

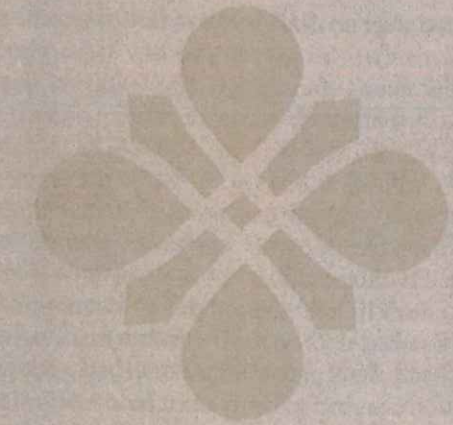


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Series editor: Jane Chance

Hildegard of Bingen On Natural Philosophy and Medicine

SELECTIONS FROM *CAUSE ET CURE*



MARGRET BERGER

9. Menstruation. Conception and pregnancy. Childbirth and infancy

57b 9.1 *Menstruation*. When the blood in a male decreases with the waning moon, so too the blood in a woman decreases through menstruation. But if for any woman menstruation comes at the moon's increase, she will suffer more at this time than if it happened to her in the wane. For her blood which decreases at the time of menstruation has to increase at the moon's increase.

After their fiftieth year, the blood of human beings is neither increased nor decreased as strongly and quickly through [the influence of] the moon's path as before. Up to their eightieth year, however, blood causes human flesh to grow fat slightly more than before because that same blood now ceases to increase and decrease. After his eightieth year, flesh as well as blood diminishes in a male, the skin contracts and wrinkles appear, whereas the skin was smooth and elastic in his youth, because then it was filled with flesh and blood. Because flesh and blood diminish in a male after his eightieth year, he himself becomes weak. Therefore he must be restored with food and drink like a child that is always in need of this, so that what he is lacking in flesh and blood may be supplied through food and drink. For women, menstruation ceases after their fiftieth year, except for those who are so healthy and strong that menstruation continues until their seventieth year. Because their blood does not flow out as before, their flesh grows fat until their seventieth year, because now it is no longer weakened through menses. But after their seventieth year, flesh and blood diminish also in women. Their skin contracts, wrinkles emerge, and they become weak. They must frequently be invigorated with food and drink like a child, because at this stage they are deficient in

flesh and blood and are weaker than men, while for men the misery of old age is prolonged until their eightieth year. [. . .]

76b 9.2 *Why menstruation.* When the flow of cupidity entered Eve all her blood vessels were opened for the flow of blood. Therefore every woman suffers an upheaval in her blood so that she holds back and pours out the drops of her blood, similar to the restraint and effusion of the moon, and all the members of her body that are fastened by blood vessels are opened.

77a For as the moon waxes and wanes, so for woman the blood and the humors are purged at the time of menstruation. Otherwise she could not survive because she is moister than man and would incur serious infirmity.

For a virgin, modesty is the lock of her integrity because, not knowing the act of a man, she has disregarded it. Therefore, menstrual blood from a virgin is more sanguineous than a woman's because the virgin is still closed. When a virgin has been deflowered she has thereafter, because she has been deflowered, more *livor* in her menstrual blood than she had earlier when she was still a virgin. When a girl is still a pure virgin, her menstruation comes in drops, so to speak, from her blood vessels. But after she has been deflowered the drops flow like a rivulet because they have been released through the act of a man. So they are like a rivulet because the blood vessels have been opened through intercourse. For when a virgin's lock of integrity is broken this breaking releases blood. Indeed, woman is made such that she must receive and retain man's semen with her blood. Therefore she is also weak and cold, and the humors in her are infirm. As a result, she would always be infirm if her blood were not purged through menstruation, just as food in a pot is purged when it discharges foam.

77b *Eve's corruption.* All the blood vessels of woman would have remained integral and healthy had Eve stayed in Paradise for the fullness of time. For when she consentingly looked at the serpent, her vision by which she had seen heavenly things before, was extinguished. And when she consentingly listened to the serpent, her hearing through which she had heard heavenly things before was deafened. And when she tasted the apple, the brightness that had shone in her was darkened.

As sap begins at the root of a tree and tends upward into all of the tree's ramifications, so it is also for a woman at menstruation. For at the time of the rivulets of blood, the blood vessels holding her brain and maintaining vision and hearing are stimulated for the effusion of blood, and the blood vessels holding neck, back and loins also draw to themselves those of liver, viscera and navel. And each blood vessel pours forth into another, just as a tree's sap greens its branches. The blood vessels holding the loins dissolve the enclosure in which these are fastened and contract and

release it, just as claws cut off from a small bird contract and release by means of its blood vessels.

