

# Demon Possessed or Spirit-Filled? Religious Dissent and Feminine Religiosity in the Twelfth Century Rhineland

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## Abstract

After several failed attempts to exorcise a young noble woman, called Sigewize, from the Lower Rhine region, she is brought to Rupertsberg where the ritual is successfully conducted according to the indications and in the presence of the famous visionary nun and *magistra*, Hildegard of Bingen. The narratives occasioned by this outstanding event also lend themselves useful for the study of the continuous negotiation of the boundaries of orthodoxy, a process in which the categories of heresy and demonic possession occupied a central role. As such, my article aims to analyse the points of intersection between discourses on demonic possession, charismatic inspiration, and heresy, as well as to show how and why they begin to diverge at some point. By focusing on this intersection, the present study aims to make use of “blurred boundaries” both as a metaphor and a necessary tool for bringing together related and yet disjointed areas or research.

Keywords: exorcism, demonic possession, heresy, feminine spirituality, Hildegard of Bingen.

## Introduction

Around 1270, one of the famous Parisian Franciscan masters and soon to be consecrated Archbishop of Canterbury, John Peckham, wrote his *Tractatus tres de paupertate*. Composed in the midst of what came to be known as the mendicant controversy,<sup>1</sup> the treatise constitutes an apologetic response to the works of William of Saint Amour and Matthew Paris. Both William and Matthew were fervent opponents of the Mendicants and both were equally well acquainted with Hildegard of Bingen’s letter addressed to the pastors of the Church roughly one century earlier.<sup>2</sup> It thus comes as no surprise that John Peckham had no flattering words towards Hildegard and warned against the devilish inspiration of her visions (*ex diaboli astutia processisse*) through which heresy was being disseminated (*Hyldegardianis hereticis ipsius dyaboli procuratoribus*).<sup>3</sup> While his opinion on the source of Hildegard’s visions stands out as unique

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<sup>1</sup> Szittyá, *The Antifraternal Tradition in Medieval Literature*. See the entire book for the anti-mendicant controversy; Geltner, *The Making of Medieval Antifraternalism*.

<sup>2</sup> Ep. 15r in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium I*, 34–47. On the reception of Hildegard’s letter to the clergy of Cologne, see Embach, “Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179): A History of Reception”, 287–88.

<sup>3</sup> Peckham, *Fratris Johannis Peckham Tractatus tres de paupertate*, 76–77: “Volens igitur facere religiones istas hominibus odiosas, veritati, quam vel ex scripturis vel angelis revelantibus didicerat, plures immiscuit falsitates et nequitias, et per istam Hyldegardim quam et alios errores docuit, Hyldegardianis hereticis ipsius dyaboli procuratoribus, et sanctorum persecutoribus promulgavit.”

amongst a long tradition of reading the famous Benedictine nun's oeuvre, it makes the case that in certain circumstances not even highly revered charismatic figures and their writings were safe in the face of harsh criticism and serious allegations.

On an intellectual level, thinkers of the High Middle Ages<sup>4</sup> strived towards refining their definitions of notions and concepts, such as devil or God inspired, to better understand, describe, as well as to perfect their lived experience. However, these aspirations were not only accompanied by negotiations and debates of both behaviours and ideas that prompted new or reignited old controversies,<sup>5</sup> but the way these processes played out was to a much higher degree context dependent, messier, and fluid, rather than following the linear pathway that historians were inclined to imagine. Ideals and norms rarely translated neatly into concrete interactions between living people as, more often than not, political alliances, religious groups and their networks morphed, pushing individuals in various positions within their confines or, in extreme cases, outside of them, through excommunication or accusations of heresy. It is not surprising that in recent times medievalists from different areas of expertise have drawn attention to the fact that spaces, dynamics, or actors go understudied, misunderstood, or simply evade a uniform and clear cut picture of "the medieval Church".<sup>6</sup> As it turns out, ambiguous signs and situations were by no means rare occurrences throughout the Middle Ages, just as tolerance for them was not lacking.<sup>7</sup> How are medievalists supposed to reckon with them, in order to not only recover but also to reintegrate them in the historiographical discourse?

Precisely herein lies the crux of the present article, as my intention is to take a closer look at the fluidity of interaction between religious groups and the individuals aiming to live under the precepts of the *uita apostolica* which came with the spiritual renewal of the long twelfth century,<sup>8</sup> especially against the backdrop of an accelerated process of institutionalization or restructuring which dominated the second half of the century.<sup>9</sup> One of the pillars of the apostolic model was making God's words and intentions known to as many people as possible through preaching. While divine inspiration or charisma made it possible for religious women to actively take part in the

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<sup>4</sup> Cotts, "Monks and Clerks in Search of the *Beata Schola*: Peter of Celle's Warning to John of Salisbury Reconsidered"; Steckel, *Kulturen des Lehrens im Früh- und Hochmittelalter*, 863–1196. Mews, "Rethinking Scholastic Communities in Latin Europe.", as well as the contributions in Giraud, *A companion to twelfth-century schools*.

<sup>5</sup> Monagle, Clare, *Orthodoxy and Controversy in Twelfth-Century Religious Discourse. Peter Lombard's Sentences and the Development of Theology*.

<sup>6</sup> Macy, "Was there a 'the Church' in the Middle Ages?"; Deane and Lester, *Between orders and heresy*, 3–22.

<sup>7</sup> Auge et al., *Ambiguität im Mittelalter*; Scheller and Hoffarth, *Ambiguität und die Ordnungen des Sozialen im Mittelalter*.

<sup>8</sup> Noble and Van Engen, *European transformations*.

<sup>9</sup> *Institutionalisierung* or institutionalization is a key word of German historiography, as it ties into the older focal point of the *Verfassungsgeschichte* which favours the normative framework of society over other aspects. On how this process shaped the monastic orders of the twelfth and thirteenth century see Melville, "The Institutionalization of Religious Orders (12th-13th Centuries)." Likewise, the concept enjoyed a broad appeal amongst medievalists dealing with knowledge and education: Van Engen, *Learning institutionalized*. For more recent contributions, see the volume Cariboni, D'Acunto, and Filippini, *Presenza-assenza*.

preaching activities, this did not happen without raising suspicions or without facing rejection from society. These attitudes were at times channelled through accusations of demonic possession, through trials of heresy, or through both.

