



IDEAS ABOUT WOMEN

Very often discussions of women's lives in any period begin with information on ideas about women, as these formed the intellectual structures within which both men and women operated. For this chapter, we have chosen to place sources regarding ideas about women at the end, for two reasons. One of these is simply chronological; there are no extended discussions of women's nature and proper role that have survived from the Early Middle Ages. The other is both chronological and substantive. The discussions of women's place in creation, the reasons for differences among women and between women and men, and the role of sex and marriage in God's plan for the world which became more vigorous in the High Middle Ages actually marked the beginning of an extended debate about women that would continue for many centuries. They thus shaped women's lives more in subsequent periods than in the period covered in this chapter.

45. Hildegard of Bingen *Causes and Cures*

Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) was the abbess of two monastic houses for women, a visionary, and a prolific author. She entered a Benedictine monastery when she was eight, and spent most of her life in various women's religious communities, two of which she founded herself. When she was over fifty, she left her community to preach to audiences of clergy and laity, and she was the only woman of her time whose opinions on religious matters were considered authoritative by the Church. She was the first woman encouraged by the pope to write works of theology, which she did along with poetry, plays, and scientific works. She was also a talented artist and composer of chants, liturgy, and other types of music. (Many of her musical compositions have been recorded recently by various artists, and are available on compact disk and on several Web sites; this current fame plus her theological status means that she could easily have been included in the "Exceptional Women" section of this chapter.) The following comes from one of her medical works, *Causes and Cures*, which includes discussion of illnesses and their treatment, but also conveys her theories about the creation of the universe and the causes and consequences of differences between men and women and among women.

31. *Adam's fall*.¹ God has created the human such that all living beings are subject to him in order to serve him [Gen. 1:26]. But when the

human transgressed God's command he was transformed both in body and mind. For the pureness of his blood was turned into something different so that he emits the foam of semen instead of pureness. Had the human stayed in Paradise, he would have remained in an immutable and perfect state. But after his

¹Here and elsewhere, Hildegard contrasts the situation at Creation with that after Adam and Eve disobeyed God in the garden of Eden, commonly called the Fall.

transgression he was turned into something different and bitter. . . .

When he consented to evil and relinquished good he was made similar to the earth that produces good and useful as well as bad and useless plants and that has good and bad moisture and sap within itself. With the taste for evil the blood of Adam's children was changed into the poison of semen from which the humans' offspring are propagated. Therefore their flesh is ulcerous and perforated. Those ulcers and perforations cause some kind of storm and a vaporous moisture in human beings. From this develop and coagulate *flegmata*² that affect the human body with various infirmities. All of this arose from the first evil that a human first performed. Because had Adam remained in Paradise he would have the sweetest health and the best dwelling, just as the strongest balsam gives off the best fragrance. But now, by contrast, human beings have poison in them, *flegma* and various infirmities. . . .

Why Eve fell first. Had Adam transgressed prior to Eve, this transgression would have been so severe and incorrigible that the human would have fallen into such a grave state of incorrigibility that he would not have wanted to be saved nor could he have been saved. Because Eve transgressed first, [her sin] could be more easily eradicated since she was weaker than the male. Adam's and Eve's flesh and skin were stronger and harder than that of humans now, because Adam was formed from earth and Eve from him. Yet after they had procreated children their flesh became weaker and weaker, and thus it shall be until the Last Day.

The creation of Adam. God made the human being from clay [Gen. 2:7]. But the man was transformed from clay to flesh and therefore he is the particular cause of and the ruler over created things. He works the earth so that it brings forth fruit. There is a strength in his

²flegma (pl.: flegmata) is a fluid in the body

bones, blood vessels and flesh. His head is whole and his skin is thick. He has his [reproductive] strength within him and produces semen as the sun brings forth light. Woman, however, was not transformed because taken from flesh she remained flesh. Therefore a more artful work was given to her to be done with her hands. She is airy, as it were. She carries the child in her womb and gives birth to it. She has a divided head and thin skin, so that the child she is carrying in her womb can get air. . . .

Diversity in conception. When a man who has intercourse with a woman has an emission of strong semen and feels proper affectionate love for the woman and when the woman at that hour feels proper love for the man, then a male is conceived because it was ordained by God. It cannot be otherwise than that a male is conceived, since Adam too was formed from clay which is stronger matter than flesh. This male will be intelligent and virtuous because he was conceived from strong semen and with mutual affectionate love. If, however, the woman's love for the man is lacking, so that the man alone at that hour feels proper affectionate love for the woman and the woman does not feel the same for the man, and if the man's semen is strong, then still a male is conceived because the man's affectionate love is predominant. Yet this male child will be weak and not virtuous because the woman's love for the man was lacking. If the man's semen is thin, yet he feels affectionate love for the woman and she feels the same love for him, then a virtuous female is procreated. If, on the other hand, the man feels affectionate love for the woman and the woman does not feel the same for the man, or if the woman feels affectionate love for the man and the man does not feel the same for the woman, and if, further, the man's semen is thin at that hour, then a female is born due to the semen's weakness. But if the man's semen is strong, yet the man feels no affectionate love for the woman and the woman does not feel any for the man, then a male is procreated because the semen was strong, but he will be bitter on account of his parents' bitterness. And if a man's semen is thin and if at that hour neither feels affectionate love for

