

# Totally (Ab)normal?!

## Bodily Norms and Body Metaphors in Medieval Latin Literature

Workshop: 4–5 September 2026

The human body stands at the centre of medieval European culture, serving as a fundamental point of reference for social, scientific, and theological reflection. Conceptions of bodies permeate diverse spheres of medieval life and learning, and they continue to shape discourses on bodies today—whether in political theory, social history, gender studies, or literary scholarship.

In medieval literature, bodies are rarely depicted in a purely descriptive manner; rather, they are evaluated with reference to explicit or implicit norms. Categories such as “well-formed”, “ugly”, “ill”, “deformed”, or “monstrous” constitute the vocabulary of this evaluative process. Since antiquity, conformity to—or deviation from—an idealised exterior has often been linked to the disposition of the “inner” self. At the same time, representations of the body frequently serve figurative or allegorical purposes. Notable examples include:

- **Nature:** The human body is understood as part of a divinely ordered cosmos, with deviations such as “hermaphroditism” represented as disruptions of this order, as in Alan of Lille’s *De planctu naturae*.
- **Beast fable:** Animal bodies act as proxies for human faults (cf. the *Ysengrimus* or the Latin *Physiologus* and its extensive medieval reception).
- **Societies and institutions:** The human body and its parts are used as analogies for secular and ecclesiastical communities (e.g. John of Salisbury, *Policraticus*, Book VI).
- **Excessive consumption:** In medieval literature, excessive consumption is often portrayed in a parodic way, exploiting the tensions between spiritual salvation and bodily pleasure; for example, in the *Carmina Burana* (no. 196, where drinking is presented as life’s purpose, or no. 211, where the stomach is depicted as the ruler of the body).
- **Literary and linguistic aesthetics:** Medieval poetic theory employs bodily metaphors to evaluate speech and literary style, as seen in the works of Geoffrey of Vinsauf and Matthew of Vendôme, who draw on Horace’s *Ars poetica*.

The workshop explores this distinctly literary mode of conceptualisation, which brings together body metaphors and the normative evaluation of bodies. We invite papers that engage primarily with the following lines of inquiry:

- In what ways are bodies staged as literary spaces in which tensions between nature, norm, and the categories of the “normal,” the “abnormal,” or the “other” are articulated?
- How are these portrayals of the body functionalised and evaluated?
- How do bodily metaphors contribute to the articulation of social relationships, structures, and hierarchies?
- Which bodily norms and metaphors are transmitted from classical literature, which are adapted, and which are newly generated in the Middle Ages? How do these continue to exert influence into the modern period and beyond?
- How can computational and digital methodologies (e.g. topic modelling, semantic networks, metaphor annotation, etc.) be integrated into research on these phenomena, and what new perspectives do they afford in relation to traditional hermeneutic approaches?

We particularly encourage proposals that combine close textual analysis with broader theoretical perspectives. Contributions from Medieval Studies, Classics, History, Gender and Queer Studies, and Digital Humanities are welcome. Papers should be 20 minutes in length, followed by 10 minutes of discussion, and may be presented in German or English.

Abstracts of up to 300 words, including the title of the paper, contact details, and a short biographical note, should be submitted by 15 February 2026. Please send proposals to: [total-abnormal@uni-goettingen.de](mailto:total-abnormal@uni-goettingen.de). Travel and accommodation expenses for speakers will be covered within the usual limits.

We look forward to receiving your proposals and are happy to address any queries.



Prudence, *Psychomachia*: The sword of Ira shatters upon the head of Patientia: London, British Library, Cotton MS Cleopatra C VIII, fol. 12r, licence: CC0, [https://iiif.bl.uk/uv/#?manifest=https://bl.digirati.io/iiif/ark:/81055/vdc\\_100056022455.0x000001](https://iiif.bl.uk/uv/#?manifest=https://bl.digirati.io/iiif/ark:/81055/vdc_100056022455.0x000001)

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