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Lesser-Known Virtues: How the *Ordo Virtutum* Reflects Hildegard of Bingen's Monastic Worldview

If Hildegard of Bingen's twelfth-century musical drama the *Ordo Virtutum* were to be written today, there would be a few key differences. For instance, the human soul, or *anima*, at the center of the drama would likely receive more characterization. In the current text, she is nominally the core figure but often fades from view. Additionally, the personified virtues that win this soul back from the Devil would also probably take on new, more nuanced forms. And the Devil himself would almost certainly sing.

As an allegorical representation of humanity's spiritual struggles, the *Ordo* has naturally been discussed as a precursor to the later medieval morality plays. And these later plays, in turn, have influenced many modern depictions of how religious spirits operate. Of course, Hildegard did not invent the concept of a spiritual battle, but the fact that her *Ordo Virtutum* first adapted this theme for theatre—over three centuries before the genre became popular—is telling. Scholars have largely used these similarities to declare the *Ordo* as the oldest morality play, a fitting title. However, such a description tends to overlook the key differences between Hildegard's work and the later popular genre. Notably, many morality plays have a very modern outlook on the seductive powers of the Devil. The popular image of the Devil as a smooth corrupter of souls was a perfect fit for theatrical performances, and became even more developed as the morality genre became increasingly popular. This figure was charming but deceitful, and has influenced many of the portrayals that today's audiences are familiar with.

But Hildegard's Devil is seductive only in theory. Despite his apparent skills at recruiting souls, he never displays any of the impressive tactics or rhetorical skills we would expect from the master corrupter. Notably, while every other character in the drama sings, the Devil merely

shouts his lines in rage. This small difference between the *Ordo* and morality plays is indicative of a wider gulf in objectives—Hildegard and later morality authors were writing in fundamentally different contexts. As a leading musician, scientist, and abbess, Hildegard filled a very specific academic and artistic role in her monastic community. And, crucially, this is the community she wrote the *Ordo* for. Unlike the writers of morality plays, Hildegard was not attempting to reach every possible audience. She was attempting to make a point about the importance of monasticism using the conventions of this lifestyle.

As Robert Potter contends, despite its surface similarities to other works, the *Ordo Virtutum* in many ways is “alone and unprecedented” among the writings of the time (Potter 1986, 12). The *Ordo* may be a morality play, but it is primarily a work deeply affected by the personal situation of Hildegard. Because her convent served as her inspiration, backdrop, and audience, it played a key role in developing a work that is simultaneously reminiscent of others and a one of a kind creation. The unique form of the *Ordo Virtutum* developed because Hildegard sought to write a drama that reflected the atmosphere of her own convent. The impact of this atmosphere on the play can be seen through the characters, music, and audience of the *Ordo Virtutum*.

The personification of spiritual concepts is a defining trait of morality plays, but Hildegard’s personified characters serve as direct symbols of monasticism. Later morality plays used similar characters as the *Ordo*, but lacked many of Hildegard’s specific decisions. For example, The *Ordo* includes a central abstract figure on a spiritual journey—for Hildegard, the Anima—a malicious being that tempts the figure—here, the Devil—and abstract beings that interact with the figure on their journey—in this play, the various virtues. But despite these similarities, the uniqueness of Hildegard’s work stems from how she treats the various

categories. Most morality plays give a numerical advantage to the temptations that a hero must face. In the *Ordo Virtutum*, however, the sole tempter—the Devil—is alone and outnumbered. Rather than focusing on temptation, Hildegard chooses to emphasize seventeen different virtues. Specifically, these are the virtues that guide female monastic life. In fact, many of Hildegard’s virtues are not only important to the lives of individual nuns, but to the texts that would have played key roles in their community. In the *Ordo*, Humility, Queen of the virtues, leads followers such as Chastity, Knowledge of God, and Modesty. (Hildegard 4). Margot Fassler argues that these specific virtues can be traced to three important monastic texts: the *Rule of Saint Benedict*, the *Speculum Virginum*, and a collection of Hildegard’s own visions entitled the *Scivias* (Fassler 2014, 329). The *Scivias*, especially, is important to consider because parts of the *Ordo Virtutum* were originally published at the end of that work. Hildegard, according to Fassler, “designed *Scivias* so that the play makes sense within it” (Fassler 333). Thus, Hildegard closely ties the composition of characters within her play to the works with which nuns would be familiar. And this comparison extends to how characters behave. While many of the *Ordo*’s predecessors feature personified battles, Hildegard’s virtues wage verbal, not literal, war against the Devil. Hildegard is clearly acknowledging the tradition of military metaphors, but she modifies it to fit a more monastic setting. This is seen through the character of Victory, who helps bind the Devil and calls the other Virtues the “bravest and most glorious soldiers” of God (Hildegard 10). Even as Hildegard meets the mold of morality play characters, she challenges genre conventions with specifically monastic character choices.