In a recent study which deals with demonic possession as lived religion in the Late Middle Ages, Sari Katajala-Peltomaa defines it as a “spiritual phenomenon which had visible and detectable physical and mental symptoms as well as social outcomes.” Revealing the multi-layered and fluid attributes of the phenomenon, such an approach helped her placing it at the intersection of “personal experiences, social dynamics, and cultural expectations.”<sup>10</sup> As studies looking to discern or prove the nature of spiritual manifestations show, this phenomenon – more widely spread in the aftermath of the Forth Lateran Council in 1215 – greatly influenced not only human interactions, but also served as a building block of orthodoxy.<sup>11</sup> Like heretics, demoniacs did not self-identify as such, but were labelled from the exterior, by figures of authority. In both cases the transgressive behaviour, perceived as the devil’s interreference in the world, served as a criterion for categorizing individuals. However, the process was never straight forward, following a clear-cut line, and as it will be shown it was highly dependent on socio-economical constellations. While heresy might not have been “invented” as some historians have suggested in the case of the Cathars,<sup>12</sup> it was constructed in opposition with interpretations, precepts and rituals deemed to be orthodox<sup>13</sup>. While most studies conducted on demonic possession focus on the later centuries of the Middle Ages, the phenomenon constituted an important piece of negotiating the boundaries of orthodoxy during the second half of the twelfth century in the Archdioceses of Mainz and Cologne. Here, in 1169, the renowned visionary *magistra*, Hildegard of Bingen, orchestrated and closely supervised a ritual of exorcism of a younger lay noble woman, Sigewize. How did this episode tie into Hildegard’s understanding of heresy and demonic possession? What were the circumstances under which boundaries between these categories were negotiated in the case of Sigewize’s deliverance from her demonic possession and how did this process shape the narrative discourses surrounding the respective event?

It needs to be said from the beginning that the dramatic events surrounding the rituals of exorcism which took place around 1169 raised the interest of both Hildegard’s contemporaries as well as that of the following generations. To better grasp the problem, the first part of this article will be a brief overview of the roles that demons played and how they have been dealt with in various contexts, before this episode took place. Since Hilgard of Bingen was a prolific author, whose work touched on both theology and medicine, it is worth looking into what she had to say on the topic of discerning the spirits;

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<sup>10</sup> Katajala-Peltomaa, *Demonic Possession and Lived Religion in Later Medieval Europe*, 1–2.

<sup>11</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*; Elliott, *Proving Woman*.

<sup>12</sup> Brunn, *Des contestataires aux « Cathares »*; Pegg, *A Most Holy War*; cf. Sennis. *Cathars in question*.

<sup>13</sup> Arnold, “The Materiality of Unbelief in Late Medieval England”; Ames, “The Spiritual Foundations of Christian Heresy Inquisitions”.

not only did she write at length about her visionary experiences, but she was also interested in understanding the work of maleficent spirits and their impact on both an individual and societal level. Following this thread, the article will turn to how the discourse about demons is integrated in the sources dealing with the unmasking of the heretics in Cologne in the summer of 1163. The last part will zoom in on the social and religious dynamic surrounding the exorcism performed under Hildegard's direct supervision, to argue that it should be interpreted as yet another response to religious dissent.

Similar to the way in which other studies consciously make the spaces and categories which overlap or are "neither/nor" or simply in-between the object of their research,<sup>14</sup> this paper aims to make use of "blurring boundaries" both as a metaphor – and useful reminder that structures and institutions are but a part of medieval society – and as a tool for bringing together related and yet disjointed areas or research.

### Talking About Demons

Stories of demons and demonic possession are as old as Christian tradition (Luke 8:26-38; Matthew 15: 21-28, Mark 7:24-30). So it is unsurprising that they occupy an important place within monastic culture, permeating its written, visual and liturgical productions well before scholastics turned demons into a matter of "epistemological exactitude and taxonomies of knowledge,"<sup>15</sup> and long before the demonological turning point placed by Alan Boureau at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries.<sup>16</sup> Prior to scholastic debates on the origin of demons, their characteristics, and their relation to God, most demon-stories were miraculous anecdotes inserted for their moral-didactic value into larger narratives, usually hagiographies or chronicles. Part of the narratives that emanated from the monastic environment reiterated the model of demons as tempters, following the synoptic Gospels of Matthew (4: 1-11) and Luke (4: 1-13), while others focused on miraculous exorcisms performed by saints on energumens. Be it in dreams or in a state of wakefulness, encounters with demons constituted leitmotifs in the narratives of spiritual advancement of both individuals and communities throughout the Early and High Middle Ages. In parallel to the endeavours towards dialectically solving various questions regarding demons, miraculous stories continued to be written, read, and largely disseminated, even amongst the monastic orders that started to emerge during the long twelfth century.<sup>17</sup> As such, narratives of fighting demonic or devilish temptations became a hallmark of the order's spiritual precedence over competing spiritual groups and thus a part of their identity-building discourse.<sup>18</sup>

Conversely, demon stories were linked with anti-heretical writings as well. However, much like how scholastic treatises and the

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<sup>14</sup> Especially relevant for this study: Lutter, *Zwischen Hof und Kloster*; Deane and Lester, *Between orders and heresy*.

<sup>15</sup> Ruys, *Demons in the Middle Ages*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> Boureau, *Satan the Heretic*, 4.

<sup>17</sup> Noble and Van Engen, *European Transformations*.

<sup>18</sup> Ruys, *Demons in the Middle Ages*, 34–35.

encyclopaedic knowledge about fallen angels bloomed during the following century, demons also turned into a more complex rhetorical tool of religious polemics, as some heretics started being depicted as worshipers of Lucifer.<sup>19</sup>

Beginning with the biblical account of Gerasene's deliverance from demonic possession, exorcism<sup>20</sup> became one of the major religious events, impacting local communities in their entirety. As the accounts of demonic possession clearly illustrate, such occurrences were highly disruptive – given the erratic and uncanny behaviour of the energumens – not only for the persons directly afflicted and their close family, but also for the local community at large. Thus, a handful of measures needed to be taken for balance to be restored: fasts, imposed mainly on the affected person, but also on the performer of the ritual as well as on the entire community, and purification ceremonials, including chants and prayers, are recorded in both liturgical and narrative sources. Exorcism shared common roots and features with rituals of baptism, healing of the sick, as well as with maledictions.<sup>21</sup> Since miraculous healing was perceived as an essential attribute of sanctity, it does not come as a surprise that women who were revered as saints were also considered capable of performing exorcisms. Likely written in the first half of the sixth century, *Vita Genovefae* recounts, amongst other things, how in different instances the saint helped deliver possessed men and women through her prayers, either by making the sign of the cross over them or by anointing them with consecrated oil.<sup>22</sup>

As the schoolmen started to closely investigate the ontological existence of evil, like Anselm of Canterbury in his *De casu diaboli*, the mechanism of possession and questions of who and why had a predilection to become a demoniac also made their way into the various writings of the twelfth century. The Aristotelian theory concerning the weaker and more porous density of the female body, which permeated the medical discourse throughout the Middle Ages, made it so that women turned into ideal candidates for demonic infestation.<sup>23</sup> However, while sacraments could be imparted only by priests, sanctity and demonic possession enabled spiritual women of the High Middle Ages to play an active part in exorcism: both as performers and also at the receiving end of the ritual. Likewise, religious women enthusiastically embraced the forceful revival of *uita apostolica*,<sup>24</sup> as part of a spiritual awakening largely diffused to and embraced by all strata of a now more diverse society. Cloistered women not only copied, but also actively produced and sometimes delivered homiletic material, while lay women (Waldensians, for

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<sup>19</sup> Moulinier-Brogi, "Le chat des cathares de Mayence, et autres « primeurs » d'un exorcisme du XIIe siècle." Brunn, *Des contestataires aux « Cathares »*, 479–96.

