference to robes and dresses probably does relate back to the original liturgy in which the maiden is robed, the “dress” that *Anima* already wears is most likely that of a nun. *Anima*, in addition to representing a sort of Every soul, is a nun, not a girl becoming a nun. Unless the *Ordo Virtutum* can be seen as a sort of ultimately hopeful cautionary tale as a prelude to the *ordo*, the adventures of *Anima* and the Virtues can best be seen as a sequel to the initial consecration. This understanding completely undermines Sheingorn’s argument—either the *Ordo Virtutum* and the *ordo consecratio sacrae virginis* are two separate though related works, or her performance scenario is incorrect and the *Ordo Virtutum* could only be staged *after* the *ordo* for any kind of sequential “wholeness” to make sense.

As a performance theory, Sheingorn’s hypothesis is compelling: there are very striking similarities between the two works, and it would make sense for the *Ordo Virtutum* to be staged directly before the *ordo* not, perhaps, as a single text, but as a single community event. When Sheingorn attempts to make the argument that the ceremony completes the action of the *Ordo Virtutum*, however, she makes an argument about the text of the *Ordo Virtutum* that is found wanting and that is unnecessary for her otherwise quite convincing theory about when the play could have been performed. When one tries to eliminate the differences between the two texts in order to make a connection between them, one misses the richness of both, and particularly that of Hildegard’s innovative musical,

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<sup>71</sup> Cyrille Vogel, *Le Pontifical Romano-Germanique Du Dixième Siècle* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1963), 44.

<sup>72</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 163.

dramatic, and theological work. One perceives in the *Ordo Virtutum* a many-layered meditation on the significance of a religious life, of a woman's life, of the Church's life, and of a human soul's life, all centered around echoes and re-echoes of the liturgy that shaped Hildegard's community and Hildegard herself. While it is reasonable and interesting to speculate that the performance of the *Ordo Virtutum* and the ceremony of the consecration of holy virgins may have coincided, or even that the *Ordo Virtutum* could have been composed for such an occasion, the interaction between the *Ordo Virtutum* and the text that inspired it is even more intriguing. As two separate yet related texts, the *Ordo Virtutum* can be seen not only as a preparation for, or participation in, a specific liturgical ceremony, but also as a legitimate commentary on the *ordo consecration sacrae virginis* itself.

#### **IV. The *Ordo Virtutum* as a Liturgical Commentary: Proposal**

The tradition of liturgical commentary, a well-known branch of Christian theology since the Patristic period that elucidated the symbolic meaning of ritual actions for the spiritual benefit of priests and readers, underwent an interesting shift in style during the twelfth century before a more identifiably scholastic style of liturgical commentary became consolidated in the thirteenth. Liturgical commentaries became more inventive in their execution, and there are recognized examples of such commentaries that venture beyond an expository format. For example, the *Seal of Blessed Mary* by Honorius Augustodunensis, written probably by 1103,<sup>73</sup> while technically an example of a commentary on Song of Songs and not a specific mass from the liturgy, marks a departure from purely expository commentary in that Honorius deliberately manipulates and reframes this poem as a dialogue between Mary and Christ before commenting upon his arrangement. Not only is this treatment notable in the history of Marian theology,<sup>74</sup> but it is also important to note for the purpose of trends in the writing of commentary on scripture and liturgy that Honorius takes a deliberate, artistic liberty with a sacred text for the sake of

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<sup>73</sup> Honorius Augustodunensis, *The Seal of Blessed Mary*, trans. Amelia Carr (Toronto: Peregrina Publishing Co., 1991), 13.

<sup>74</sup> Honorius Augustodunensis, 18.

instruction, almost dramatizing what was originally a written poem. Although by no means a fully realized work of drama or a commentary indirect in its allusions, this work does suggest that it is not unreasonable to assume that commentary could be done in such a way at this time.

One may question, however, to what extent Hildegard would have had access to the text of the liturgy—that is, beyond the actual performances of the *ordo* whenever a new nun joined her fold—and to what extent she would have had the education to comprehend it, as standards for the education of female religious have never been known to enjoy full parity with those of their brethren. In the area in which Hildegard was born and raised, however, there was a rich and well-documented tradition of rigorous scribal education; Disibodenberg, where she spent the formative years of her life before becoming *magistra* at Rupertsberg, has been identified with the Hirsau reform movement<sup>75</sup> which, like many other twelfth-century reform movements, called for a strict observance of the Benedictine Rule while also resisting outside authority and interference.<sup>76</sup> The association with this movement may explain the great deal of freedom Hildegard was able to exercise in running her community and staging dramatic productions.