78a *Why menstruation.* As a strong wind sets in motion a storm in a river, so too a storm is set in motion in all the humors of woman so that they intermingle with her blood, become quite sanguineous and are purged in this manner together with the blood. Thus the rivulet of blood occurs in a woman. For that reason a woman's head hurts at that time, her eyes are tired and her entire body is weak. Her eyes, however, will not weaken if the rivulets flow at the right time and in the right amount. Before the onset of this effusion, those members of her body that are supposed to receive man's semen open up so that women now conceive more easily than at any other time. Similarly, women conceive easily when menstruation is ending and abating because then the members of their bodies are still open. But they do not conceive as easily at another time, for then the members of their bodies are constricted, similar to a tree that spreads its greenness in summer to produce blossoms but draws it inward in winter.

78b *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.

Conception. For woman is now like soil that is ploughed with a plough. She receives man's semen, encases it in her blood and warms it with her warmth. So the seed develops until it is infused with the breath of life and until the time is ripe for it to come forth.

79a *Childbirth.* When the offspring must come forth from a woman she is overcome by such fright and trembling that every woman trembles with this fright and that her blood vessels pour out blood in abundance, and all

the fastenings of her members are aching and are released with tears and lamenting, as is written: "In pain you shall bring forth children" [Gen. 3:16], that is to say, with such pain as there will be when the earth is transformed at the end of time. All women have blood that is intermingled with *livor* more than man's because they are open like a wooden frame onto which strings for playing the zither are fastened; moreover, they are windy. Consequently the elements in them are more vehement and the humors more plentiful than in men.

Fertility. For woman, the rivulet of menstruation indicates her greenness and flowering that blooms in her offspring. As a tree, from its greenness, brings forth blossoms and leaves and bears fruit, so too woman, from the greenness of the rivulets of menstrual blood, brings forth blossoms and leaves in the fruit of her womb. [...] But young girls do not have the flowing rivulets of menstrual blood, and therefore they do not conceive offspring because their members are not yet completed, just as there is no complete building where only the foundation for a house has been laid and the wall is not yet completed. Yet when a girl has reached the age of twelve, her members are strengthened forthwith until her fifteenth year, just as a wall is completed when it stands at full height on its foundation. From her fifteenth until her twentieth year the structure of her members is completed, like a house that is completed with beams and a roof, and into which furnishings are then placed. And so a woman who has been completed in her blood vessels and in the structure of her members can then easily receive, retain and warm male semen. But if a woman has conceived a child before the twentieth year of her life, it happens either from the extreme warmth of her own or her husband's nature or because of their frequent intercourse. However, she will produce a child that is infirm and in some way weak.

Cessation of menstruation. From her fiftieth, or sometimes from her sixtieth year, a woman feels some irritation and dries out around the windowlike sites of her body. [...] It will be like that until her eightieth year. Afterwards, she loses her capacity entirely. From the age of fifty or, for some women, sixty, menstruation ceases and the uterus begins to shrink and to contract so that she can conceive no more offspring, unless it happens occasionally that a woman once again conceives a child up to her eightieth year. Yet this child will then have a defect, as happens frequently to young girls who conceive and give birth at a tender age under twenty. From her eightieth year, however, woman loses her capacity and becomes frail like a day nearing its end.

Absence of menstruation. In some young women, on account of sadness, their menstrual bleeding is so severely reduced that the vessels carrying the blood for the rivulets' effusion contract as a result of the

woman's sighs, and dry out. As a tree blooms and blossoms in summer from the sun, so too women's menses are very often opened from happiness, and as cold wind, frost and winter dry up the trees' leaves and branches, so too the streams of blood that should flow out of a woman often dry up from sadness. On the other hand, when due to an unhealthy superfluity the humors abound in some women and flow out, causing a different and adverse suffering, then the blood vessels carrying the rivulets of blood constrict so that menstruation stops, because the tempests of the humors cause untimely coldness and undue warmth. Therefore the blood of such women is at times cold, at times boiling hot. Consequently it runs in them this way and that, while its temperature changes. Then the blood vessels that should flow out at a certain time become impeded, due to their aridity, and do not flow out. There are other women who have infirm and thick tissues that grow from weakness and foulness rather than from appropriate greenness. These tissues grow over their blood vessels and suppress them so much that they become severely constricted. As a result, their rivulets of blood are weighed down and cannot flow out at the right time. [...]

