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Spring 2021

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Jacqueline LaRivee

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### An Entity of Power: Hildegard Von Bingen and the Female Body

The female voice is one of tremendous power, yet it quite often finds itself undermined by the patriarchal nature of society. To resist the domineering influence of patriarchy, women must recognize the inherent power they possess within themselves. The concept of female empowerment is thus a crucial aspect to overcoming all that attempts to silence the voices of women.

With more women assuming leadership positions, as well as taking a stand against gender-based discrimination, female empowerment has become an increasingly discussed concept in this current day and age. Female empowerment has become quite apparent through the well-known #MeToo movement, which has offered women the opportunity to reclaim any power lost through sexual abuse and harassment. Currently, many women feel empowered by Kamala Harris, the first ever elected female Vice President of the United States.

Therefore, it is apparent that society has made progress in terms of heightening the power of women. Yet, one underlying issue continues to remain on both a societal and personal level, drastically impacting a woman's ability to exercise her full power and potential. That issue is *sexual objectification*, which refers to the perception of a person as an object meant to fulfill another person's sexual desires. In essence, the person becomes "something" (a body) rather than "someone" (a human) through the process of objectification (Butts, 2020). Most prominently through media representations, society has generated a definition of the female body as a sexual object. As a result, women largely base their self-worth off the appearance of their bodies, leading to problematic consequences in regards to how they perceive themselves as human beings.

It is unsurprising then, that the word “beauty” is used most often to describe females, whose physical appearances are defined as a central aspect of their lives. The pressure to maintain the optimal appearance is apparent as women engage in dieting behavior, apply makeup and receive cosmetic surgery (Papadaki, 2020). Ultimately, these behaviors stem from society’s tendency to view the female body through a lens of male desire and gratification. For females to be fully empowered, it is therefore necessary to change the lens in which the female body is viewed. In order for women to recognize their own inherent power, they must learn to view their bodies through their own eyes.

Frederickson and Roberts (1997) introduce the idea of objectification theory, which posits that females are acculturated to internalize an observer’s perspective on their bodies. When this occurs, females learn to treat themselves as physical objects meant to be gazed at. This tendency reflects a subcategory of objectification, referred to as “self objectification,” where females value their physical appearance more so than their feelings, thoughts, and actions (Calogero, 2012).

Frederickson and Roberts (1997) identify various consequences of self-objectification. One example would be feelings of shame, as the result of being unable to live up to some internalized cultural ideal (e.g. having a “Barbie Doll” body type). Women can also experience anxiety, due to not knowing exactly when and how their bodies will be looked at and evaluated. As a result of internalizing the observer's perspective, women have even been found to exhibit diminished awareness of their internal physiological states.

More problematically, female objectification is thought to contribute to the emergence of eating disorders. Evidence from past literature suggests that self-objectification and eating disordered behavior are linked to each other. Through survey responses from a sample of

undergraduate women, Noll and Frederickson (1998) found that self-objectification directly contributed to disordered eating. Body shame was also found to be a mediator between self-objectification and disordered eating behavior. Thus, it is plausible to argue self-objectification results in harmful consequences to the mental and physical well-being of women.

The issue of objectification is particularly apparent through popular music videos. In fact, a research study conducted by Aubrey & Frisby (2011) found that female artists are more frequently subject to sexual objectification in popular music videos, as compared to male artists. Female artists are also held to stricter appearance standards and are more likely to demonstrate sexually alluring behavior than male artists. While Aubrey & Frisby (2011) did not bring up this particular example in their study, popular Korean (K-pop) music videos profoundly objectify females. The first way these videos accomplish this is by reducing females to a child-like status, thus reinforcing notions of feminine passivity. Simultaneously, these artists are given a sexually alluring appearance, through the use of short and tight clothing.