Although women were “generally excluded from the discourse of eleventh-century papal reform,” as Alison Beach writes in a recent study on female book production in twelfth-century Bavaria, many women worked “as scribes, helping to copy biblical and liturgical texts, patristic sermons and commentaries, saints’ lives, histories, grammars, and canon law texts.” Nowhere was this sort of activity as encouraged as in the monasteries affiliated with Hirsau.<sup>77</sup> The longstanding debate in Hildegardian studies over the extent to which Hildegard wrote her own works and to what extent her scribes influenced the style of her prose, a debate too broad to engage here, remains unresolved; however,

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<sup>75</sup> Barbara Newman, “‘Sybil of the Rhine’: Hildegard’s Life and Times,” in Barbara Newman, ed., *Voice of the Living Light: Hildegard and Her World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>76</sup> Alison I. Beach, *Women as Scribes: Book Production and Monastic Reform in Twelfth-Century Bavaria* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 26.

<sup>77</sup> Beach, 30.

there is a broad consensus that Hildegard did have some education, and, if she did, it would, considering Beach's research on Bavaria, have centered around the transmission of texts. Even before one considers the extent to which the liturgy and sacred texts affected any twelfth-century convent or monastery, one should note that these texts would have included liturgies and commentaries.

It is therefore reasonable to assume that Hildegard of Bingen would have been intimately familiar with the liturgy in a religious culture where "nearly all aspects of this life were informed by liturgy, that is, by church services, the sacraments, and other ritual actions."<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, the majority of artwork made and used in convents—"liturgical books, vestments for the celebration of Mass, altar hangings, liturgical implements, and much more – were required because of the liturgy."<sup>79</sup> As Barbara Newman writes in an essay about visionary and visual worlds of religious women, "nuns and their monastic brethren belonged to a Latin textual community grounded in Scripture, exegesis, and liturgy. This culture was textual to its core, in contrast to the fundamentally oral and performative culture of the aristocracy."<sup>80</sup> Every student of the Middle Ages quickly learns that the literature of this period is characterized by a high degree of intertextuality, and that most works of scholarship that flowered after the Gregorian reforms of the late eleventh century were commentaries, meditations, and variations on the foundational texts and themes of Christianity: Scripture, the Patristics, monastic Rules, and the liturgy. As Caroline Walker Bynum notes, making a broader point about the veracity of hagiographic accounts of female behavior in the Late Middle Ages, "the religious behavior we see in texts is of course mediated by texts and constructed by those who created the texts."<sup>81</sup> To live, worship, and work in a

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<sup>78</sup> Gisela Muschiol, "Time and Space: Liturgy and Rite in Female Monasteries of the Middle Ages," in Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti, eds., *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 191.

<sup>79</sup> Muschiol, 191.

<sup>80</sup> Barbara Newman, "The Visionary Texts and Visual Worlds of Religious Women," in Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti, eds., *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 151.

<sup>81</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, "Patterns of Female Piety in the Later Middle Ages," in Jeffrey Hamburger and Susan Marti, eds., *Crown and Veil: Female Monasticism from the Fifth to the Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 178.

cloistered religious community in the Middle Ages can be seen in itself to be an exercise in intertextuality and interdiscursivity, the nun an incarnate and conversant participant in the texts that ordered the religious universe of the twelfth century. Hildegard of Bingen's *oeuvre*, then, can be read as a collection of texts steeped in and imbricated with the Scripture and liturgy of her religion, a meditation on a meditation.