The cranium. The cranium of a woman's head is divided because this is the means, so to speak, by which the blood vessels are opened when they let the menstrual rivulets flow out. At that time the cranium itself opens and lets the blood vessels have their way, so that woman's menstrual purgation can be carried out. Once this purgation is completed, the cranium closes and holds fast the blood vessels so that they do not let any more blood out, just as a heap of stones and wood holds back a river so that it does not flow forth beyond measure. Every now and then some women feel discomfort from various fevers and have pains in the stomach, the side and the abdomen. These pains prevent the cranium from closing at the right time, just as some storms cause floods that flow over barriers. So for these women, the streams of blood flow out excessively at the wrong time. A woman then suffers as much pain as a man who has been wounded with a sword. As a consequence, a woman should at this time look after herself with care so that this will not harm her still more, and also because medication must be administered to her with utmost caution.

Conception and childbirth. [...] Because of the danger to the child to be delivered, while the child emerges one should not give the mother those medications that suppress bad and superfluous humors. For as a person would suffocate if buried in the ground, so too the child would suffocate from the vapor of aromatic drugs and herbs if they were administered when the child is about to be delivered.

More on conception. When a woman has received male semen, the conception of this semen is so powerful that it attracts her entire

menstrual blood, like a tube or a cupping glass that the bloodletter places on a person's flesh for drawing much blood and waste matter. At first, the semen inside the woman is milky. Then it coagulates, and afterwards it becomes flesh, just as milk first curdles and then becomes cheese. Thus, the child lies in menstrual blood and is nourished until birth.

83a *More on childbirth.* When the birth has begun, the child comes out with a strong flow of blood, like an overflowing of waters that sweeps along stones and wood. But *livor* and the offensive smell of menstrual blood still remain inside the mother because they cannot be purged that quickly; but little by little they are expelled later on. The purgation of a woman who is dry by nature and does not abound with humors is completed a short while after giving birth. However the purgation of a woman who is moist by nature and abounds with humors takes longer than the purgation of a woman who is dry and does not have many humors.

83b *The infant's delicateness.* Infants do not walk soon after they are born because humans are conceived from thin semen and their flesh and bones are fragile when they are still infants, and because human beings need great strength to lift themselves up to walk. This is not the case for other living beings, for they walk on their feet soon after birth. The reason for that is that they walk bent forward towards the earth, just as an infant too crawls on its hands and feet before it can lift itself up to walk. Even though newborn animals can keep themselves up on their feet, they still cannot sit the way an infant sits when it can not yet lift itself to its feet. Because animals have strength in their legs and feet, their newborn walk immediately. But human beings are unable to walk at that time because they have their strength from the navel and because they are weak in feet and legs while they are infants.⁴⁷

Why the human being does not swim. Because the human body is heavy and because people work with their hands and walk on their feet, are upright, and are not very airy and aqueous, it is not in their nature to swim in water, unless they learn it for themselves at some time. Animals, on the other hand, have strength in their legs and walk bent forward and have motion in their legs as [if moved] by the wind. Consequently, some of them can swim naturally, for as they walk bent forward on land, so they swim bent forward in water. Human beings cannot do that, since they walk entirely upright and bend and stretch when they swim.

The breasts. In the area around a woman's navel, that is to say above and below the navel, certain fine blood vessels are interconnected. Some

of them extend upward to the breasts, others lead towards the uterus. All receive their repletion and nourishment from the juice of food and drink. Those blood vessels leading towards the breasts receive more than those leading towards the uterus. While a woman is still a girl, her breasts keep growing until the fine blood vessels, which lead towards the uterus, discharge the menstrual rivulets. Then her breasts stop growing – unless they fill occasionally, like a sponge, later on.

10. Regimen of health

84b **10.1 Digestion.** When a person eats, the fine blood vessels that sense the taste distribute it throughout the body. The internal blood vessels, namely those of the liver, the heart, the lungs, and the stomach, receive the finer juice from these foods and carry it through the entire body. In this way the blood in a human being is increased and the body is nourished, just as fire is kindled by bellows and as grass greens and grows from wind and dew. [. . .]

85a *Evacuation.* Of the ingested food and drink, whatever is feces descends toward a person's lower abdomen and is converted into putridity. Having turned to putridity, it is expelled. Similarly when one presses grapes, one pours the wine into a vessel and the residue, that is the skins of the fruit, is discarded.[. . .]

