



“Please Don’t Talk about Hildegard and Feminism in the Same Breath!”¹

Recently, an eminent scholar in the field of Hildegard studies suggested to me that in giving my up-coming paper on one of Hildegard of Bingen’s songs, I should refrain from associating the twelfth century *Magistra* with feminism. I was surprised to hear the study of the music of a long-forgotten female composer uncoupled from feminist endeavour, given that the twentieth-century recovery of Hildegard’s body of works coincided with the rise of feminist interest in female achievements. I had mistakenly believed that scholars of Hildegard’s works must pay some allegiance to feminism. It appears that many scholars of Hildegard’s twelfth-century life and works regard the linking of feminism with the study of her accomplishments to be anachronistic. While I am, in part, sympathetic to this critique, I would also suggest that without the rise of second wave feminism, Hildegard’s music may never have been brought to the attention of contemporary scholars.

There are other fears less overtly expressed by scholars who wish to disassociate themselves from feminist work, even though they have benefited thereby. These concerns include fear that a feminist perspective would suggest:

- that Hildegard was oppressed by patriarchy and that she was a proto-feminist who struggled consciously against this oppression;
- that she was a lesbian (the oft-presumed outcome of being a feminist, and doubly dangerous in Hildegard’s case with her very public declaration of love for Richardis); and
- that Hildegard’s basic agenda was to fight for the equality of the sexes.

In this paper I address these concerns and suggest an approach which both recognizes the contribution feminism has made to Hildegardian studies, and acknowledges the anachronism of attributing a feminist agenda to Hildegard’s work as leader of her twelfth-century monastic community. In the field of musicology at least, feminist studies have indeed contributed to the recognition of the embodied nature of musical practices.

Holsinger argues that “deep-seated assumptions about musical sonority as a practice of the flesh exert[...] a clear influence upon the composition, performance, reception, and representation of music...” (Holsinger 2001, 2).

This point of view is diametrically opposed to arguments privileging the idea that medieval music is a manifestation of the beauty of proportional geometry. Holsinger refers to the “fierce resistance” that has occurred to “the introduction of theories of gender, sexuality, power, and the body into the study of Western art-music traditions...” (Holsinger 2001, 3). He suggests that this has come in part from the medieval musicologists who have an investment in the so-called “purity” of the chant.² As a feminist, I also have difficulty examining Hildegard’s texts without attention to issues of gender, including, for example, a careful assessment of the obstacles Hildegard might have had to overcome in striving to be heard, as well as her privileges as a noble woman with strong connections to local seats of secular and ecclesiastical power. However, the problem is not as simple as the dichotomy feminist and non-feminist suggests; there are shades and nuances of many hues within and surrounding each field, as well as acknowledged and unacknowledged connections.

The 2002 Kalamazoo roundtable sponsored by the Society for Medieval Feminist Scholarship asked the question, “Are we post-feminist yet?” I would like to locate the problem not so much in the “post” part of “post-feminism” but in the term “feminism.” My argument is that there are many feminisms, and that to declare oneself to be post-feminist, one needs to clarify “post-which-feminism.”

In America, the feminism that has most currency is liberal feminism. While acknowledging the debt I personally owe to liberal feminism, I have some reservations about its viability, if one takes as the broad objective of most branches of feminism the notion of a world without sex and gender discrimination. Liberal feminists take the position that women have won their battle in the public arena. For them the system essentially works, and women should use it more wisely by stripping themselves of particularities, and participating only as gender-free political agents. In contrast, I argue that liberal feminism rests on foundational assumptions within liberal theory that hamper the full liberation for women in the future. Contemporary non-liberal feminist movements are accused of being anti-male, sexually repressed, too focussed on lesbianism, too invested in victim mythology, opposed to free speech, and overly involved with spirituality and morality. This is precisely the fear of not only liberal feminists but of those scholars who wish to isolate their studies from what they see as irrelevant concerns. Perhaps liberal feminists would regard themselves as “post-feminist.” I would argue however that liberal feminism still leaves unexamined issues of race, class and gender, and reinstates the white, middle-class privilege of those whose gender performance most approaches that of an imaginary gender-free subject. It is a comfortable position for women who are insulated from social and political inequities that are prevalent in many areas of this country, and globally.