#### V. The *Ordo Virtutum* as a Liturgical Commentary: Analysis

The central event in the mass for the consecration of a holy virgin is when she receives the robe of a religious, or "takes the veil." In the liturgy for this rite, the robe of a nun is to be a "sign for the conservation of chastity," a promise of blessing and a challenge to the new nun to be worthy of it:

And as you bless all of your religious to yourself for everything pleasing, so also make this woman worthy of blessing, and here at hand, most merciful father, so that this wholesome garment of your aforementioned servant N. might be a covering, so that she might be made wealthy in this knowledge of devotion, in this beginning of sanctity, in this strong defense against all weapons of the enemy, so that, if she is chaste, she may receive the gift of the sixtieth fruit and, if a virgin, the hundredth wealth of gifts, in both parts remaining chaste.<sup>82</sup>

In this invocation, there is a clear connection between chastity and the worthiness and success of the woman, symbolized by the garment she receives and dons before the end of the ceremony—blessing, in the form of "knowledge of devotion" and "the beginning of sanctity," "the gift of the sixtieth fruit, and if a virgin, the hundredth wealth of gifts" are all contingent on her remaining chaste. The robe itself represents promised divine protection of her chastity or maidenhood,<sup>83</sup> her future as an effective spiritual mediatrix of her community,<sup>84</sup> and also a source of moral strength and comfort.<sup>85</sup> The outfit of

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<sup>82</sup> Vogel, 40; passage translated by Kathleen Fung.

<sup>83</sup> "so that this wholesome garment...might be a covering"

<sup>84</sup> Earlier in this prayer, the bishop would call for blessing of her robe "as you poured forth a prayer for the clothing of Aaron, a blessing of ointment flowing from the head into the beard," thus identifying the robe of a female religious with the priestly caste of ancient Israel – and her own time period.

<sup>85</sup> "strong defense against all weapons of the enemy, so that...she may receive the gift of the sixtieth fruit and, if a virgin, the hundredth wealth of gifts."

the nun, given to her by the bishop, is therefore a fully developed metaphor and external sign of her future life of pious devotion.

Later in the *ordo* the promise of support and solace represented by the robe is even further elaborated and complicated. When the bishop prays for the actual consecration of the woman, he pleads:

Let there be in her, Lord, through the gift of your holy spirit, sensible modesty, wise kindness, serious mildness, chaste liberty; let her be fervent in charity and delight in nothing outside of you, let her live in a praiseworthy manner and desire not to be praised. Let her glorify you in the sanctity of her body and glorify you in the purity of her soul, let her fear you in love and serve you in love. For to you is the honor, to you the glory, to you the will, in you is the solace of grief, in you is the ambiguity of advice, in you is the defense from injury, patience from tribulation, abundance from poverty, bread from fasting, medicine from illness. In you she shall have everything, which she longs to enjoy above all and which she is sworn to guard.<sup>86</sup>

The tension in this passage is intriguing and also rather fraught. Through the pervasive pairing of opposites in this mixed blessing, the text of the liturgy points to a sharp divide between the promises of God and the harsh reality of earthly life and how her life is to be the site of both, summarized in the idea that she is to “have everything” in God, including a participation in the divine nature made possible by her continued chastity. The positive and gentle gifts of modesty, kindness, mildness, and liberty are qualified by restrictive and weighty commands to be also sensible, wise, serious, and chaste. And although she may expect to encounter grief, ambiguity, injury, tribulation, poverty, fasting, and illness, God will give her respite—if she proves her love through her continued sexual purity. While practicing this severe gentleness, dismissing hardship in favor of invisible, celestial aid, she is to “live in a praiseworthy manner and desire not to be praised.” The holy virgin must balance the joyful and painful aspects of the Christian life within her own character, reconcile the disparity between her lived experience in a convent and the spiritual realm in which she is wed to an invisible Lord, and do so without desiring recognition for this ethical and metaphysical feat.

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<sup>86</sup> Vogel, 43.

Even accounting for the complexity of the liturgical vision of the life of a female religious, there is a clear logic to the message the bishop is imparting to the nun and to the community gathered to witness her consecration. When the nun takes the robe, the veil, and the crown, the sartorial sign of her new status and role in life, she does so as an affirmation of her present and eternal commitment to chastity, a goal blessed by God and the Church, and that in return she will be richly blessed with a wide range of virtues, consolations, and responsibilities despite any suffering she may encounter throughout life. When we look at the text of the liturgy, we see that chastity is paramount: chastity is the highest gift, the greatest reward, and the greatest honor and protection a woman of God can receive or bestow, and it is the ultimate source of a woman's spiritual authority. When we turn to the text of the *Ordo Virtutum*, we find an intricately woven commentary that modifies this logic and what it meant not only for the life of the female religious, but also what it meant for the congregation from which she had been set apart.