“Love at First Sight”<sup>1</sup> by the K-pop girl group *Tint* can be discussed as one example. The childlike character is clearly evident in this video, through the singers’ high-pitched voices, accentuated eyes, hair-bows, and pigtails. Their general mannerisms are also quite childlike, as they are shown holding lollipops and making pouting faces. Yet, there is also a “grown-up” quality to their performance, as they wear short skirts, perfect for flaunting their legs and hips. At one point, the video even zooms straight into the singers’ waists, as if to place an emphasis on their perfectly slender bodies. This “sexy” or “grown up” character could be thought to garner

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<sup>1</sup> Video link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nREEyUJ5rH8>

male attraction to the female body, whereas the passive and childlike demeanor may serve to remind males of their supposed authority over it.

Essentially, the issue of female objectification boils down to the idea of perceived male authority over the female body. One significant way that this authority manifests is through male possession of female pornography (Papadaki, 2020). Anti-pornography feminist Catharine MacKinnon argues that pornography further reinforces the role of women as sexual objects meant for male consumption. She specifically states that pornography transforms women's sexuality into "something any man who wants to can buy and hold in his hands." MacKinnon and another anti-pornography feminist, Andrea Dworkin, also argue that female consent to pornography does not make the use of such pornography permissible. Expanding upon these arguments, MacKinnon and Dworkin explain that women in the pornographic industry only consent to being objectified due to the lack of options available to them within a patriarchal society. Through this perspective, female objectification can be thought to be demanded and inflicted by males in society.

Historically, women have based their appearance standards off of male expectations, which illustrates the patriarchal nature of society. Ngo (2019) explains that a woman's body was considered to be her best survival tool in patriarchal society, with size and physical characteristics being dictated by "male desire and marriageability." In the Victorian Era, for example, women wore corsets and crinolines to mold their bodies into the ideal hourglass shape. The closer their bodies aligned with this ideal, the more successfully they would attract a man and gain social power in turn. The tight lacing of corsets often led to problematic consequences, including diminished lung capacity, restricted digestion, and misaligned ribs. Even so, women

continually wore these corsets because the prospect of attaining social power was worth any type of pain.

This attainment of social power ties into why women continually engage in self-objectifying behaviors, such as posting sexualized photographs of themselves online. De Wilde et al., (2020) discuss the “sex is power belief” (SIPB) which is a woman’s belief that her beauty and sexuality can be a source of power over men. Consequently, she will self-objectify in attempts to gain this power. In a research study conducted among samples of female college students, De Wilde et al. (2020) found that SIPB was associated with self-objectification, which in turn led to negative eating attitudes. In addition, it was found that SIPB related to sexual satisfaction through two contrasting paths. On one hand, there was a positive correlation between SIPB and self-objectification, which decreased women’s sexual satisfaction in turn. On the other hand, SIPB was positively correlated with sexual subjectivity (i.e. experience as a sexual being) which was then positively correlated with sexual satisfaction. Based upon these findings, it appears there is a clear relationship between SIPB and self-objectification, which can either result in positive or negative consequences to sexual satisfaction. Therefore, it is arguable that self-objectifying behaviors are driven by perceptions of sexual power through appearance.

The problematic consequences of self-objectification urge for a change in the way that society views the female body. To counter objectification, the female body should be viewed as an entity of power in itself, as opposed to an object that attains power by acting as a sexual instrument. The works of Hildegard Von Bingen (1098-1179) can be thought to align with the former perspective of viewing the female body. Despite being written centuries ago, Hildegard’s works may encourage females in contemporary society to recognize and appreciate their bodies for the power that they inherently possess.