In a recent article published on the Independent Woman’s Forum website, Christine Stolba castigates the authors of Women’s Studies textbooks for miseducating students (Stolba 2002, 6-7). She is critical of the type of feminism which she sees as anachronistic and anti-intellectual, that

encourages a “...process of internalising subordination and inferiority by promoting a message of women-as-victims...” (Stolba 2002, 31). Her appropriation of Virginia Woolfe’s title in her article, entitled “Lying in a Room of One’s Own: How Women’s Studies Textbooks Miseducate Students,” underlines her argument that feminism has won the day. No doubt, some of her criticisms are valid. For example, in a section entitled “Errors in Interpretation” she accuses the authors of the textbooks she has chosen as her research focus of “...skewing information, telling only part of the story, and failing to include facts that might inconvenience their arguments” (Stolba 2002, 16). Later in this paper I argue that this has been the case in some studies of Hildegard’s life and works. Stolba points out that the “...attitude of women-under-siege seeps into discussion of history...” (Stolba 2002, 16). This has also been true of some studies of Hildegard’s life and works, where the privileges accorded to her by virtue of her class have not been acknowledged, alongside the difficulties she experienced because of her gender. However, on many occasions, Stolba’s article positions the arguments of the IWF in contemptuous opposition to the work of the broad range of feminist writers represented in the five Women’s Studies textbooks she analyses. In her conclusion she accuses the texts of teaching students that “...shoddy summaries of their opponents’ work is an appropriate intellectual response to ideas that challenge one’s own” (Stolba 2002, 31). In spite of some reasonable arguments within the article, inflammatory statements like this underline her stereotyping of feminism and Women’s Studies in a way which is not mirrored in the diversity of current feminist approaches.

For example, in a thoughtfully nuanced and broadly ranging collection of papers titled “Differential Aesthetics,” editors Penny Foster and Nicola Foster suggest that it is a mistake to cast all twentieth and twenty-first century feminisms in the same mould. They say that “Despite the bad press, we understand contemporary feminism to be supple enough to enable negotiation of new levels of interconnection, at the same time as sufficiently incisive to continue to critique culture and thought, not least its own” (Florence and Foster 2000, 2). The authors suggest that the “bad press” is usually associated with “a caricature of a selection of 70’s moments” (Florence and Foster 2000, 6), which is generalised to the point of undeniability. In Stolba’s case, generalisations like the accusation that Women’s Studies textbooks teach poor scholarship are placed alongside analyses that hone in on isolated details like her accusation that these books “suffer from serious errors of taste.” She cites “graphic photos of women performing do-it-yourself pelvis exams” and “a naked woman embracing her equally naked daughter” (Stolba 2002, 30).

Florence and Foster’s answer to a criticism of feminist methodologies suggests that feminist insights call for more nuanced analysis than Stolba’s: “The seriousness and level of sophistication of contemporary feminist discussions around how representation interfaces with reality, and what theoretical models or approaches have to offer individually or in combination, deserves rather more exacting commentary than this” (Florence and Foster 2000, 8). Obviously, white twenty-first century feminisms have moved beyond Stolba and Denfield; perhaps its critics have not.

The critics of feminist Hildegard studies do have a point, as becomes obvious in a survey of twentieth-century publications about Hildegard and her works. Nonetheless, one has to note that the rise of feminism and the rise of interest in Hildegard coincide. Without second wave feminism, there would be far fewer studies of Hildegard's oeuvre. A brief and less than comprehensive search on Worldcat on March 12, 2002 revealed the following information (Table 1) using a sample of publications about Hildegard.

Table 1

Year range	Number and language	Comments
1900-10	0	
1910-20	1 German	Holy Hildegard as a Benedictine
1920-30	2 German; 2 English	Study at Eibingen and copy made of Scivias; Holy Hildegard again plus Singer's magic and science work
1930-40	4 German	Hildegard, the holy monastic, and metaphysician
1940-50	1 German	Looking at various holy women
1950-60	2 German	
1960-70	0	
1970-80	2 German but one published in French	Interest in the music and the illuminations
1980-90	8 English; 1 German	Rise of interest in Hildegard as a woman forgotten but now brought to light by new (renewed?) interest in Women's Studies, prompted, I suggest, by the rise in feminist studies
1990-2000	50 English; 2 German; 2 French	English speaking scholars take up Hildegard studies as part of a Women's Studies initiative to find foremothers
2000-	8 English; 1 French	Very recently some more "gender-attentive" approaches

This table highlights that the bulk of Hildegard publications fall in the 1990s, and are in English or English translations from German or French. In my own bibliography, I have 152 items listed under the keyword “Hildegard”; 18 fall in the 1980s, and 18 in the 2000s but the vast majority fall in the 1990s (111). Of course, this decade coincides with Hildegard’s nine hundredth anniversary celebrations. I suggest, however, that the international interest in this anniversary was prompted by the rising popularity of Women’s Studies in the 1980s and the earlier advent of second wave feminism.