86a *Hunger.* After the ingested food turns to feces and dries out, the blood vessels are emptied of their juice and the blood loses its red color and becomes watery. Then the blood vessels want to be replenished and the blood in the flesh desires its red color. And what the human suffers is hunger.

Thirst. While eating, a person works during the meal like a mill that grinds. Through the labor of eating, a person becomes warm and dry within, and consequently begins to dry out. That is thirst. Then one should drink a little and eat again. And when one becomes dry again from warmth while eating, one will again be thirsty. Then one should drink again. So one must do while eating. For if a person did not drink during a meal, namely while eating, he would incur serious mental and physical illness and not produce good liquid blood nor have a good digestion. [. . .]

86b *Sleep.* One should not sleep immediately after a meal before the taste, the juice, and the smell of food have reached their sites. After a meal one should, rather, forgo sleep for a short while. Since, if one slept immediately after a meal, this sleep might conduct the taste, the juice and the smell of food to unnatural and wrong sites and disperse them, like dust, throughout the blood vessels. But after a person does without sleep for a short time and then lies down to sleep for a little while, his flesh and blood replenish themselves and this makes him healthy.

⁴⁷ From the Middle Ages to the seventeenth century, this is an oft-discussed topic (see Brian Lawn, *The Salernitan Questions*, pp. 39; 53–56; 150f.).

16. Lunar prognostication

77b *Something on conception.* Persons¹⁰⁷ who are conceived when the moon carries along many downpours in rainy weather are easily attracted by water, causing them to drown. Persons who are conceived when the moon is shining in the burning heat of summer are easily attracted by fire, causing them to burn. Persons who are conceived during the dog days are easily devoured by animals because these are the biting days.¹⁰⁸ One who is conceived at the time of *loubroz* ["rotting leaves"] will easily fall from trees and other heights. [. . .]

178a *The second day after the new moon.* One who is conceived on the second day after the new moon, if it is a male, has a lively imagination, extensive knowledge and a stable character. Other people treat him with respect. If there is occasion for fear, he is easily overwhelmed by terror. He is often ill, albeit only slightly, and he can live longer than a person conceived on the first day after the new moon. But if it is a female, she will be intelligent and inquire into many things. She is *arbeitsam* ["industrious"], cares about herself and other people and wishes to be loved, but cannot be loved. She is affected by black bile and is readily *suarmudich* ["melancholic"], but she can live long. [. . .]

178b *The fifth day after the new moon.* One who is conceived on the fifth day after the new moon, if it is a male, will be virtuous and loyal, courageous and steadfast. He will be physically healthy and live long. But if it is a female, she will be virile, *stridich* ["quarrelsome"] and *nidich* ["vindicative"], but honest nevertheless. At times, though not very often, she suffers from some mild infirmity. She too can live quite long. [. . .]

The ninth day after the new moon. One who is conceived on the ninth day after the new moon, if it is a male, is easily frightened and will be unchaste. He will be physically weak and will not live long. But if it is a

female, she will be bashful and love men with dignity. She will be physically weak and will not live long. [. . .]

180b *The twentieth day after the new moon.* One who is conceived on the twentieth day after the new moon, if it is a male, will be virile and evil. He will be a robber and a murderer and will enjoy it. He does not easily fall ill; once an infirmity has affected him, he will be seriously ill and will not live long. But if it is a female, she will be a *uerretheren* ["betrayor"] and a *cedenseren* ["gossip"]. She will be a poisoner and will gladly destroy people. She will easily become lunatic and will live long. [. . .]

182a *The twenty-sixth day after the new moon.* One who is conceived on the twenty-sixth day after the new moon, if it is a male, will be prudent and think prudently about everything he does. He easily incurs fevers and can live long. But if it is a female, she will be prudent, caring, steadfast, and chaste. But she is easily affected by *flegma* and will live long. [. . .]

184a Here end the revelations of Saint Hildegard. This book ends; may the writer be free from criticism.¹⁰⁹ Everything say Amen.



¹⁰⁹ This book . . . criticism] *Explicit iste liber; scriptor sit crimine liber*. This sentence, a hexameter, contains a wordplay based on two lexemes sharing the same form: *liber* "book" and *liber* "free". The rhythmically defined explicit, marred in Kaiser's edition, together with the wordplay were restored by the first reviewers of the text.

¹⁰⁷ Persons] *Homines*. Five-line decorated initial *H* in red.

¹⁰⁸ To revise this idiosyncratic etymology: these are the days governed by Sirius, the Dog Star. The hottest days of summer, they were believed to be productive of harm and disaster. See *Imago mundi* 1.33 "*Canis*".