<sup>20</sup> For an overview, see Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*; for an in-depth analysis of exorcism in the High and Late Middle Ages see Chave-Mahir, *L'exorcisme des possédés dans l'église d'Occident (Xe-XIVe siècle)*.

<sup>21</sup> Chave-Mahir, "Devil Possession in the Liturgy around the Tenth and Twelfth Centuries. Bringing Together the Body Like a Microcosm."

<sup>22</sup> See *The Life of Genovefa, Virgin of Paris in Gaul*, 29, 44–45, and 51, in McNamara, Halborg, and Whatley, *Sainted women of the Dark Ages*, 34–35.

<sup>23</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 151–58.

<sup>24</sup> See Chenu, *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century*; Constable, *Reformation of the twelfth century*.

example) were perceived as heretics, amongst other things, for preaching.<sup>25</sup>

The manners in which the apostolic model should be followed and by whom were being intensely debated – that is to say they constituted a central point of dissent between different religious groups as well as within them; and demons and especially demonic possessions were also part of the debate.

### The Malignant Spirits and the Prophetess

After being professed *oblata* to a religious vocation at the beginning of the twelfth century, Hildegard of Bingen lived as an *inclusa* at the double monastery of Disibodenberg in the Archdiocese of Mainz. Later in life, after moving to Rupertsberg, she turned to a monastic habit. Much like her superior, Jutta of Sponheim, and other spiritual women within the sphere of reform promoted by the Hirsau monastery in the Black Forest region, Hildegard experienced visions from a very early age. In comparison to them, however, she left a significant number of works directly inspired by what she called the Living Light.

Ranging from theological treatise, hagiographies, homilies, and epistles to liturgical compositions, medical writings, and words she firmly believed to be recovered from the prelapsarian language, Hildegardian works are, for the most part, prefaced by descriptions of her visionary inspiration.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, the most detailed account of her experience was included in a letter addressed later in her life to the much younger monk from Liège, Guibert of Gembloux (c. 1124-1214).<sup>27</sup> In it, she not only recalls when and how the visions started, but also differentiates between two main types: *visio*, those inspired by the shadow of the Living Light (*umbra uiuentis luminis mihi nominatur*) – pain and knowledge inducing, incessantly experienced – and those seen in the Living Light (*lux uiuens mihi nominata est*) – almost impossible to convey in words and more rarely occurring.<sup>28</sup> Refusing

<sup>25</sup> Kienzle, “The Prostitute-Preacher. Patterns of Polemic against Medieval Waldensian Women Preachers.”; Alexiu, “*Magistra magistrorum*”.

<sup>26</sup> Newman, “Hildegard of Bingen: Visions and Validation”; Meier, “Legitimationsstufen des Prophetentums”; Meier, “Autorschaft”.

<sup>27</sup> After an intense epistolary exchange, Guibert served during Hildegard’s last years of life, as well as for a short time after her death as provost at Rupertsberg. During this period, he also served as the visionary’s secretary and acquainted himself with her works. See Coakley, *Women, men, and spiritual power*, 45–67.

<sup>28</sup> Ep, 103, in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium II*, 261–62: “Ab infantia autem mea, ossibus et neruis et uenis meis nondum confortatis, uisionis huius munere in anima mea usque ad presens tempus semper fruor, cum iam plus quam septuaginta annorum sim. Spiritus uero meus, prout Deus uult, in hac uisione sursum in altitudinem firmamenti et in uicissitudinem diuersi aeris ascendit, atque inter diuersos populos se dilatat, quamuis in longinquis regionibus et locis a me remoti sint. Et quoniam hec tali modo uideo, idcirco etiam secundum uicissitudinem nubium et aliarum creaturarum ea conspicio. Ista autem nec corporeis auribus audio nec cogitationibus cordis mei, nec ulla collatione sensuum meorum quinque percipio, sed tantum in anima mea, apertis exterioribus oculis, ita ut numquam in eis defectum extasis patiar; sed uigilanter die ac nocte illa uideo. Et assidue infirmitatibus constringor, et grauib; doloribus implicata sum, adeo ut mortem inferre minentur. Sed Deus usque adhuc me sustentauit. Lumen igitur quod uideo, locale non est, sed nube que solem portat multo lucidius, nec altitudinem nec longitudinem nec latitudinem in eo considerare ualeo, illud que umbra uiuentis luminis mihi nominatur, atque ut sol, luna et stelle in aqua apparent, ita scripture, sermones, uirtutes et quedam opera hominum formata in illo mihi resplendent. Quicquid autem in hac uisione uidero seu didicero, huius memoriam per

to categorize it as ecstasy, the visionary nun still describes an upward movement of her spirit, into the *uicissitudinem diuersi aeris*, for the most part accompanied by an almost death-inducing bodily affliction. While, in this instance, it is unclear how these disparaged elements were linked to bring together her visionary experience, another passage – included in the final edition of *Vita Hildegardis* – appears to shed light on this matter. Here Hildegard goes into more detail concerning her struggles with the airy spirits during one of her frequent episodes of ailments, which brought her face to face with a near-death experience. While being laid on the *cilicium* by her sisters,<sup>29</sup> Hildegard recalls having a vision of Archangel Michael's army of angels fighting the dragon, at the end of which she is revived and exhorted by the angelic choir to keep on fighting. During her gradual period of recovery, she ponders on the source of her illness:

“It was the most evil spirits of the air that to whom are committed all the punishing tortures of human beings, who administered me this punishment, since God allowed them to bring it against me. [...] These came hurrying to me, crying out in a loud voice: ‘Let us seduce this woman, so that she has second thoughts about God, and rails at him for overwhelming her with such sufferings.’ For just as it happened to Job when by God's permission Satan so struck his body that he crawled with vermin so, in my case, it was a fiery air that entered in and consumed my flesh.<sup>30</sup>”

What Hildegard describes is a demonic temptation which she managed to resist in her quest for spiritual betterment. Allusions to a fiery air entering the body illustrate how thin, almost unperceivable, the boundaries could be between demonic temptation and actual possession. In both referring to St. Michael's intervention and to the *pessimi aerii/aerius ignis* Hildegard seems to reflect scholastic convictions that demons inhabit the lower airs, which also contain the fiery elements of hell,<sup>31</sup> on the one hand, and that resisting temptation

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longum tempus habeo, ita quod, quoniam illud aliquando uiderim et audierim, recordor. Et simul uideo et audio ac scio, et quasi in momento hoc quod scio disco. Quod autem non uideo, illud nescio, quia indocta sum. Et ea que scribo, illa in uisione uideo et audio, nec alia uerba pono quam illa que audio, latinis que uerbis non limatis ea profero quemadmodum illa in uisione audio, quoniam sicut philosophi scribunt scribere in uisione hac non doceor. Atque uerba que in uisione ista uideo et audio, non sunt sicut uerba que ab ore hominis sonant, sed sicut flamma coruscans et ut nubes in aere puro mota. [...] Et in eodem lumine aliam lucem, que lux uiuens mihi nominata est, interdum et non frequenter aspicio, quam nimirum quomodo uideam multo minus quam priorem proferre sufficio, atque interim dum illam intueor, omnis mihi tristitia omnis que dolor de memoria aufertur, ita ut tunc mores simplicis puelle, et non uetule mulieris habeam.”