Hildegard Von Bingen was a German Benedictine abbess, visionary, writer, and composer (Bent, 2001). At age five, Hildegard began to experience “visions,” which she was later given permission to write down in 1141. During that year, Hildegard claimed that she was “commanded” by God to begin putting her mystical experiences and revelations into words (Holsinger, 1993). This resulted in *Scivias*, an illustrated work containing 14 lyric texts comprising 26 revelations (Bent, 2001). Following *Scivias*, Hildegard created two works on natural medicine and science, *Physica* and *Causa et Curae*. The *Liber vite meritorum* (1158-63) and the *Liber divonorum operum* (1163-73) followed next, which contained apocalyptic, prophetic, and symbolic writings. While Hildegard’s writings date back to at least the 1140s, the musical settings of her poetry did not begin until the early 1150s. 77 of her songs are preserved in an encyclopedia called the “Riesencodex,” located at the Dendermonde Abbey in Belgium. Each of these songs are collectively entitled *Symphonia armonie celestium revelationum* and come together to form a liturgical cycle.

Hildegard was an exceptional woman of her time, as she undertook four preaching missions in Germany between 1160 and 1170 (Bent, 2001). She was considered to be a spiritual mother, or “magistra,” who guided her fellow nuns by strengthening their commitment to the Virgin Mary. In fact, the Virgin Mary played a central role in Hildegard’s religious devotion, as is evident by her various hymns that commend the Virgin’s power. In Hildegard’s eyes, it is the Virgin’s body that provides her with this power, as it was responsible for bringing the savior Christ into the world.

This perspective is evident through Hildegard's *Alleluia! O virga mediatrix*,<sup>2</sup> a verse meant to accompany the singing of the Gospel at Mass. In this verse, Hildegard speaks about the Virgin's role in salvation history (Campbell, 2014). Interestingly, it is the Virgin, rather than Christ himself, who is painted as the agent of salvation. By carrying Christ in her womb, it is the Virgin's "sacred flesh that has conquered all deaths." As a whole, Hildegard emphasizes that salvation would not have been possible if it were not for the body of the Virgin that carried Christ.

The Virgin's power and agency is established from the beginning of the verse, where she is referred to as the "mediatrix." As a mediator between humans and God, she is a source of power in herself. The lines, "sancta viscera tua mortem superaverunt, et venter tuus omnes creatures iluminabit (your sacred flesh has conquered death, your womb all creatures illumined)," which explicitly reference the Virgin's body, are given significant musical emphasis in the verse (Lomer, 2014). Compared to the subsequent line, there is a slight increase in dynamics and more elaborate melismatic ornamentation. The melismatic ornamentations may possibly illustrate the beauty of the Virgin's sacred body, whereas the dynamics emphasize its power.

There is also a significant increase in dynamics, along with elaborate melismas, during the line, "clausi pudoris tui orto" (of your enclosed modesty sprung forth). It seems almost paradoxical that these powerful musical elements are utilized in the context of the Virgin's body being described as "enclosed" and "modest." The argument may then be that the purity and

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<sup>2</sup> Audio link:

[https://merrimack-nml3-naxosmusiclibrary-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/stream.asp?s=152972%2FMerrimackNMLp10%2FTH2289\\_001](https://merrimack-nml3-naxosmusiclibrary-com.proxy3.noblenet.org/stream.asp?s=152972%2FMerrimackNMLp10%2FTH2289_001)

modesty of the female body is what defines it with power. This type of perspective contrasts to the belief that the female body attains power by acting as a sexual instrument.

Hildegard may be thought of as a “Medieval Feminist” as she empowers the female body through her musical works. Holsinger (1993) discusses another one of Hildegard’s works, *Ave Generosa*, which was also addressed to the Virgin. Again, the Virgin’s body is given clear emphasis through the line, “for your womb held joy, when all the celestial symphonia rang out from you.” In reference to this “celestial symphonia,” it appears that Hildegard believed that the power of the female womb manifested itself through music.

