

# Failing Male Bodies

## Body, Gender, and Masculinities in the Medieval West (4<sup>th</sup>-15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)

In 589, in Poitiers, nuns who had rebelled against their abbess brought a serious accusation against her: she was allegedly hiding within the cloister “a man who, dressed in women’s clothing, passed himself off as a woman, even though it was clearly evident that he was a man and that he was assiduously in the service of the abbess herself<sup>1</sup>.” An investigation was conducted: the man claimed not to know the abbess and, moreover, to be unable of performing any manly acts (*dixit se nihil opus posse virile agere*). At the insistence of Chrodielde, leader of the rebels, Reoval, the monastery's chief physician, was summoned; he confirmed that he had removed the man's testicles when he was a child suffering from a groin ailment. The current abbess, he added, knew nothing of this: her honor is intact, and the rebellious nuns then sought other accusations. The narrative is particularly clear: the eunuch of Poitiers is not really regarded as a man because, being unable to engage in active, procreative sexual relations, he must dress as a woman and is no longer a threat to the monastic enclosure. His existence challenges the categories of masculinity and the male body: can one be a man when inhabiting a castrated or incomplete body? What reconfigurations of gender identities do mutilations and, more broadly, the failings of the male body, give rise to? This is the question that the conference “Failing Male Bodies: Body, Gender, and Masculinities in the Medieval West (4<sup>th</sup>–15<sup>th</sup> Centuries)” intends to address. The event will take place on January 28 and 29, 2027, at the German Historical Institute (Institut historique allemand) in Paris. By focusing on the Latin West and its peripheries – since the topic has already been extensively covered for Byzantium<sup>2</sup> – we will examine continuities and ruptures, as well as the circulation of models of masculinity between Late Antiquity and the late Middle Ages.

Historiography has highlighted the importance placed on the body in the practices and discourses produced by medieval society regarding masculinity<sup>3</sup>. Numerous expectations thus weigh on bodies<sup>4</sup>: the body of the lay man should preferably be handsome, muscular, robust, swift, and of tall stature. Male sexual organs, which show his ability to produce heirs, as well as his body hair, in certain social contexts, also distinguish the body of the virile layman<sup>5</sup>. From these physical criteria stems a set of representations that shape the socially gendered roles and behaviours attributed to men.

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<sup>1</sup> Grégoire de Tours, *Decem libri historiarum*, X, 15, trans. Robert Latouche, *Histoire des Francs*, Paris, 2005, p. 287-288.

<sup>2</sup> Georges Jablonski-Sideris, *Les anges du palais. Eunuques, trisexuation et pouvoir à Byzance (IV<sup>e</sup>-VII<sup>e</sup> siècle)*, Turnhout, 2025 ; Matthew S. Kuefler, *The Manly Eunuch. Gender Ambiguity and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity*, Chicago, 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Murray, « ‘The Law of Sin that is in my Members’ : The Problem of Male Embodiment », in Samantha Riches and Sarah Salih (eds.), *Gender and Holiness: Men, Women and Saints in Late Medieval Europe*, London, New-York, 2005, p. 9-22.

<sup>4</sup> Didier Lett, *Hommes et femmes au Moyen Âge : histoire du genre, XII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2023.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Thomasset, « Le médiéval. La force et le sang », in Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello (eds.), *Histoire de la virilité. 1. De l’Antiquité aux Lumières : l’invention de la virilité*, Paris, 2011, p. 141-180 ; Matthew Bennett, « Military Masculinity in England and Northern France, c. 1050-1225 » in Dawn M. Hadley (eds.), *Masculinity in medieval Europe*, London, 1999, p. 71-88.

Yet men's bodies are vulnerable to accidents. The repercussions of war, illness, or disability can impair an individual's physical abilities, just as natural aging can diminish them. Certain bodily injuries may be inflicted voluntarily following a judgment, for example in the case of sentences involving bodily mutilation<sup>6</sup>, result from a criminal act, or be the consequence of violent conflict. Lastly, other voluntary amputations may result from a medical procedure<sup>7</sup>, or, more rarely, from self-inflicted mutilation, such as the famous self-castration of Origen<sup>8</sup>. These reflections have been extensively revisited in recent years within the field of disability studies, which offer new frameworks for interpreting medieval bodies<sup>9</sup>; an approach that would benefit from further exploration from a gender perspective.