<sup>29</sup> For dying as process, see Lutter, *Geschlecht & Wissen, Norm & Praxis, Lesen & Schreiben*, 96–97.

<sup>30</sup> VSH II, 9 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 34: “Nam pessimi aerii spiritus, quibus penales cruciatus hominum iniuncti sunt, penam hanc, que michi ab eis ut Deus permisit inferebatur, subministrabant, sicut et tortores fecerunt, qui beato Laurentio et aliis martyribus prunas apponebant; qui et ad me festinantes uoce magna clamabant: ‘Seducamus istam, ut de Deo dubitet et blasphemet, cur eam tantis penis implicet.’ Sicut enim in Iob permissione Dei factum est, quod sathan corpus eius ita percussit, quod uermibus scateret, ita aerius ignis subintrans carnem meam consumpsit.” (Engl. in Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard*, 170.)

<sup>31</sup> Ruys, *Demons in the Middle Ages*, 74.

and expelling evil spirits could take on Apocalyptic overtones, on the other.<sup>32</sup>

Likewise, her theory of demonic possession placed her, as Nanci Caciola noted, within the dominant tradition of the twelfth century, which held “that unclean spirits may possess a person physically but could not affect the soul.”<sup>33</sup> Upon finding out about a young woman assailed by demons, Hildegard starts to ponder how this demonic obsession came to happen. She defines it as a form of overshadowing (*obumbrare*) of the senses, which cuts the existing connection between the rational soul (*rationalis animus*) and God. Thus, as Peter Dronke observed many decades ago,<sup>34</sup> it would not be accurate to equate *obsessa* with possession, at least not when dealing with Hildegard’s texts, as she goes on to point out that:

“a devil does not actually enter a human being in its own form; rather with the shadow and the smoke of its blackness, he overshadows and covers him [...] God does not allow him to enter a human being in his own form, but as we said above he envelops his victim and wraps him into insanity and unseemly ways, and snarls through him as through a window, and moves his limbs outwardly. [...] the soul is in a stupefied sleep and does not know what the flesh of the body does.”<sup>35</sup>

This is, however, not the only time that Hildegard visited this question. She also touched upon the topic in a letter addressed to an unnamed priest,<sup>36</sup> where she insists on the bodily aspects responsible for the human predisposition towards sin and to being attacked by the demon, especially the imbalance in the blood, bile, and phlegm. According to her, excess in blood makes people vulnerable to a demonic obsession. If that happens, the people affected “speak of God deceitfully”, “are always hard-hearted and cruel, and do not willingly follow other people’s advice, but, rather, do whatever they wish.” In contrast, those with an excess of bile “are assailed by many wicked thoughts in denial of God, and they think this state of mind as a great affliction and even as a sickness unto death.”

The letter seems to be informed by Hildegard’s medicinal knowledge as well as by her direct spiritual experience: both as a victim of the malignant spirit (and potentially obsession), as well as an eyewitness to and the one responsible for Sigewize’s liberation from her demonic obsession.

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<sup>32</sup> Young, *A History of Exorcism in Catholic Christianity*, 67.

<sup>33</sup> Caciola, *Discerning Spirits*, 191–92.

<sup>34</sup> Dronke, “*Problemata Hildegardiana*”, 118–22 and Dronke, *Women writers of the Middle Ages*, 163: *obsidere* and not *possession*.

<sup>35</sup> VSH III, 20 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 56: “[...] diabolus in forma sua ut est hominem non intrat, sed eum umbra et fumo nigredinis sue obumbrat et obtigit. [...] Quapropter Deus non permittit, quod hominem in forma sua intret, sed supradictis perfundens ad insaniam et inconuenientia euertit et per eum quasi per fenestram uociferatur et membra illius exterius mouet, cum tamen in eis in forma sua interius non sit, anima interim quasi sopita et ignorante, quid caro corporis faciat.” (Engl in Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard*, 194.)

<sup>36</sup> Ep. 289 in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium III*, 42–43. (Engl. in Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 2004, 3 82–84.)



## Demonic Possession and Heresy in the Rhinelands

Compared to other instances of demonic possessions, Sigewize's case stands out in more than a few ways. As highlighted by Florence Chave-Mahir, the abundance of details concerning this episode illustrates that Hildegard of Bingen not only played a part in Sigewize's deliverance from demonic possession, but also put her theological reflections on the matter to good use when designing a new liturgy of exorcism.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, given its precise chronological and geographical placement, it was likely tied to the broader manifestation of religious dissent.

Just a couple of years before Sigewize was delivered by her preaching demon, the Archdiocese of Cologne was shaken in 1163 by the "Cathar affair".<sup>38</sup> According to the earliest sources recounting these events, several men and women, after being unmasked and arrested as heretics, were excommunicated by the clergy, tried by secular authorities, and eventually ended up being burned. A remark stands out, as it is repeated by all narrative sources compiled in the 1160s: the most frantic believers threw themselves into the fire. Moreover, Dietrich of Deutz (a monk from an abbey situated in the proximity of Cologne) attributed their firm conviction to the devil's trickery: "When they were burned near the Jewish cemetery [...] they showed themselves so obstinate in their belief that, inspired by the devil, some of them threw themselves into the fire."<sup>39</sup> Interestingly, in grappling to make sense of the actions of the heretics, Dietrich's account concludes that they could have only been inspired by the devil. In other words, he acknowledges demonic temptation as being at the source of their erratic behaviour. Thus, the category of heresy with which he operates shares many similarities with that of demonic possession as described in Hildegard's writings: basically, in their origins and the way they manifested, heresy and demonic possession were quasi-indistinguishable. However, the point where the two categories start becoming differentiated was, as Dietrich's short report illustrates, in their perceived societal impact. Not only were those branded as heretics clearly held accountable and blamed for the obstinacy of their convictions, but they were also subjected to a firm and more radical response from the community, as the heretics ended up dying in the flames which were lit up for their purification.