Music played a significant role in Hildegard’s perception of the female body. She specifically described words as symbolizing the “body” whereas music symbolized the “spirit” and was vital to bodily existence. This view is apparent through Hildegard’s reflections upon the emotional effects of sacred songs. She felt that sacred songs would resonate with individuals in a way that “banishes all dark obscurity and makes pure and lucid those things that are obscure to the bodily senses because of the weakness of the flesh” (Holsinger, 1993). Namely, Hildegard viewed music as able to bring light to any confusion within the senses of the body. As music supposedly provided the body with this clarity, Hildegard therefore viewed it as essential to life.

Yet, the male and female body were impacted differently by music in the eyes of Hildegard. Notably, Hildegard felt that the female body was musically superior to the male body and was “open like a wooden frame (...) or, again, they are like windows through which the wind blows, so that the elements affect them more vehemently than men.” In other words, she felt that the female body was more open to the elements of music, which thus allowed music to resonate more so within it. This may be reflective of the tendency to associate females with emotional and

sensitive qualities. As a result of this openness, Hildegard believed that music was able to provide the female body with sensual pleasure.

The power of music allowed Hildegard to overstep the limiting boundaries of the Medieval church. As music echoes and resonates within her womb, the Virgin is portrayed to feel the joys, delights, and pleasures that were denied to her by Christian tradition. Holsinger (1993) explains that in the traditional Christian view, Virgin's body is not permitted to experience any sort of sensual pleasure. The musical elements of *Ave Generosa* are also able to transcend the boundaries of the Medieval church. Through the use of large intervals, *Ave Generosa* exceeds the proper melodic range for a twelfth-century plainchant (Holsinger, 1993). These large intervals are also present in *Alleluia! O virga mediatrix*, with there being several disjunct leaps throughout the verse. The slow tempo of *Alleluia! O virga Mediatrix* also characterizes the song with a sensual quality. As the verse is slowly played out, the powerful dynamics and melismas are able to resonate more so within the listener, who effectively obtains a sense of the Virgin's power. Holsinger (1993) thus argues that music allowed Hildegard to "give voice" to the female body in a way that words alone could not.

In her efforts to empower the female body, Hildegard did not necessarily fight against the constructs of society, yet she was still unbounded by them. Hildegard's views of gender, sexuality, and reproduction are discussed in her *Book of Compound Medicine (Causae et curae)* (Cadden, 1984). It is important to note that nothing about her discussion contradicted or overstepped the bounds of contemporary debate in the twelfth century. Still, her treatment of gender, sexuality, and reproduction was broader, deeper, and much more serious compared to the works of other twelfth century philosophers. In keeping with theological, scientific, and social traditions, Hildegard believed that women were weaker and more vessels than causes of

reproduction. Yet, she still took the time to discuss the reproductive contributions of women, for example stating that “plump women have sufficient heat to overcome the men's seed, resulting in children with facial resemblance to their mothers.”

In her *Book of Compound Medicine*, Hildegard makes explicit efforts to include and compare women to men. While she does not deny male power, she still finds opportunities to note female strengths. For example, she states that women are less susceptible to hernias and gout than men, due to having stronger abdominal areas for childbearing. She also places what was viewed as female weakness in a favorable light, explaining that the mildness of a woman's passion enables her to contain herself and be less impulsive than men. These characteristics, she claims, also enable women to conceive and give birth.

Highlighting this point, Hildegard states that, “pleasure in a woman is comparable to the sun, which gently, calmly, and continuously spreads the earth with its heat, so it may bring forth fruit” (Holsinger, 1993). Although men might display a more explosive climax, this does not make them any more superior to women in Hildegard's eyes. Rather than emphasize the supposed weaknesses of women, Hildegard's goal was to illuminate the differences between women and men (Cadden, 1984). This type of perspective allows for the female body to be viewed as unique from, as opposed to inferior to the male body.