Surveying the contents of this list reveals both the bias of liberal feminism toward a white, middle-class, Euro-centric perspective, and the problem that feminist studies face in the twenty-first century. For example, one dissertation from 1989 is entitled “Hildegard of Bingen, spiritual mentor and leadership model for women today.”³ The candidate may nuance this assertion in her thesis, but the title makes several assumptions, primarily that the category “women” is universal, applying to all women, and that the woman Hildegard inhabited a context which relates in an uninterrupted connection with a twentieth century context which is also universal, applying to all countries, cultures and races. In addition, Hildegard’s leadership, I would suggest, is problematic, and I would cite the example of her lapse into a catatonic state on being refused permission to remove herself and her sisters to Rupertsberg, and her subsequent miraculous recovery on being allowed to go. Is this a model women should adopt? Is it one that some women, in some times and places, under certain circumstances, have had to adopt in order to achieve their dreams? Do we need to perpetuate it? Is it a gender-specific tactic or is it one utilised by other genders and how often and in what contexts? Perhaps we are and should be “post” this un-nuanced feminism.

At a later date, another dissertation was entitled “God, Woman and the World: an examination of the protofeminism of Hildegard of Bingen” (1997).⁴ As with the use of other relatively modern concepts such as lesbian and homosexual, feminism describes a type of political activism which is hard to apply to earlier eras without strain. The enthusiasm with which women embrace aspects of their genealogy can indeed lead to ahistorical usage. Perhaps we are post an ahistorical feminism, but I would regret to lose enthusiasm to ennui.

Another problem arises from the use of the term “feminine,” carefully canvassed by Newman in the final chapter of “Sister of Wisdom.” The arguments over the essentialism embedded in “feminine” images of the Divine such as those revealed in Hildegard’s music and art, have been bitter and deeply divisive at times. In 1989, Newman characterised this split as between the liberals and the romantics: to the liberals, “gender-related differences are culturally conditioned rather than innate” (Newman 1989, 267); to the romantics, there is something inherently distinct about women’s writing which is “inscribed in a separate ‘space’ set apart from the patriarchal universe of discourse” (Newman 1989, 268). The liberals hold the winning cards in terms of academic debate on this issue, but Newman’s so-called

romantic feminists will not go away. Are we “post” this type of feminist concern? Is there any way of resolving the question of difference?

In 1993, Irigaray proposed that sexual difference was not a fact so much as a question and she argues that it is *the* question of our times, one which is “not one question among others but a particularly dense moment of irresolution within language...” (Butler 2001, 417). Butler suggests that the question of sexual difference will remain unresolved, and that “...we make no decision on what sexual difference is, but leave that question open, troubling, unresolved, propitious” (Butler 2001, 432). Are we possibly “post” feminist essentialism? Is there a feminism that can cope with the question of sexual difference without reifying the “feminine” or any other gender stereotype, and yet leave the way open for the investigation of difference, even though the conclusions may be inconclusive, and paradox would have to be accommodated?

In my view, two publications signal a change in the direction of feminist Hildegard studies: Holsinger’s “Music, Body and Desire in Medieval Culture” and Sautman and Sheinhorn’s “Same Sex Love and Desire among Women in the Middle Ages,” both published in 2001. Both works employ an approach that Teresa Berger characterised as “gender-attentive,” in this case an allegiance to queer theory or “queering” as is suggested in Sautman and Sheinhorn’s introduction (Sautman and Sheinhorn 2001, 17). Holsinger does not specifically ally himself with any theoretical position, preferring “...an interdisciplinary perspective [which]...informs my approach to visual materials, including sculptures, paintings, and a number of illuminations, and drawing found in manuscripts of exegetical, liturgical, typological and visionary writings” (Holsinger 2001, 19). In his epilogue, he suggests a term of his own which might serve, for example, to characterise his approach to contemporary musicological inquiry, “a musicology of empathy” (Holsinger 2001, 348). This describes a musicology where scholars can openly discuss “...the ways in which... musical relations among ourselves are constructed simultaneously with the musical bodies that populate the past” (Holsinger 2001, 348). He sees this approach as compatible with feminist, queer, or postmodern musicologies.