By the time these events were taking place, Hildegard appears to have had significant connections to the Archdiocese of Cologne. While the authenticity of the letter exchange with Archbishop Arnold of Cologne has been questioned by historians,<sup>40</sup> it is known that at least one of her nephews, also named Arnold (elected Archbishop of Trier

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<sup>37</sup> Chave-Mahir, *L'exorcisme des possédés dans l'église d'Occident (Xe-XIVe siècle)*, 141, 157-61. See also Gouguenheim, "La sainte et les miracles: Guérisons et miracles d'Hildegard de Bingen", 170-76.

<sup>38</sup> As R. I. Moore pointed out, the narrative adds details at the beginning of the thirteenth century: Moore, *The War on Heresy*, 2-3.

<sup>39</sup> Holder-Egger, "Theodericus Tuitiensis aedituus, Series archiepiscoporum Coloniensium", 286-87: "[...] iuxta Iudeorum sepulturas igni cremati sunt, tanta diaboli instinctu in suo proposito usi pertinatia, ut quidam ipsorum furentibus flammis se ipsos inicerent."

<sup>40</sup> Ep. 14 and 14r in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium I*, 31-32; Holbach, "Hildegard von Bingen und die kirchlichen Metropolen Mainz, Köln und Trier", 97-99.

in 1169) was serving as dean of the collegiate church dedicated to St. Andrew in Cologne.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the blood ties to Arnold, Hildegard also nurtured a friendship with Philip of Heinsberg who, after serving as dean of the cathedral chapter in Cologne for several years, was elected Archbishop in 1167. In fact, at Philip's request, Hildegard composed her most well-known sermon, preserved in letter form, which seems to have originated in the midst of a turbulent period of Church schism. Dated by Lieven Van Acker to 1163, the letter contains a biting invective addressed to the clergy of Cologne, whose neglect of their pastoral duties made the wave of heresy possible.

Some historians interpreted the sermon as a reflection of Hildegard's disapproval of the Church policy pursued by the Archbishop of Cologne, Rainald of Dassel, who actively encouraged and even participated in the military campaigns of Frederick Barbarossa in Italy against the supporters of Alexander III (1159–1181).<sup>42</sup> If that was indeed the case, Hildegard's dissenting voice was by no means singular, as the archbishop's actions elicited discontent on a local plane, and not only amongst his opponents. Even his former friend and staunch supporter, Ekbert of Schönau and his sister Elisabeth denounced the policy promoted by the Archbishop of Cologne as scandalous.<sup>43</sup> Likewise, the two siblings from Schönau were equally dedicated to restoring orthodoxy within the Church, so much so that they made efforts to recruit Hildegard in the fight against heresy.<sup>44</sup>

It is therefore unsurprising that, while the aim of Hildegard's sermon was to remind the pastors of the Church of their pastoral duties, the text came to be known less than half a century later as the sermon against the Cathars, and soon afterwards as a polemical text against the friars.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, in one of its earliest versions, the text only alluded to heretics, but these allusions are worth mentioning. By means of spirits of the air (*per aerios spiritus*) the devil takes control over people and clothes them in false sanctity (*uelut in omni sanctitate*) manifested in their open rejection of avarice and their public display of chastity. Here Hildegard refers to a radical form of abstinence which makes the people deceived by the devil to refrain from food (*pallida facie*) and to refuse the proximity of women (*unde mulieres non amant, sed eas fugiunt*). However, the false male saints end up imposing their pastoral duties on the women and luring them into error.<sup>46</sup> In the

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<sup>41</sup> Heinzelmann, "Hildegard von Bingen und ihre Verwandtschaft. Genealogische Anmerkungen", 49–51.

<sup>42</sup> Kienzle, *Hildegard of Bingen and her Gospel homilies*, 253.

<sup>43</sup> See Clark, *Elisabeth of Schönau*, 121–22.

<sup>44</sup> For an in-depth presentation of how Hildegard acted in conjunction with Ekbert and Elisabeth of Schönau, see Manselli, "Amicizia spirituale ed azione pastorale nella Germania del secolo XII: Ildegarde di Bingen, Elisabetta ed Ecberto di Schönau contro l'eresia catara", Brunn, *Des contestataires aux « Cathares »*, 241–364; Kienzle, *Hildegard of Bingen and her Gospel homilies*, 245–88.

<sup>45</sup> Kerby-Fulton, "Hildegard of Bingen", Hayton, "Pierre d'Ailly's *Tractatus de Falsis Prophetis* II and the *Collectiones* of William of Saint-Amour".

<sup>46</sup> Ep. 15r in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium I*, 40–42: "Nam diabolus per aerios spiritus hec operatur, qui propter praua opera hominum in sufflatu uenti et aeris ita innumerabiles circa quosdam discurrunt sicut musce et culices, qui in ardore caloribus homines pre multitudine sua. Ipse enim homines istos hoc modo infundit, quod castitatem eis non aufert et quod eos castos esse permittit, cum castitatem habere uoluerint; unde mulieres non amant, sed eas fugiunt. Et ita quasi in omni sanctitate

revised versions of Hildegard's letter collection, prepared around the time of the visionary's nun death, the sermon presents further interesting additions regarding the measures which need to be taken against those deceived by the devil: "And so drive them out, lest your city and congregation perish, for long ago the banquet of the royal wedding was prepared in Cologne, and to this day its streets still resound."<sup>47</sup> In other words, subtle changes can be detected in the exhortatory sermon of the charismatic *magistra*: while in the first version, the pastors of the Church are urged to look inwards and exert self-reform, in the second edition these are encouraged to direct action outwards, against the heterodox groups. The ambiguous appeal to drive heretics out cannot categorically be interpreted as an encouragement to persecution, however it clearly describes an exclusionary dynamic, which aims to draw firm boundaries between a category acting under the devil's influence and the rest of Christianity.

Like Dietrich of Deutz, Hildegard of Bingen presents us with an image of heresy that shares a lot in common with demonic possession and demonic temptation: again, airy spirits are at work, and they manage to overshadow the rational capacity of the human soul. What is more, heretics are not mimicking sanctity, but in leading a quasi-monastic life, they are truly convinced to be "filled by the Holy Spirit." The difference, again, resides in how the devil's intervention in the world is being perceived from the outside: as heretics are held accountable and considered incurable at the same time. Still, much like demon possessed and divinely inspired people, heretics coinhabited, at least temporarily, a liminal space that ended up being invested with meaning only in context, through a process that involved it being deciphered by a figure of authority.