male child

female child

the other, a female of bitter disposition is born. The warmth of women who are obese by nature outweighs the man's semen, such that the child's face often resembles the mother's. But women who are thin by nature often generate a child whose face resembles the father's...

The creation of Adam and the formation of Eve. When God created Adam, Adam felt great love in the deep sleep that God imparted to him. And God made a form for the love of man, and so woman is the love of man. As soon as woman was formed, God gave man the power of creation, that he might procreate children through his love which is woman. For when Adam looked at Eve he was wholly filled with wisdom, because he saw in her the mother through whom he would procreate children. And when Eve looked at Adam, she looked at him as though she were looking into heaven and as the soul, longing for heavenly things, strives upward, because her hope was placed in man. Therefore the same love and no other will be and must be in man and in woman.

But, man's love with its blazing heat, compared with woman's love is like the fire of blazing mountains that is difficult to extinguish compared with a wood fire that is easily extinguished. Woman's love compared with man's love is like sweet warmth proceeding from the sun which brings forth fruit compared with an ardent wood fire, because woman sweetly brings forth fruit in her offspring. In Adam's transgression, both the great love that he felt when Eve proceeded from him and the sweetness of the sleep which he then slept were turned into a contrary mode of sweetness. Therefore, because man still feels and has this strong sweetness in himself, as a deer longs for water [Ps. 42:1] so he rushes toward woman and woman toward him, like a threshing floor that is shaken by many strokes and brought to heat when grain is threshed on it...

Conception. When a woman has intercourse with a man, a warm pleasurable feeling in her brain announces the sensation of this pleasure in intercourse and the outpouring of semen. After

the semen has fallen into its place, this extremely strong warmth in the brain will attract it and hold it. Soon the woman's loins, too, contract, and all the members of her body that were prepared to open at menstruation close at once very tightly like a strong man enclosing something in his hand. Then menstrual blood intermingles with semen, makes it sanguineous and turns it into flesh. When it has become flesh, this same blood draws a vessel around it, like a little worm preparing its dwelling out of itself. And so the blood prepares this vessel day after day until a human being is formed in it and until this human being receives the breath of life. Then this vessel grows with the human being and is so firmly set that it cannot move from its place until this human being leaves it.

Eve. The first mother of humankind was created similar to ether. For as ether contains all the stars so she, pure and uncorrupted, carried humankind within herself when she was told: "Be fruitful and multiply" [Gen. 1:28]. And this comes to pass with much pain...

*Sanguine women.*³ Some women are plump by nature. They have soft and delightful flesh, slender blood vessels, and good untainted blood. Because their blood vessels are slender they contain less blood and their flesh grows that much better and is that much more permeated with blood. They have a clear and light facial coloring, are lovable in the embrace of love and meticulous in arts. Their mental disposition is such that they are capable of self-control. They suffer only a moderate effusion of blood from the rivulets of menstruation and their uterus is strongly developed to bear children. Thus they are also fertile and able to receive man's semen. Still, they do

³These four categories of women derive from ideas about four fluids (also called "humors") in the body that date back to the ancient Greeks. Europeans from the Greeks to the seventeenth century saw individuals as dominated by one of these humors (in the same way that we might describe someone according to psychologized personality traits, such as "Type A" or "anal retentive"), and saw illness as caused by an imbalance in these humors. Hildegard is the first to interpret these in terms of sexual behavior and to discuss them extensively in regard to women.

not bear many children. If they remain without a husband so that they do not bear offspring, they will possibly suffer physical pain, but if they have a husband they are healthy. If, at menstruation, drops of blood are locked up in them before the natural time, so that they do not flow out, then these women will occasionally be melancholic, or suffer a pain in the side, or a worm will grow in their flesh, or lymph nodes, called scrofulae, will burst, or a rather mild form of leprosy will develop.

like
scabrous
mppo.