Other Medieval writers viewed the power of the female body in a strikingly different way than Hildegard. *De secretis mulierum (On the Secrets of Women)* was a late thirteenth century/early fourteenth century educational treatise that focused on the role of the female body in human reproduction (Miller, 2010). The treatise, which was thought to be written by a pupil of the bishop Albertus Magnus, was based upon Hippocratic, Galenic and Aerosotilian theories of reproduction. The purpose of the treatise was to shed light on “certain, hidden, secret things”

about women, such as the “corruptive powers” of menstrual fluid. According to early Medieval medical tradition, all human life issues from a corrupt environment, as it is fashioned out of menstruation.

While this text was written after Hildegard’s time, perspectives from Magnus and other male commentators provide an idea of how the female body was generally viewed by males during the Medieval period. Menstruation was given a clear negative connotation, as one commentator stated that, “women are so full of venom at the time of their menstruation that they poison animals by the glance; they infect children in the cradle; they spot the cleanest mirror; and whenever men have sexual intercourse with them they are made leprous and sometimes cancerous.” The female body was also blamed for fetal health problems, as Magnus and other male commentators associated fetal deformities with a “defective womb” In addition, the female body was placed at fault for miscarriages, which Magnus thought occurred when, “the matter of the menses is corrupt” or when the woman moves too much and “breaks the womb.”

In keeping with Medieval gynecological writers, Hildegard also places emphasis on menstruation in her treatment of women (Cadden, 1984). Yet, she softens this emphasis by viewing menstruation as “an aspect of the general ebb and flow of blood caused in both men and women by the waxing and waning moon.” As should anyone, Hildegard sees menstruation as a natural and normal asset to life, as opposed to some evil and corrupting power. While she does not explicitly reject the views of early Medieval medical theorists, Hildegard subtly empowers the female body by introducing an alternate (and perhaps more empowering) perspective to viewing it.

This perspective ultimately comprises a view of the female body as a source of its own distinct power. Perhaps early Medieval medical theorists, such as Magnus, were threatened by

this power, which thus drove them to describe the female body as corrupting. Hildegard recognized and appreciated the distinct power of the female body; she viewed female sexual desire and pleasure as an attribute of the female body itself, as opposed to the result of penetration from outside the body. This view is apparent, as Hildegard's music is able to embody the Virgin's sensual pleasure without any mention of male intercourse (Holsinger, 1993). Holsinger (1993) cites the sixth strophe of *Ave Generosa* as one specific example, where Hildegard describes the Virgin's flesh as holding joy "like grass upon which dew falls." The virgin's body is able to feel delight and pleasure not by being penetrated, but by being "immersed in moisture and blossoming in fertility." In other words, Hildegard believed that the fertility within the Virgin's body allowed her to receive her own sensual pleasure.

Hildegard attributed the source of female sexual pleasure to the "winds and breezes" circulating within the womb, as opposed to outside penetration. She stated that these breezes originated from the innermost part of the woman -- that is, the "marrow" -- and then fell to the womb, where her blood pressure began to rise. She believed that mildness of a woman's climax was due to its ability to diffuse within the womb. While there is no scientific evidence to back up Hildegard's claims, her general message of female bodily empowerment can still be applied to contemporary society. Perhaps if women learn to see their bodies as their own sources of power, they may become less inclined to view their bodies as instrumental objects. In turn, they may become less vulnerable to self-objectifying behaviors and the negative mental health consequences that result.

In spite of the high prevalence of objectification in popular media, some female artists can be thought to adopt similar perspectives to Hildegard, through the ways they allude to the power of their own bodies. Charli XCX's "Body of My Own"<sup>3</sup> is one modern-day song that

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<sup>3</sup> Video link: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Va-6\\_60-gg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3Va-6_60-gg)

aligns with Hildegard's idea of viewing the female body as its own source of sexual power. Charli XcX has stated that this song is about sexual self-stimulation. There also appears to be an underlying message of body empowerment, as Charlie XcX argues that she does not need a man (or any other sexual partner) to experience pleasure. In the first verse, she shares her dissatisfaction with her current sexual partner stating, "you got no feeling, I want my blood hotter." During the chorus, she describes the pleasure that she receives from her own body, explaining; "yeah I can do it better when I'm all alone, lights out, so high, all alone, I've got a body of my own." As Charli XcX repeatedly states, "I've got a body of my own" she may be thought to reclaim the power of her body. The rapid tempo and loud dynamics of this song further illustrate the energy and passion she receives from herself on her own.