### Sigewize – A Case Study

At a first glance it might seem that, after the events of the summer of 1163, the "orthodox party" had the situation under control, when, in 1169, Hildegard was approached by Abbot Gedolf of St. Nicholas in Brauweiler, for advice on how to exorcise a young noble woman from the Lower Rhein. The abbot revealed that the woman had already been struggling with demonic possession for seven years when she was brought to the Abbey St. Nicholas – located about 14 kilometres northwest of Cologne – and that several attempts at exorcism had been performed, without any luck. Closely following the ritual prescribed by Hildegard, while adjured, the demon hinted to the fact that the ritual could only be successful in the nun's presence. Finally, the girl

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hominibus se ostendent ac illudentibus uerbis dicent: Ceteri homines qui ante uos castitatem habere uolebant, ut assum piscem se torrebant. Nulla autem pollutio carnis et concupiscentie nos tangere audet, quia sancti sumus et Spiritu Sancto infundimur. [...] Ipsi autem in inceptione seductionis erroris sui mulieribus dicent: Non licet uobis cum esse, sed quoniam rectos doctores non habetis, nobis obedite et quecumque uobis dicimus et precipimus, facite et salue eritis. – Et hoc modo feminas sibi contrahunt ac eas in errorem suum ducunt."

<sup>47</sup> Ep. 15r in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium I*, 47: "Quapropter ipsos a uobis proicite, ne congregatio et ciuitas uestra pereat, quoniam in Colonia pridem conuiuium regalium nuptiarum preparatum est, unde platee eius adhuc fulminant." (Engl. in Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1994, 1 61.)

got released from her demonic possession during a solemn ritual performed at Rupertsberg and joined the community of nuns afterwards. Minute details concerning various stages of the exorcism have been preserved and reflect the event's importance in solidifying Hildegard's image as a living saint, as well as for the restoration of the equilibrium within Sigewize's community.

Most of the details of the dramatic event are known from the third book of *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*. Finished around 1187 by Theodoric of Echternach, the hagiographical work was a peculiar endeavour. Neither an eye witness to the events, nor one of Hildegard's intimate collaborators, Theodoric tried to offer as much proof in support of the accounts as he could find in the library of the cloister of Rupertsberg. Instead of retelling the story with his own words, the hagiographer opted to present his audience with a compilation of all the available sources: a first-person account attributed to Hildegard herself, the epistolary exchange between Hildegard and Abbot Gedolf, as well as the written testimony of the nuns from Rupertsberg. Given the complex implications of the event, it could be that Theodoric felt more comfortable quoting the source material verbatim and *in extenso*. In addition to the detailed materials presented by the *Vita*, the *Liber Epistolarum* and *Acta inquisitionis* help shed light on Sigewize's story.

The so-called autobiographical passages<sup>48</sup> and the letter of petition addressed by Abbot Gedolf to Hildegard<sup>49</sup> indicate that Sigewize's demonic possession was not only an urgent matter at the level of her community, but that its proportions went beyond a mere local business and could, in fact, harm the Church in its entirety. Thus, both texts indicate that Sigewize was being possessed by a spirit who led many people astray and posed a threat to Ecclesia. Moreover, while there are no direct mentions of heretical groups, the fragments bare striking resemblances with Hildegard's letter to the clergy of Cologne. Yet again, the phenomenon is linked with the devil's machinations, who stirs the airy spirits to sow confusion amongst people. Even more telling is the fact that, while performing the rituals of exorcism, Hildegard finds out that the demon obsessing Sigewize displayed characteristics of a preaching devil.<sup>50</sup> At this point, the previously upheld boundaries between demonic possession and heresy are becoming even blurrier, which would beg the questions of why Sigewize was treated like an energumen and not a heretic, when some hints towards heterodox activity still linger in the hagiographical text.

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<sup>48</sup> VSH III, 20 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 57: "Quoniam uero Deus populum per istos purgare uult, permissione et iussione eius stuporem in aere commouent ac per spumam aeris pestilentiam euomunt atque inundationes et pericula in aquis faciunt, bella excitant, aduersitates et mala producant. [...] Cum enim nequam spiritus Deo permittente plures per eam propter prauos mores et peccata que eis persuaserat palam confunderet, quibusdam exterritis et pro hoc penitentibus idem malignus spiritus confusus est."

<sup>49</sup> VSH III, 21, Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 59: "Nam quedam nobilis femina a maligno spiritu per aliquot annos obsessa per amicorum manus ad nos deducta peruenit, quatinus adiutorio beati Nycholai, sub cuius patrocinio sumus, ab hoste imminente liberaretur. Sed uersutia et nequitia callidissimi et nequissimi hostis tot hominum fere milia duxit in errorem et dubium, quod ecclesie sancte maximum timemus detrimentum."

<sup>50</sup> Newman, "Three-Part Invention: The *Vita S. Hildegardis* and Mystical Hagiography", 207.

The *Vita* refers in rather vague terms to the demoniac woman, as a certain noble woman of the lower Rhine. Only when turning to Hildegard's *Epistolarium* are both her name as well as her exact place of origin revealed to those interested in looking deeper into the event. More precisely, an unnamed Dean of the Holy Apostles in Cologne alludes to her as "our sister – rather our beloved daughter – lady Sigewize"<sup>51</sup> and also adds that after hearing about Sigewize's miraculous healing, the entire city of Cologne felt "a love of spirituality by the love of God." Like the Archbishop Arnold of Trier,<sup>52</sup> the dean expresses his wish to find out more details about the ritual of exorcism. Moreover, at the end of the letter, he stresses once again that "Sigewize is a very good friend of ours" and thus wishes to send her his greetings. It is therefore clear that as a noble woman, Sigewize had a strong network of "familiares", at least in the Archdiocese of Cologne, willing to intervene on her behalf if she were to be in a dire situation. Of course, the response of the immediate community played an important part in all cases of demonic possession, but since Sigewize appears to have been involved in a form preaching and was quite mobile in her activity, it proved to be impossible to contain within the community. Hildegard and Elisabeth of Schönau, both noble women and both authors of sermons, were acutely aware of their liminal position within the Church, despite their formal profession and large support within their milieux.<sup>53</sup> Elisabeth experienced backlash and was accused of being a false prophet when a prediction of the imminent end of times, attributed to her, turned out to be wrong.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, Hildegard faced excommunication and a ban on singing during liturgy in response to her refuse to obey the command of the clergy of Mainz.<sup>55</sup>

Further hints regarding Sigewize's entanglement with some of the spiritual groups accused of heresy come from the life of Ekbart of Schönau, a scholastically educated canon turned monk, who dedicated a treatise to the fight against the Cathar heresy, known as *Sermones contra Catharos*. Quite interestingly, *Vita Ekeberti* was composed by Emecho of Schönau, Ekbart's direct successor at the helm of Schönau Abbey, around the same time when Theodorich of Echternach was labouring at the *Life of St. Hildegard*. Emecho's endeavour's main goal was to portray his predecessor as a champion of orthodoxy. In doing so he insisted on those instances when Ekbart acted as investigator of several heretical communities. Among others,

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<sup>51</sup> Ep. 158. *qua nobis innotuit quod sororem, immo filiam nostram specialem, dominam Sigewizen* in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium II*, 352. (Engl. in Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1998, 2 105.)

