

*“Die Briefe Hildegards von Bingen als Medium literarischer Inszenierung und performativer Rollenzuschreibung”*

(working title)

**Abstract**

Ever since the late twentieth century the oeuvre of Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) has been of increasing interest to scholars from various fields. And even though Hildegard’s visionary works and the manuscript illustrations are well known, her letter correspondence has not received much attention. The focus of the discussion of these letters so far has been dominated by the question of ‘authenticity’<sup>1</sup> due to the circumstances of their transmission in various manuscripts. However, in the light of the deconstruction of the historical subject and the author in literary and other cultural studies, it seems of less relevance whether the letters can actually be attributed to Hildegard than the fact that such a dialog was deemed appropriate and plausible at the given time. Therefore, this PhD project examines the letter correspondence of Hildegard of Bingen as a highly context-sensitive ‘literarised’ social interaction under the aspects of performativity, acquisition of social roles, agency and language. Based on the premise that the address animates a subject into existence and that only in terms of language a certain social existence becomes possible (Butler 1997: 5), the project aims to reveal the process behind the literary enactment of social roles and the means by which the roles ascribed to the interactants are encoded in the letter correspondence. In order to do so, the lexical, grammatical, cohesive and text-structural properties of the letters are examined and contextualised with reference to the discursive and social practices of the 12th century. As the interactants designate series of rhetorical moves in order to affect each other in a particular fashion, the analysis of the letters will borrow aspects of speech act theory as an heuristic set of guidelines for examining the different utterances chosen by the participants in a given communicative situation (Fitzmaurice 2002: 93). Of further interest will be the relationship of Hildegard’s modes of expression and the social-status as well as the gender of the recipients in regard to the different versions of the letters in the respective manuscripts. The analysis thus serves a dual purpose: to approach the texts in terms of their linguistic properties, and to analyse the letters as social and discursive acts.

---

<sup>1</sup> With the only notable exception of the following article: *John Van Engen*, Letters and the Public Persona of Hildegard, in: *Peter von Moos / Gert Melville* (Ed.), *Das Öffentliche und Private in der Vormoderne*, Köln / Weimar / Wien 1998, 375-418