

Sarah Higley

University of Rochester

Germany

Teaching From the Unknown:

Students' Reinvention of Hildegard of Bingen's *Lingua Ignota*

Hildegard of Bingen's *Lingua ignota* (12th century) is the earliest rational language invention we know of in the European Middle Ages, consisting of 1012 "unknown" nouns, translated into Latin and Old High German. She includes five unknown words in a macaronic antiphon she composed: "O orzchis ecclesia," a kind of code – switching in the strictest sense. This paper describes a pedagogical approach for a class I teach called "Magic Language in the Middle Ages" where, among other things, I encouraged students to explore the unknown (*ignota*) by way of their own imitation of it. I gave them a creative assignment that taught them phonology, phono- semantics and lexical structure, as well as some understanding of the desire on the part of so many imaginative people to reinvent words. The *Lingua* is hardly "magic"; it was intended as a deific substitute for and an imitation of the *summaria* in her day (lists of Latin words and their vernacular translations used by ecclesiasts). But Hildegard's words have a distinct and consistent sound to them that imitates her native German, and in many cases matches the initial syllables of the words for which she's finding her divine substitutions. By abandoning the impulse to invent English – sounding words, my students' invented Hildegardian words for categories she missed: large animals (she has an oxherd and a shepherd but no ox or sheep for instance, or any other beast besides birds), celestial bodies (no planets, no sun or moon), and so forth. It's important that students and other interested readers reject popular claims that her *Lingua* was a) an entire language, b) entirely arbitrary, c) a secret code, or d) glossolalic, but includes many compounds and evidence of gender. The *Lingua ignota* and her accompanying *litterae ignotae* resemble in design and layout noteworthy language inventions today – far more so than other early and late medieval languages of "angels" (such as that found in the *Tenga Bithnua* or the *Pistis Sophia*, which are largely nonsensical). In a book I interviewed by Carl Phelpstead called *Tolkien and Wales*, Tolkien wrote to a friend that he had learned Greek by making up a similar language that was "Greekier than Greek." Education by imitation. No one but an enthusiast would turn the *Lingua Ignota* (all substantives, verbs, adjectives – which we surmised would have Latin cases and conjugations) into an expanded, usable language, but there is the dream of doing it, the joy of examining Hildegard's *modus operandi*, and the satisfaction of seeing in her something familiar to many.