*Anima*, the protagonist of the *Ordo Virtutum*, initiates the action of the drama with a reflection on her "robe" that appears confusing and contradictory. After the Patriarchs praise the Virtues, and the embodied Souls lament their fallen state, *Anima* sings her first lines:

*Anima (happily):*  
 O sweet divinity, oh gentle life,  
 in which I shall wear a radiant robe [*vestem*],  
 receiving that which I lost in my first manifestation –  
 I sigh for you, and invoke all the Virtues.<sup>87</sup>

The longing for the "radiant robe" seems anticipatory, the true solace for some mysterious loss, perhaps for having "fallen into the shadow of sins" like the embodied Souls.<sup>88</sup> The Virtues arrive to greet and praise her, and she is happy to see them. Then, however, the Virtues sing the following line: "We must

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<sup>87</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 161.

<sup>88</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 161.



fight together with you, royal daughter.”<sup>89</sup> In response to this invitation, *Anima* becomes deeply distressed.<sup>90</sup>

*Anima, depressed, laments:*  
 Oh grievous toil, oh harsh weight  
 that I bear in the dress of this life:  
 it is too grievous for me to fight against my body.<sup>91</sup>

The meaning of this statement is unclear. The same Latin word, *vestem*, is used to speak of the “radiant robe” she *shall* wear and the “dress of this life” that she can no longer bear all within the space of ten lines. While the interpretation that the “radiant robe” is the veil of a nun in contrast to the “dress” of the body immediately presents itself, the next twenty lines make it clear that *Anima* already wears the robe of a nun, or a robe of some kind that should inspire obedience to God and the Virtues, and that it is a robe that she is attempting to “complete”: that is, a robe that symbolizes an ongoing role she is bound to fulfill.<sup>92</sup> How, then, does *Anima* long for something she already has, yet casts aside so quickly? We could speculate that we are perhaps missing some crucial stage direction, an interlude during which *Anima* puts on the “radiant robe” and then has a change of heart, or that Hildegard was taking advantage of some contemporary dramatic convention that her audience would have immediately understood, or even that Hildegard made a continuity error in an excess of poetic enthusiasm. If we take this contradiction at face value, however, we are confronted again with *Anima*’s paradox: how can one desire something one already has, especially if what one desires is chastity? Moreover, what about this situation inspires such defeat, despair, and ultimately defection in favor of *Diabolus*’ enticement: “What use to you is toiling foolishly, foolishly? Look to the world: it will embrace you with great honour”?<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 163.

<sup>90</sup> The English translation does not clearly show that *Anima*’s sudden depression is a result of the Virtues’ previous line. In the Latin text, however, their line, “Nos debemus militare tecum, o filia regis,” directly precedes the stage direction, “Sed, gravata, *Anima* conqueritur,” [Emphasis on “Sed” mine] showing a causal relationship between the Virtues’ call to arms and *Anima*’s abrupt change in mood.

<sup>91</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 163.

<sup>92</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 163.

<sup>93</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 165.

Considering that the most obvious meaning of the object of Anima's desire for the "radiant robe" or *vestem* is the monastic habit that represents a nun's chastity, the "beginning of sanctity,"<sup>94</sup> and that *Diabolus's* temptations are carnal in nature,<sup>95</sup> we must pay great attention to how Hildegard is saying what she is saying about this central image and metaphor of a nun's ritual performance of religious life.

In the liturgical *ordo*, the logic that governs the rewards of chastity consecrated to God is linear; in the *Ordo Virtutum*, the logic is circuitous. As far as the Mainz Pontifical is concerned, a chaste woman, remaining chaste, may dedicate herself to God and be guaranteed blessing. In the *Ordo Virtutum*, the ideal of chastity through dedication to God is first seen as the one quality that will redeem *Anima's* original sins, whatever they are. The performance of this highest virtue and dedication—that is, non-performance of sexual acts—sends *Anima* into an endless feedback loop in which ambitious piety gives way to rebellious discouragement, neither of which provide her true comfort or support; for example, when *Scientia Dei* tries to tell her that she already wears the dress of a virgin of God as "a daughter of *salvation*" (emphasis mine), *Anima* retorts by saying that she cannot *complete* the dress, missing *Scientia Dei's* point entirely, which the Virtue notes by saying, "You do not know or see or taste the One who has set you here."<sup>96</sup> At this point, *Anima*, though fretful, remains chaste, yet chastity is not enough—fulfilling her role as a holy virgin does not protect her from *Diabolus's* snares, as the blessing given by the bishop suggested it would, and the *Every soul* joins the Devil.