<sup>52</sup> Ep. 27, in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium I*, 77.

<sup>53</sup> McGinn, "To the Scandal of Men, Women are Prophesying."

<sup>54</sup> *Visionen* 3, XIX in Roth, *Die Visionen der Hl. Elisabeth von Schönau*, 71: "Sicut enim vobis de me revelatum fuisse dixistis, fateor vere quandam perturbationis nubem me nuper in animo concepisse propter ineptos sermones populi multa loquentis de me, que vera non sunt. Sed vulgi sermones facile sustinerem, si non et hi, qui in habitu religionis ambulant, spiritum meum acerbius contristarent. Nam et hi, nescio quibus stimulis agitati, gratiam domini in me irrident, et de his, que ignorant, temere iudicare non formidant. Audio, et quosdam litteras de suo spiritu scriptas sub nomine meo circumferre. De iudicii die me prophetasse diffamaverunt, quod certe nunquam facere presumpsi, cum omnium mortalium cognitionem effugiat eius adventus."

<sup>55</sup> Schmitt, "Charisma gegen Recht? Der Konflikt der Hildegard von Bingen mit dem Mainzer Domkapitel 1178/79 in kirchenrechtsgeschichtlicher Perspektive".

one examination is said to have taken place in Mainz, where Ekbert was called to closely investigate (*ad negotia ecclesiastica invitaretur*) forty heretics whose names and whereabouts were revealed during the exorcism of a “certain woman obsessed by a demon” brought to Bingen, a ritual performed by none other than Hildegard.<sup>56</sup> While the woman remains unnamed, the description fits well with the other information recorded in both Hildegard’s *Vita* as well as in the *Epistolarium* about Sigewize’s deliverance from demonic possession. Emecho’s narrative provides interesting additions to the story recounted in the *Vita*; namely, during the exorcism, a questioning is being carried out, during which the demon – and not the woman – according to God’s will, makes known everything about the Cathars (name, house, and burial places) in Mainz. The narrative linking exorcism with heresy morphed at the beginning of the thirteenth century in a curious text which dealt with the 120 theological questions addressed by a priest to a demon (during an exorcism performed in the presence of Hildegard).<sup>57</sup> While only a Latin version of this text is known, several strongly abbreviated French translations have been preserved, in which Cathars were, for the first time, described as cat worshipers.<sup>58</sup> One might be tempted to think that the connection between heresy and demonic possession is but a mere narrative construction, yet a closer inspection of the sources reveals that the connection between them existed from the very beginning.

Given the wider context, it is clear that a direct accusation of widely spreading heterodox ideas might have exposed Sigewize to a similar fate to that of the Cathars of Cologne. In her case, instead of insisting on the active part she played in the spread of dissenting ideas, the narratives pushed her to the background and placed the devil at their core, insisting time and again on how “she suffered from an infirmity that, at that time, she was unaware of.”<sup>59</sup> Moreover, while her exorcism was indeed a public matter, as its success would assure the restoration of the Church’s unity, it mainly insisted on the personal dimension of the act, a mere quest to save the soul of a lost sheep.

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<sup>56</sup> *Vita Ekeberti* in Roth, *Die Visionen der hl. Elisabeth und die Schriften der Aebte Ekbert und Emecho von Schönau*, 352: “Cum enim Pinguam obsessa quedam a demone femina adducta fuisset, ut ibi a Domino curaretur per preces domine Hildegardeis apud Sanctum Rupertum, demon non sua, sed Domini voluntate ductus Kataros quosdam numero circiter quadraginta Magoncie habitantes prodidit, et ubi habitarent et ubi mortuos suos sepelissent, occulte edixit. Cum igitur indicia omnia, que predixerat, vera fuissent inventa, et illi de fide sua interrogarentur, tam caute tergiversando responderunt, ut hereticos eos esse deprehendi non posset, quousque idem Eckbertus abbas advocatus ad subterfugia consueta eos declinare non passus, errorem eorum et heresim manifestavit.”

<sup>57</sup> Brunn, *Des contestataires aux « Cathares »*, 479–96. While Brunn offers quite a solid internal analysis of the text and thus, compellingly argues for dating it around 1230, he seems to be unaware of Michael Embach’s study which, following his palaeographical analysis of the Codex Dendermonde 9, attributes its composition to a Cistercian monk from Villers Abbey at the beginning of the thirteenth century. See Embach, *Die Schriften Hildegards von Bingen*, 139.

<sup>58</sup> Moulinier, *Hildegard von Bingen in ihrem historischen Umfeld*. The article also includes an edition of both the Latin and French versions of a dialogue between the priest and the devil.

<sup>59</sup> Ep. 27r in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium I*, 79: “Sed cognouimus quod diabolicus sufflatus de die in diem usque ad recessum suum defecit, et quod eadem mulier a fatigatione diaboli liberata est, et quod etiam tunc infirmitate, quam ante in se non cognouit, occupata est.” (Engl. in Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, 1994, 1 91.)

Indeed, only the early texts, such as Hildegard's autobiographical passages and Gedolf's letter of petition, briefly touch upon the more public nature of the affair, while Theodoric tries to make his interpretation as uncontroversial as possible. Emecho's narrative is much bolder, in the sense that it tackles the problem of heresy head on, indicating how Ekbert and Hildegard collaborated in dealing with what he perceived as a very serious threat to the Church. The institutionally grounded clerical authority embodied by Ekbert, the protagonist of Emecho's work, surely offered his author the possibility to be more generous with the details he shared with his audience regarding the events. However, much like Theodoric, he was careful not to disclose the name of the demoniac woman, and to frame his narrative as a confession coming from the demon, not the woman.<sup>60</sup>

On the other hand, Sigewize's social status, as a noble woman, as well as her various clerical and lay connections within the city of Cologne, the eponymous Archdiocese and quite likely in that of Mainz should not be underestimated. These probably had a major influence on the manner the situation played out in the end and even more so on how her story got to be told: that is, rather than a heretical act, her preaching activity (to which the texts make only subtle allusions) was the result of demonic obsession.

While in the late 1160s Sigewize's exorcism was treated as a delicate matter for the local religious landscape, to which she was well connected, and an outstanding endeavour for Hildegard in particular, as time went by it turned into one of the numerous miracles performed by a living saint, and afterwards by her relics. Indicative for this slow, but clear, shift in perception is the third account dealing with the topic of exorcism included in *Vita sanctae Hildegardis*. In their testimonial, the nuns of Rupertsberg list several instances in which Hildegard cured women of demonic possession. According to them, a nun from Aschaffenburg was deluded by the devil to commit perjury during her confession and "confess crimes to which she has never succumbed." Moreover, even her pious acts were the result demonic obsession. Sadly, the nuns do not go into details concerning any of the cases mentioned in their testimonial. Be that as it may, it is quite clear that prescriptive texts of behaviours and sophisticated theological explanations cannot enforce insurmountable boundaries between categories which share too many similarities, such as heresy and demonic possession. Like Hildegard and Theodoric, the nuns seem to allude only to Sigewize when they briefly mention two other cases of women freed by demonic possession through Hildegard's mediation: "One of these was a poor little thing and blind, and, through pity, was received into the monastery, where she happily lived out her life in the habit of the spiritual."<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> For more on this topic and its evolution in the thirteenth century, see also Newman, "Possessed by the Spirit: Devout Women, Demoniacs, and the Apostolic Life in the thirteenth century", 754-55.