While Hildegard would not have made such explicit sexual references in her own works, she and Charli XcX share a similar perspective in regards to the sexual experience of females. Both primarily argue that stimulation from a partner is not needed in order to experience delight and passion. More deeply, this perspective may be thought to contradict the broader issue of female objectification. If the female body is powerful enough to receive sensual pleasure on its own, its power is not dependent on acting as a sexual object.

Other contemporary artists emphasize the power of the female body by promoting bodily acceptance messages. One well-known example is Meghan Trainor's "All About That Bass"<sup>4</sup> which promotes the acceptance of larger, curvy female bodies. This song may be thought to connect to Hildegard's ability to view supposed female weakness in a favorable light, where Trainor highlights the perks to having a larger body. As she states, "I got that boom boom that all

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7PCkvCPvDXk>

the boys chase,” and “boys like a little more booty to hold at night,” she essentially contradicts the idea that the thin “Barbie Doll” ideal is what men find most attractive. Trainor demonstrates that she is powerful enough to resist societal ideals as she refuses to be “a stick figure silicone Barbie Doll” just to please others. Confidently, she proclaims, “if that’s what you’re into then go ahead and move along.” In a similar way to Hildegard, Trainor demonstrates that she is unbounded by societal standards as she speaks her message.

Yet, Trainor falls short by promoting the power of the female body in the context of attracting men. To see their bodies as unique sources of power, women should not define their bodies by their ability to generate attraction. “Body Love,”<sup>5</sup> a spoken word by artist Mary Lambert, urges for women to accept their bodies beyond their abilities to attract. This spoken word is extremely pertinent to the issue of self-objectification, as Lambert explicitly addresses the issue. She powerfully states, “we swallow pills, still wanting to be beautiful at the morgue, still proceeding to put on makeup, still hoping the musician finds us f\*\*\*able and attractive.” Here, Lambert perfectly alludes to the fact that women tend to view their self-worth based on their appearance, which in turn leads them to self-objectify.

Importantly, Lambert urges for women to reclaim their bodies, stating that, “our bodies deserve more than to be war-torn and collateral, offering this f\*\*\*dom as a pathetic means to say, ‘I only know how to exist when I am wanted.’” Lambert argues that women deserve to love their own bodies, regardless of whether or not they are “wanted” by another person. To recognize and appreciate the power they possess, Lambert tells women to touch their naked bodies as if they are remembering the first time they “touched someone with the sole purpose of learning all of them.” She urges women to, “love your body the way that your mother loved your

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-gBH4sSLfA>

baby feet.” In other words, she wants women to respect their own bodies and care for them as a mother would tenderly care for her child. In closing, Lambert states, “you are no less valuable as a 32a than a 36C, your sexiness is defined by concentric circles within your wood, it is wisdom.” Lambert makes the important point that a woman’s power comes from not only her body, but also her mind. It is her wisdom that gives her strength, rather than the appearance of her body.

Both contemporary works and the early works of Hildegard illustrate that the female body possesses an immense power, which may be overshadowed and repressed by societal constructs. These constructs ultimately stem from the idea of the female body as a passive object meant for male sexual gratification. By assuming a passive stance (as is evident by the previously discussed example of K-pop), the idea of perceived male authority over the female body is continually reinforced. Problematically, women believe that the only way to reclaim their power is by attaining a sexually alluring appearance. In reality, their power is diminished further, as they too come to view themselves as sexual objects. Women will truly reclaim their power when they recognize that their bodies are their own sources of strength. This strength is dependent not on the ability to attract others, but rather on the ability to accept oneself.

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