Phlegmatic women. There are other women whose flesh does not grow much because they have thick blood vessels and rather healthy white blood containing, however, a small amount of poison which gives it its light color. They have a severe expression and a darkish coloring. They are industrious and useful and possess a somewhat virile mind. At menstruation their rivulets of blood flow moderately, neither too little nor too much. Because they have thick blood vessels they are extremely fertile with offspring and conceive easily, since also their uteri and all their viscera are strongly developed. They attract men and cause men to pursue them, and therefore men love them. If they wish to abstain from men, they are able to abstain from intercourse with them with only some, though not too much, debilitating effect. Yet if they have avoided intercourse with men, they will become morose and disagreeable in their demeanor. But if they have been together with men so that they do not wish to abstain from intercourse with them, they will be unrestrained and excessive in their lust, as has been observed by men. Because they are somewhat virile they will occasionally, due to the greenness within them, grow a little fluff on the chin. If, at menstruation, the rivulet of blood is constricted in them before the natural time, they will occasionally incur an unsoundness of the head, madness in other words. Or they will suffer from the spleen or from dropsy, or a swelling will develop as always in tumors, or they will develop wildly growing flesh on a limb, like a gall on a tree or on an apple.

Choleric women. There are other women who have soft flesh but big bones, average blood ves-

sels and dense red blood. Their facial coloring is pallid, they are intelligent and kind. People show them respect and are afraid of them. At menstruation they suffer severe blood loss. Their uteri are strongly developed and they are fertile. Men like their disposition but stay out of their way because these women draw men's attention but do not attract them. In a marital union they are chaste and faithful as wives, and together with their husbands they are physically healthy. If they are deprived of husbands they will suffer physically and be debilitated by that, because they do not know in which man to put their womanly faith and also because they do not have a husband. If the flow at menstruation ceases sooner than it should, they will easily become paralyzed and their humors will dissolve, so that their humors become weak and these women will either feel pain in the liver or will easily incur a black tumor as from a dracunculus⁴ or their breasts will swell with cancer.

Melancholic women. But there are other women who have haggard flesh, thick blood vessels, average-sized bones, and blood that is more bluish than sanguineous. Their faces are a blend of greyish and black color. These women are also windy, and wavering in their thoughts and wearisome when they waste away as a result of annoyance. They are not very resilient, so that at times they are weary from melancholia. At menstruation they suffer severe blood loss, and they are sterile because they have a weak and fragile uterus. Therefore they can neither receive nor retain nor warm man's semen. Consequently they are healthier, stronger, and happier without husbands than with them, because they will become weak if they have been with husbands. But men avoid them and shy away from them because they do not talk pleasantly to men and because men love them only a little. If, at some time, these women feel carnal pleasure, it will, however, pass quickly in them. But if they have robust and sanguine husbands, occasionally some

⁴from a dracunculus: dragunculi, the Guinea worm (*Dracunculus medinensis*) of North Africa and Asia, which causes eruptions on the skin of its hosts. Hildegard will have learned of it via the ancient medical authors.

of these women can bear at least one child when they reach a sound age like fifty. But if they have had different husbands whose nature is weak they will not conceive from them, but remain sterile. If their menstruation ceases sooner than is right for the nature of women, they will at times suffer gout and swelling of the legs, or they will incur an unsoundness of the head, brought on by

melancholia. Or they will suffer back or kidney pain or a rapid swelling of the body because waste matter and foulness, from which menstruation should have purged their bodies, remain enclosed in them. If they do not receive any help in their infirmity, so that they are not freed from it by the help of God or by medicine, they will die very soon.

46. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica*

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) was a professor of theology and philosophy at the University of Paris and the most important scholastic philosopher of the Middle Ages. In 1879, Pope Leo XIII declared his ideas to be the official philosophy of the Catholic Church. Aquinas was a follower of Aristotle and so believed in the importance of logic and reason; one of his aims was to demonstrate that reason and faith are not contradictory, but complement one another. Aquinas wrote many works, the most significant of which was the *Summa Theologica*, a systematic discussion of Christian theology based on philosophical principles. Like many works of the scholastics, the *Summa* is organized into series of questions and answers, in which Aquinas states a question, sets out several negative answers to the question (termed *objections*), and then answers these objections. In this section, Aquinas adapts dichotomous notions of male and female nature derived from Aristotle to Christian teachings.

PART I, QUESTION XCII THE PRODUCTION OF THE WOMAN (IN FOUR ARTICLES)

We must next consider the production of the woman. Under this head there are four points of inquiry: (1) Whether the woman should have been made in that first production of things? (2) Whether the woman should have been made from man? (3) Whether of man's rib? (4) Whether the woman was made immediately by God?

First Article

Whether the woman should have been made in the first production of things?

We proceed thus to the First Article:—

Objection 1. It would seem that the woman should not have been made in the first production of things. For the Philosopher¹ says, that the female is a misbegotten male. But nothing misbegotten or defective should have been in the first production of things. Therefore woman should not have been made at that first production.

Obj. 2: Further, subjection and limitation were a result of sin, for to the woman was it said after sin (Genesis iii. 16): Thou shalt be

¹The Philosopher: Aristotle.