In a new collection of essays exploring gender, sexuality and early music, Suzanne Cusick acknowledges her previously unnuanced involvement with early music, and looks to the future of feminist scholarship in this field. She suggests that attending to more than the “deliciousness of desire” is needed (Cusick 2002, 287). Instead of “fleeing modernity” into realms of otherness that have the illusion of beauty and grace, we need to see issues of gender and sexuality in relation to music not only in terms of desire, but also in terms of violence. All the essays in this collection “...acknowledge the pain, the sexual violence, the gender terrorism behind, beneath and even within the beautiful sounds to which I and so many other early music scholars had once turned for comfort” (Cusick 2002, 286). However, she warns against resting even in this new approach:

Yet even as I applaud the scholars whose work is included in this volume, I urge us all to refuse the unwelcome seduction of a new complacency. No critical scholarship that *only* acknowledges and describes the relationship of gender and sexuality to music has completed its work. While naming is power, naming alone is not enough; naming alone is, in my view, the opiate offered to the people by the neoconservative forces of 1980s and 1990s intellectualism (Cusick 2002, 288).

According to Cusick, one of the strengths of twenty-first-century feminisms is the awareness of the dangers of complacency, the dangers of thinking that it has all been done, that enough has been achieved, that no more startling discoveries can be made. Cusick does not advocate abandoning a “gender attentive” focus, but asks for attention to the intersection of other influences with issues of gender and sexuality.

Can a feminism rise from the ashes of the past to demonstrate “...new levels of interconnection...” (Florence and Foster 2000, 2) between various discourses, including the political? This question is both very simple and paradoxically complex. Recently I asked Ulrike Wiethaus why, as a medievalist, she was also a feminist. She replied that for as long as it was unsafe for women to walk freely and safely alone at night, she would be a feminist. This existential stance seems somewhat separate from the study of arcane medieval texts produced in the twelfth century, and yet it is linked to academic work that could be termed gender-attentive. This approach listens to all the clues concerning the empowering or disempowering of a person’s agency that might be connected to their gender identity, located in their historical time and place. However, there is a danger here, that gender studies carries less active political meaning than feminism, and therefore becomes an academic exercise lacking impetus towards a just future for all people, whatever their gender identity.

When asked “why are you a feminist?”, Gerda Lerner, historian and feminist scholar, replied, “Because if you want to survive, you cannot do it alone.”⁵ To her, the construction of identity and deviance, which she defined as “who is in, and who is out,” was the most dangerous power, more than armed warfare; she remained a feminist because the construction of “woman” as an inferior outsider for the last three thousand years still affects our world today. She felt that women still needed to act in solidarity so that all women might be “in” not “out.” Although I have some difficulty with the term “woman” as a construction that does not describe clearly enough all the people gathered under its rubric, Lerner’s perspective might point to a viable future for feminist work. Feminism would need to embrace the paradox of idealism versus critical analysis, difference versus likeness, and progress versus the need for justice.

Is this then feminism and not merely gender studies or even Women’s Studies? For me, the answer is yes. If you want to engage in studies of

masculinity, there is no shortage of material available in the West. If you want to look at what women have produced, there is far less that has been excavated, although more is coming to light now and this is exciting. Without feminist endeavour, would this project still go ahead? Would there still be funds available for the research? And more is needed than enthusiasm. I suggest that one approach among several is to be “gender-attentive”; this means looking at all the ways in which agents/subjects interact with their environments with respect to their gender. Hildegard’s interactions with the women she lived, loved and sang with, the men she worked with, the authorities she struggled with, the clerics who supported her, the letter writers who appealed to her, the secretary who devoted his life to hers, the musical scribes who wrote down her oral compositions, the multifarious Divine personifications who inhabited her visions, and the Church she both loved and castigated, respond to a feminist approach which attends to issues of gender, power and identity in a broad sense but which also acknowledges that women have had to and do still struggle to be heard. Are we post-feminist yet? I hope not.

—Lorna Collingridge

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² See Suzanne Cusick's recent "Postscript: Dancing with the *Ingrate*" for a description of her personal escape from "mid- and late-20th century ideas of gender, sexuality and embodiment" into the aesthetically "neutral" arena of early music, only to find that "...the gendered quality of my flight made it seem somehow natural that I would eventually use the categories I had sought to escape as categories with which to analyse the musics that had been my refuge" (Cusick 2002, 286).

³ The author of the dissertation is Cheryl Maloney.

⁴ The author of the dissertation is Lynda Anne Nesbitt.

⁵ The question was asked by a young Duke undergraduate at Gerda Lerner's reading from her autobiography *Fireweed: A Political Autobiography*, held on April 25, 2002, at the Rare Book Room, Perkins Library, Duke University.