Similarly, the other virtues that receive special roles in the *Ordo Virtutum* bear special significance to the female monastic lifestyle. This is best illustrated through the beginning and end of Hildegard’s work. In the beginning, the virtues are only seen as a group. However, when a

single soul becomes troubled, Knowledge of God reveals herself, telling the soul that if she is “steadfast” she “will never fail” (Hildegard 2). The fact that Knowledge of God is the first virtue to receive individual lines fits well with both the educational focus of monasticism and with Hildegard’s specific reputation as a scholar. Once the Devil arrives, Knowledge of God’s role fades, to be replaced by Humility, but this early introduction shows that failing to know and study God is the first step to falling into temptation. For the members of a convent, especially, this would have been a pointed warning. Later in the story, when the now penitent soul returns to the Virtues, Humility gains the most focus, asking her followers to “take up this weeping sinner” and guide her back to God (Hildegard 9). When the Devil returns for Anima, he is defeated by Victory and the other virtues, but, interestingly, his last exchange is not with Humility, Knowledge of God, or even Victory, but with Chastity. Against the Devil’s complaint that she will never bear a child, Chastity responds that there is “one man” she has “brought forth”—Jesus himself (Hildegard 11). By shaping her characters to create the story of a soul that flees from Knowledge of God, is accepted back by Humility, and is at last saved by Chastity, Hildegard structures her plot to mirror what she sees as the essential social role of convent. Both the selection and behavior of characters in the *Ordo* reflect distinct aspects of Hildegard’s life, surroundings, and beliefs.

If this firmly monastic argument is made by characters, then it is heavily reinforced through Hildegard’s musical decisions. By highlighting music as a tool to be used by certain groups—monastic women—the *Ordo Virtutum* supports the values of Hildegard’s own community. As a musical drama, the *Ordo Virtutum* has most of its characters sing their lines. This musical aspect of the script takes on a new importance due to the structure of the play: while the beginning and ending of the *Ordo* feature confrontations with the Devil, the majority of

the drama consists of an extended showcase of each virtue. Plotwise, very little happens in this segment, but the shifting music gives personality and weight to the individual Virtues. In fact, Hildegard makes the ability to sing certain high notes a defining characteristic of the Virtues, and uses this trait to define their relationships with other characters. Throughout the play, these singers cycle through a range of high keys. By establishing this power as a key trait of her noble characters, Hildegard is then able to use it as a mark of the trials faced by her most human figure—the Anima. Initially, the Anima is able to match the high notes of the virtue, but she loses this divine voice as she succumbs to the Devil’s temptations. After the Anima returns, she regains this ability, marking a symbolic reunion both with divine harmony and monastic values. However, it is noteworthy that even when the Anima is gone, the play still focuses on the Virtues and their singing. Hildegard shows music—as a symbol for monasticism—to be a key focus even when spiritual battles would seemingly be more important. And, as Potter illustrates, she may have had very personal reasons for doing so. Shortly before the believed publication date of the *Ordo Virtutum*, Hildegard’s close friend and follower Richardis von Stade left her to receive another appointment that Hildegard viewed as driven by “worldly desires” (Potter 206). Despite this loss, Hildegard remained focused on her community. Similarly, the *Ordo Virtutum*, unlike later morality plays, does not follow a soul’s descent into sin; rather, it builds on the music of a community of women ready to accept that soul when she returns. Even when the script is relatively straightforward, the orchestration of the *Ordo*’s journeys highlights how powerful music is as a unifying monastic force.

The Devil’s inability to sing, then, carries even more weight in light of how Hildegard frames music. Music is not just a trait of the Virtues, it is an ability. If the Devil were to be portrayed as a master of seduction, he would likely be able to match if not exceed the harmonies

of heaven. But Hildegard seems to have not been interested in showing the power of the Devil. In fact, Potter asserts that “the balance of power” within the *Ordo* is firmly with the Virtues the entire time, even when the Devil appears to temporarily win. He claims the Anima, but never succeeds in claiming the stage. Even during the Procession of Virtues, the Devil is restricted to being a minor nuisance. Ultimately, this Devil lacks the weapon which is music, a weapon on full display in the individual introduction to each Virtue. Even today, this is a rare decision. Portraying the Devil as an ineffective adversary risks stripping the play of what should be its moral, the dangers of temptation. But Hildegard’s use of monastic conventions means that she does not need to focus on the terrors outside the monastery, but instead the music inside. This Devil is merely a background temptation, an occasional shout to disrupt the monastic music. By keeping the audience with the Procession of Virtues, and its distinct musical structure, Hildegard narrows the focus of her writing to reduce non-monastic influences. Margo Fassler argues that this “systematic progression through tonal areas” was intended to be “understood interactively” within a monastic community (Fassler, 318). Effectively, Hildegard constructs a monastery using the vocal abilities of her Virtues. To do this, she includes very specific musical beats and ranges, and especially emphasizes the parts of music that nuns would be familiar with. By increasing the musical power of her monastic characters—the Virtues—and reducing that of her antagonist—the Devil—Hildegard affirms the long-standing monastic musical tradition as the sole weapon of heaven’s servants.

