

Herbert Schutz

Mystic Women and Lyric Poets in Medieval Society

The Literary View of Medieval Culture
During the Romanesque Period
in Central Europe 900 – 1300

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To Andrea

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INTRODUCTION

Venturing into the past is akin to an errant quest into an unfamiliar land, in which an unfamiliar language is spoken. It bears stressing, that the elements of a culture include historical, literary, artistic and architectural components. These elements contain spiritual as well as material considerations. They speak their own 'languages'. The factors contributing to each are considered to be mutually informative indicators. Using various 'dialects', the material components are not under discussion here, although they rely on the equally informative and eloquent archeological and anthropological 'language' of spectacular and significant things. The craftsmen, artisans and builders of Romanesque imbued matter and images with codes of meaning, which were never peripheral. They are consequential, essential and fortuitous for our better understanding of the age. Although they are independent developments, one informed the other, just as the beauty of the illuminated page underscores the beauty of the word. Together with visual objects and miniature images, reinforcing the spoken word, they serve a didactic end, just as the illuminated religious manuscripts clarify the Scriptures to the unlettered in an educational process in which sculptures and reliefs, objects of art and images are texts by other means. Similarly, the artistry recorded on portals and exterior ornamental friezes, virtual narrative journeys, was always spiritual *art engagé*, mainly instrumental in the service of the faith and its dogmas, only seldom in the secular interest. Objects in themselves suggest a degree of disinterestedness and seldom did portable or monumental artistic objects pursue deliberate historical purposes. This, however, did not prevent artistic craftsmanship from sheltering art, since the best examples in the arts rise to such levels of eloquent expression, style and form, as to merit the term 'Art'. The historical setting of Central European Romanesque Culture is explored in a different volume, *The Medieval Empire in Central Europe, 900-1300. Dynastic Continuity in the Post-Carolingian Realm* (Newcastle upon Tyne 2010). Hence historical references appear here only by inference.

This book turns exclusively to the textual language of the printed word. Its aim is to examine some of the details of the literary endeavors, which animated Romanesque, the cultural designation applied to the period from 900 to 1300 in Central Europe. The literary view of mediaeval culture presented here includes something of the intellectual history. Particular attention will be paid to six topics in an attempt to illustrate the Romanesque study of the world of nature/science and of the human spirit. Without returning to review the earlier Old High German Literature of the Carolingian Period, the book deals with the Medieval Liturgical Drama, Middle High German Epic Poetry, Courtly Romances and Middle High German Lyric Poetry. Although this study excludes specific questions of theology, religious themes are treated incidentally as they arise in the mystical works of canonesses, nuns and beguines. They may take the form of the exultation through music, as with Hildegard von Bingen. Hildegard also had a "scientific" persuasion which served her medical purposes when she applied her observations to the healing arts of the day.

Some of the earlier dramatic and epic literature of the Carolingian Period was in Latin written essentially by clerics and intended for the religious edification of an educated audience of cloistered monks and clerics and only the occasional layman. For them were the moralizing admonitions warning of the risks to salvation lurking in the works offered by the secular Ancient writers. In this context, the exclusive scribal culture was engaged in didactic tasks providing "manuals" in the instrumental service of the church, but especially of Christian society.

The fact that the scribal culture was initially determined by clerics and monks, affected the one-sided literary evidence, generating the perception of the Middle Ages as a mainly bookish and spiritual period. Before these texts became recognized as literature, the works were primarily examples of a certain intellectual history and employed craftsmanship, and like the other examples of craftsmanship and skills added to the range of artifacts. It is as illustrations of the oral and scribal skills that they make possible a literary survey. However, rather than treating these examples from the point of view of composition and poetics, these examples illustrate actual patterns of thought and feeling of tales still expressed in Latin.

In one of his poems Walter von der Vogelweide asks a fundamental question of the age, 'wie man zer welte solte leben' – how one should live in this world? The religious and secular cultures each had their particular answers to this question. The former provided an essentially life-negating answer, recommending a life of renunciation, resignation and repentance, while extolling the blessings of a life-negating virtue, directing the individual away from a world that was a deceptive vale of tears best not to be relied upon by good Christians who did not want to compromise their souls and their salvation. The latter proposed life-affirmation and the acceptance of a world of natural beauty and in which the pursuit of human affection did not mean the indulgence in sin and the consequences of burdensome guilt.

The secular motivations of the oral culture representing the largely illiterate population played a very subordinate role. It will become apparent, however, that in this reputedly Christian society, the individualistic lay culture, initially largely oral in nature, did sustain its place in society, especially when subsequently committed to writing. It will restrain and channel the pro-active, reformative, collective intellectualism of the church, based on text-based traditions and customs to transform human society.

At the same time, individualistic needs will affect the church. Largely outside of the formal ecclesiastical realm the role of women finds greater freedom of expression. Women assume a role as mystical practitioners and theorists within the wide framework of the religious cult. Their recorded spirituality provides access to the human spirit. Within the secular context, theirs is also the role of poetic subjects in the chivalrous love service. It is in this service, that men, through the poets, reveal their emotional contribution to this culture. In contrast to the monkish view of women as being seductive Jezebels, by elevating their ladies on to a pedestal the poets pay homage to women as remote representatives of purity and spirituality and as bringers of light into the lives of men.

The book deals first with two outstanding examples of the empirical observation of "scientific" characteristics in nature: the work of Hildegard von Bingen and Albertus Magnus. Their works are formulated in Latin. While the thoughts of Albertus Magnus also inform the fourteenth century work of such mystics as Meister Eckhard, Hildegard von Bingen offers pragmatic medical treatises intended to help her contemporaries. In so doing, she demonstrates the interwoven relationship between theology and popular belief, even superstition, shared by the various levels of society.

Because of the extraordinary, ecstatic canticles composed by Hildegard for the religious services of her convent, she deserves special attention. Her ethereal music is an instrument, which offers the most excellent audible bridge to the invisible realm of the spirit. Even today her extra-ordinary work demonstrates the impressive vocal and instrumental function of music in which "Art" serves the faith. She presents mystical insights, which introduce aspects of feminine Mysticism in the religious exaltation through Music.