If the protection of chastity, the performance of an inaction, is not enough to safeguard a nun from perdition, then what is? *Castitas* is actually one of the more prominent characters in the *Ordo Virtutum*: once *Anima* returns to the Virtues, battered by her adventures in some sort of worldliness, it

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<sup>94</sup> Vogel, 40.

<sup>95</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 165: The Virtues sing, "Ah, a certain wondrous victory already rose in that Soul, in her wondrous longing for God, in which a sensual delight was secretly hidden, alas, where previously the will had known no guilt and the desire fled man's wantonness."

<sup>96</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 163.

is *Castitas* who deals the final blow to *Diabolus* after *Victoria* ties him down.<sup>97</sup> She claims this honor by virtue of her nurturing a “sweet miracle” “in a virgin form” – that is, giving birth to Christ – despite *Diabolus*’s taunts that she is somehow incomplete because she has never joined in “the sweet act of love” with a man.<sup>98</sup> Although *Castitas* plays an important role in the climax of the drama, the most important Virtue is *Humilitas: gloriosa regina, suavissima mediatrix,<sup>99</sup> vera medicina.<sup>100</sup>* The focus of *Anima*’s redemption, and the mechanism which it follows, are therefore radically de-centered from the virtue of chastity to a different character trait entirely: humility.

Queen Humility, in the end, is Hildegard’s comment on the paradox and contradictions of a nun’s life inherent in the liturgy that created it, desiring that which one should already have: not a *quid pro quo* relationship with God based on chastity, but an endless, honest return to God with the wounds that we have received throughout our life, obedient or disobedient. In a very real way, *Anima* is not “better” or more holy at the end of the play than she was at the beginning; she begins by lamenting her loss and seeking a remedy, and she ends scarred and broken “in many vices” through her pride, begging *Humilitas* to rescue her. *Humilitas* replies:

All you Virtues, lift up this mournful sinner,  
with all her scars, for the sake of Christ’s wounds,  
and bring her to me.<sup>101</sup>

*Anima* is redeemed not because of the “robe” she wears or casts off, but because of Christ’s sacrifice. The finale of the *Ordo Virtutum* affirms that the currency of salvation and blessing is not purity but grace, and turns from the tensions and difficulties of a strictly religious life to address the whole community, as the Virtues, *Anima*, and embodied Souls come together and sing as Christ, then as themselves:

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<sup>97</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 179.

<sup>98</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 179.

<sup>99</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 164.

<sup>100</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays.*, 174. In English: “Humility: glorious queen, sweetest mediator, true remedy.”

<sup>101</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 175.

“Now remember that the fullness which was made in the beginning  
 need not have grown dry,  
 and that then you resolved  
 that your eye would never fail  
 until you saw my body full of jewels.  
 For it wearies me that all my limbs are exposed to mockery:  
 Father, behold, I am showing you my wounds.”  
 So now, all you people,  
 bend your knees to the Father,  
 that he may reach you his hand.<sup>102</sup>

The Virtues and the pious life they represent are not irrelevant to the soul’s restoration; as they declare in their first aria, “we shine with [the Word of God], building up the limbs of his beautiful body.”<sup>103</sup> Chastity, humility, and the other virtues of the religious life do not, in this specific presentation of Hildegard’s vision, set the monastic spiritually and physically apart from the human race as the text of the liturgy suggests; the Virtues and those who entrust themselves to the care of the God in whom the Virtues have such vibrant personification to begin with are the true faithful, the true religious, regardless of their position in society or level of purity, including, in Hildegard’s vision, *omnes homines*.<sup>104</sup>

### **Conclusion: Some Suggestions for Further Research and Study**

Hildegard’s commentary on the liturgy particular to her way of life opens a specific, complex rite to a more general interpretation and application for her community, as all effective commentaries do. And while her method and execution are extraordinary, confusing at times to the modern reader and perhaps even to the contemporary audience member, her work is not one of isolated genius or visionary uniqueness, but rather one deeply rooted in and indebted to the texts that were so important to her life and the lives of other medieval German Christians in the twelfth century. These texts were undergoing rapid reinterpretation as the scholastic school of liturgical commentary solidified and expanded and lay

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<sup>102</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 181.