<sup>61</sup> VSH III, 26 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 69: "Eadem uirtute alia duas mulieres obsessas a demonio liberavit, quarum una, cum esset pauperula et ceca, in elemosinam eius recepta in spirituali habitu uitam feliciter consummauit." (Engl. in Silvas, *Jutta and Hildegard*, 208.)

Likewise, in *Acta inquisitionis*, a dossier put forward at the beginning of the thirteenth century by the nuns of Rupertsberg for the purpose Hildegard's canonization, Sigewize's case was not singular, as she was one of the two "nobiles mulieres" cured by the demonic obsession, who then took the veil in their cloister during Hildegard's lifetime.<sup>62</sup>

## Conclusions

While prominent in the sermon addressed to the pastors of the Church in Cologne (1163), as well as in the fragments recounting Sigewize's exorcism, discussions about malignant spirits are ubiquitous in Hildegard of Bingen's oeuvre. Demons are linked with heresy, schism<sup>63</sup> (terms which tend to be used interchangeably) in the Church, with scholasticism,<sup>64</sup> as well as with abuses committed by secular power.<sup>65</sup> Furthermore, they interfere with preaching and even with acts of piety and thus function as a double-edged sword against those exercising any form of religious authority, be it charismatic or institutional.

With regards to Hildegard's understanding of the malignant spirits' origins, she follows a long tradition going back to the first angel's act of disobedience towards God, for which it was cast down to Hell. Much like other monastic authors, she talks about her own recurring experience with demonic torments that happen on different planes: personal – bodily pains, which she shares in common with her younger contemporary and visionary fellow, Elisabeth of Schönau,<sup>66</sup> communal – as some of her sisters oppose the strict interpretation of the rule she was in favour of, and societal – when the nature of her visions is questioned by the population at large.<sup>67</sup> In many regards, Hildegard's experience as a living saint shares numerous similarities with the categories of heretics and energumens, so much so that the boundaries between them are at times almost impossible to perceive. In this blurry, ambiguous space, authority and institutional boundaries can be questioned and criticised; therefore, this is one of the spaces where religious dissent thrives.

The parallels between Hildegard and Sigewize, as these have been pointed out by Barbara Newman, are undeniable.<sup>68</sup> At a first glance, each of the two women seems to fit into a neatly differentiated category: the prophetess in the service of orthodoxy and the demoniac

<sup>62</sup> *Acta inquisitionis* 4 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis. Canonizatio sanctae Hildegardis*, 248.

<sup>63</sup> See for example *Scivias*, II. 7 in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Scivias*, 43-43A 308-25; Ep. 296 and 296r. in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium III*, 54-57.

<sup>64</sup> Ep. 116 in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium II*, 288.

<sup>65</sup> Ep. 316 in Hildegardis Bingensis, *Epistolarium III*, 76-77.

<sup>66</sup> VSH II, 12 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 37: "Ad ueram uero uisionem aspiciebam magna sollicitudine, quomodo aerii spiritus contra nos pugnarent, uidi que, quod idem spiritus quasdam nobiles filias meas per diuersas uanitates quasi in rete perplexerant."

<sup>67</sup> VSH II, 5 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 28: "Tunc antiquus deceptor per multas irrisiones me excubruit, ita quod multi dixerunt: 'Quid est hoc, quod huic stulte et indocte femine tot mysteria reuelantur, cum multi fortes ac sapientes uiri sint?' In dispersionem itaque uertetur."

<sup>68</sup> Newman, "Three-Part Invention: The *Vita S. Hildegardis* and Mystical Hagiography", 206: "But if we change angle of vision slightly, another view comes into focus: two women face to face, remarkably alike – both suffering, both 'spirit-filled', both preachers – the younger a funhouse mirror image of the elder."



spreading heretical ideas. However, a closer look at the source material reveals how both were moving in a space with blurred boundaries, constantly open to negotiation, where spiritual practices and theological ideas never existed in a vacuum, but depended on social dynamics as well as on lay and ecclesiastical hierarchies which they, in turn, could question. Not much is known about Sigewize, but the scarce information provided indicates she was of noble descent, with strong lay and ecclesiastical connections in Cologne as well as in Mainz; she might have been able to freely preach for a couple of years until being eventually subjected to various rituals of exorcism, one carried out at the monastery of Brauweiler (near Cologne) and the second at Rupertsberg under Hildegard's direct supervision – where she would eventually be professed as a nun. While there is no way to closely investigate the content of the sermons Sigewize preached, as none were recorded,<sup>69</sup> many points were clearly not controversial in nature<sup>70</sup> and thus, did not differ from the type of “allowed criticism” expressed by other prominent religious women, like that of Hildegard and Elisabeth of Schönau. While many high-ranking religious women could assume ministerial offices in one form or another, their access to preaching publicly was only possible by blurring the institutional boundaries and from the safe shelter of a strong network of support. Even so, the in-between space from which religious women drew their authority, when denouncing the moral decay of the pastors of the Church and actively promoting the spiritual awakening, was by no means a safe haven. On the other hand, by embracing a similar career as a charismatic figure, Sigewize came to be known as the possessed woman who was miraculously exorcised by her older and more successful peer, Hildegard.

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<sup>69</sup> VSH III, 22 recounts how during the exorcism the demon was forced to recognize the validity of the baptism, of the Eucharist, as well as the mortal dangers to which excommunicated people and the Cathars would expose their souls, among other things.

<sup>70</sup> In fact, Hildegard frequently insists that, in order to confuse people, the malignant spirits would “not speak out against God totally, but, in fact, speak of him lovingly, and sigh to Him. But if with God's permission, a malignant spirit takes possession over someone's body, that person does not speak of God with faith, but sometimes, because of the devil's spells, speak of him deceitfully.” In Ep. 287, 83 Cf. VSH III, 22 in Klaes, *Vita Sanctae Hildegardis*, 64: “Interim per Dei potentiam coactus immundus spiritus multa de salute baptismi, de sacramento corporis Christi, de periculo excommunicatorum, de perditione Catharorum et his similibus ad confusionem sui, ad gloriam Christi coram populo quamvis inuitus protulit, unde multi fortiores ad fidem, multi promptiores effecti sunt ad peccatorum emendationem.”

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