Both the characters and music of Hildegard’s play are crucial internal factors to the finished work, but she was also closely influenced by her need to reach an external factor: her audience. The *Ordo Virtutum* was primarily written for an audience of nuns. This does not mean, of course, that the play would only have been seen by women. However, women would have

formed the bulk of the audience, and this means that the message of the play would have been directed towards them, which would alter the tone that the message took. The first way that this manifests in the work is through the human identifying character, the Anima. Typically, Dorothy Wertz highlights, these characters in later morality plays would be specially designed as a “reconciliation of social classes,” a generic being who could exist at any economic level of society (Wertz 1969, 451). The tone of this character would thus try to appeal to any viewer in medieval Europe. Popular morality plays that follow this model include *The Castle of Perseverance* and *Everyman*. Anima meets these criteria in some respects but is not as specifically generic in economic status. This is especially relevant, Potter argues, because Hildegard’s Rupertsberg Convent was an “elite, aristocratic, and female-dominated environment” (Potter 204). The play could have such a lofty tone because many of the nuns in Hildegard’s community would have been wealthy and socially connected. Similarly, because the convent would perform the play, it wasn’t necessary to tie the *Ordo Virtutum* to the local power structures that would arrange later morality plays. Most of all, however, the tone of the play’s message is seen in its closing passage, where the audience is addressed directly to look to God, “that he may reach you his hand” (Hildegard). This section, more mystic than the rest of the play, highlights virtuous living as a continuous necessity—giving this play a stronger tone than many moralities. In the cities of Europe, a brief message would have been preferably. But in a monastic setting, the work of virtues and of nuns continued long after the play ended. The virtues of the play, already closely connected to the beliefs of convents, are in this passage firmly tied to the everyday lives that nuns are told to lead.

Just as the audience of the play directly influences its tone, it also shapes how clear the message needs to be. As a playwright writing for a highly educated and spiritual audience,

Hildegard did not need to include some of the specific traits of morality plays. The most important of these traits, according to Wertz, was ambiguity (Wertz 438). Morality plays often seem to have clear messages, but they also needed to appeal to the common person, meaning that there is often a divergence between a play's actual content and "official intent" (Wertz 438). The *Ordo Virtutum* was able to include a clear message free of this ambiguity because Hildegard was targeting a very different audience than other moralities. This also meant that Hildegard's message could be more direct. By not attempting to create a single figure that represents every possible spiritual journey, Hildegard is instead able to highlight the specific trials of a single soul. Thus, the Anima in the *Ordo Virtutum* was specially created to epitomize the struggles of a nun, more than any other possible class. Of course, this does not mean that the play cannot still represent other groups, as the details surrounding Anima are still very broad. But it does show that Hildegard's message had increased clarity and specificity because she framed it around her own surroundings. The play's message would also have been more easily accepted in convents because of Hildegard's own authority and reputation. Perhaps most importantly, the atmosphere of a convent meant that Hildegard did not need to subvert the inevitability of her own message. Morality plays, Wertz argues, have long struggled with providing "dramatic catharsis," because catharsis implies balance—and Christian plays can only be resolved "if there is final imbalance on the side of mercy" (Wertz 444). The *Ordo Virtutum*, like most moralities, has this imbalance. Hildegard, however, did not need to grapple with the confusion of this imbalance, and instead offered clear catharsis based on the environment of her own monastery. Because she knew who her audience was, she was able to construct a tone and message to appeal directly to her own monastic lifestyle.

For all of its similarities to morality plays, the *Ordo Virtutum* is most fascinating as a work created by the specific monastic context of Hildegard's own life. Hildegard was known for contributing to many fields, and the *Ordo* is perhaps one of the best examples of how she applied the lessons of one area of study—such as music—to another—theatre. If she predicted the morality genre, she did so largely by highlighting the themes and messages that would resonate best with the nuns that surrounded her. The characters, music, and audience of the *Ordo Virtutum* reflect this, combining to tailor this musical drama to the exact circumstances it would have been performed in. The key to the *Ordo Virtutum*, then, lies not in its impact, but in its uniqueness—there are numerous depictions of spiritual temptations, but the most interesting may be the one play where the Devil can't sing.

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