<sup>103</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 161.

<sup>104</sup> Dronke, *Nine Medieval Latin Plays*, 180. It would be profitable to pursue reverberations of this reading of Hildegard’s philosophy in the *Ordo Virtutum* in Hildegard’s other works; however, space does not permit a full treatment or consideration of this question.

and religious piety became increasingly focused on the humanity and physical body of Christ.<sup>105</sup> Placing Hildegard in dialogue and opposition to contemporary texts opens her work to an even broader range of interpretive richness, and to a reexamination and exploration of her significance in the intellectual “renaissance” of the twelfth century.

Further study of the rest of her work, particularly visionary works such as *Scivias*, may reveal a further elaboration not only of the all-inclusive theology of the *Ordo Virtutum*, but also a further debt to the liturgical texts that shaped the devotional life of her community. It is exactly this sort of thorough comparative analysis of texts related to and alluded to in her works, which may and almost certainly do go beyond the text of the liturgy, that may assist Hildegardian scholars in their efforts to fully contextualize Hildegard in her twelfth-century milieu. Barbara Stuhlmeyer, a German scholar, has already begun to apply this comparative and contextualizing model in her musicological studies of Hildegard’s other songs, work currently only available in German. However, as Honey Meconi stated in a review of Stuhlmeyer’s 2003 book in *Early Music*:

"Dispelling the notion that there is nothing with which to compare Hildegard’s compositions, Stuhlmeyer draws mostly on her own discoveries to discuss three offices (the Liudger Office from the Benedictine Monastery of Essen-Werden, the Willehad Office from Bremen Cathedral, and the Ursula Office from the Civitatense Antiphoner) as well as works by Hildegard’s close contemporary, Peter Abelard. She concludes that Hildegard’s style, though individualistic, is compatible in many respects with 12th-century compositional practice and melodic structure."<sup>106</sup>

More research and thought in English taking Stuhlmeyer’s approach, to which this essay is a small and slight contribution, could open up new, specific interpretative possibilities for the new generation of Hildegardian scholars who wish to appreciate Hildegard as an able contributor to the intellectual history of the twelfth century and situate her within its greater context. . Analyses centered and focused around

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<sup>105</sup> Bynum in Hamburger and Marti, eds., *Crown and Veil, inter alia*.

<sup>106</sup> Without access to this particular issue of *Early Music*, I must direct the reader to the FAQ page of the International Society of Hildegard von Bingen Studies website: <http://www.hildegard-society.org/faq.html>.

formative texts in dialogue with the rest of Hildegard's *oeuvre* could do a great deal to ground her work in her own time: such detailed, carefully constructed arguments could and perhaps should frame any broader efforts, such as those made in the literature reviewed earlier in this essay, to place Hildegard in a vertical history such as the history of medieval drama or music or in a horizontal history that compares this *magistra* to a contemporary and correspondent such as, for example, Peter Abelard or Bernard of Clairvaux.

Such an approach would not only provide scholars of Hildegard with an exciting and fecund territory to explore, but would also have the added advantage, perhaps a chivalrous one, of considering Hildegard's texts as though they are thoroughly medieval texts, as deeply resonant in the careful glosses and allusive commentaries as those of her less striking contemporaries. To write such detailed comparisons, to even go so far as to write commentaries upon commentaries of liturgy—arguably the medieval Church's ultimate commentary on Christian life and doctrine—has the advantage, perhaps a poetic one, of engaging with the record of the past at an almost Augustinian level of sophistication. Such insight grants the historian not only a new skill with which to ply his or her craft, but also the gift of better understanding the texts she studies by participating in their full elucidation, much like the ritual, liturgically observant medieval women who embodied the paradox of faith, and the scribes and artists who are the true subjects of her inquiry, research, and imagination.

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