These attacks on male bodies lead to a reconfiguration between hegemonic masculinities —as conceptualized by Raewyn Connell<sup>10</sup>— and other forms of masculinity. In some cases, the diminished or mutilated body can contribute to challenging masculinity, or even, voluntarily, to publicly degrading it<sup>11</sup>. In the face of this vulnerability of the male body, some historians have observed a form of anxiety resulting from certain men's fear of seeing their masculinity undermined<sup>12</sup>. However, the consequences of these physical impairments should not always be thought of as negative. They can also be viewed by those involved as a desirable event: the voluntary castrations of certain clergymen, while remaining forbidden by the Church, are a means of freeing oneself from the torments of the body. In other circumstances, being born with a body not entirely male is not a decisive factor, and there is even sometimes a relative indifference towards anatomically incomplete bodies, such as those of hermaphrodites in the late Middle Ages<sup>13</sup>.

In order to understand the relationship between bodies and masculinities, a wide range of textual, archaeological, and iconographic sources will be drawn upon, thereby allowing for a cross-examination of perspectives. The proposed chronological scope spans from Late Antiquity —when Christianity became the dominant faith and changed the way bodies were perceived— to the end of the Middle Ages, a period marked by a strengthening of gender polarity and a harsher condemnation of deviance and difference<sup>14</sup>. Papers may address one or more of the following themes, which are not exclusive.

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<sup>6</sup> Jay Paul Gates and Nicole Marafioti, *Capital and corporal punishment in Anglo-Saxon England*, Woodbridge, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Laurence Moulinier, « La castration dans l'Occident médiéval », in Lydie Bodiou, Véronique Mehl and Myriam Soria (eds.), *Corps outragés, corps ravagés de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge*, Poitiers, Turnhout, 2009, p. 189-216.

<sup>8</sup> On castration : Larissa Tracy (éds.), *Castration and culture in the Middle Ages*, Woodbridge, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Ninon Dubourg, *Disabled Clerics in the Late Middle Ages. Un/suitable for divine service?*, Amsterdam, 2023 ; Cordula Nolte, Bianca Frohne, Uta Halle, Sonja Kerth (eds.), *Disability History der Vormoderne. Ein Handbuch. Premodern Dis/ability History. A Companion*, Affalterbach, 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Gender and Power: Society, the Person and Sexual Politics*, Cambridge, Polity Press and Blackwell, 1987.

<sup>11</sup> Stefan Meysman, « Degrading the Male Body: Manhood and Conflict in the High-medieval Low Countries », *Gender & History*, 28-2, 2016, p. 367-386. Hugo Fresnel, « La castration : une arme politique dans le monde anglo-normand » in Nahema Hanafi (eds.), *Castrations. Testicules et masculinité*, Paris, 2025, p. 193-212.

<sup>12</sup> Jacqueline Murray, « Sexual Mutilation and Castration Anxiety: A Medieval Perspective » in Matthew S. Kuefler (eds.), *The Boswell Thesis. Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, Chicago, 2006, p. 254-272.

<sup>13</sup> Christof Rolker, « Der Hermaphrodit und seine Frau. Körper, Sexualität und Geschlecht im Spätmittelalter », *Historische Zeitschrift*, 297-3, 2013, p. 593-620.

<sup>14</sup> Didier Lett, *Hommes et femmes au Moyen Âge. Histoire du genre, XII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris, 2023, p. 319-320.

## **Theme 1 – Gender and physical care**

An injured or failing body requires specific care. Whether due to injury, mutilation, illness or old age, the failure of the male body requires adaptation on the part of the individual and those around him. Various sources mention, often in passing, the changes necessary to compensate for a man's disability: elderly and obese kings, such as William the Conqueror, can no longer ride a horse; injured men are carried to the tombs of saints by their loved ones. Legends may also reflect this: in Arthurian literature, the Fisher King or Wounded King, the “maimed” one, is wounded in the legs and cannot move on his own. His injury is also moral and spiritual, plunging his entire kingdom into desolation, all the more so because it prevents him from having an heir. On the other hand, certain injuries may be downplayed or concealed so as not to call into question the virility of the wounded or mutilated man. All these measures can be seen as gendered arrangements that would be worth highlighting, by linking them to a history of bodies and gender.

## **Theme 2 – Afflicted bodies and legitimacy to exercise power**

As Isidore of Seville points out, physical strength (*vis*) is presented as a masculine trait<sup>15</sup>. For him, it justifies male domination and, more broadly, serves as a factor of legitimacy for exercising power. Consequently, we will examine how physical ailments, by undermining masculinity, could contribute to the weakening of princes' political authority<sup>16</sup>. A striking example is the case of Charles of Provence, who suffered from epilepsy and whose administration of the kingdom fell to his relatives. Physical mutilations also appear to have served as humiliating punishments designed to exclude political rivals: examples include certain sentences of castration<sup>17</sup>, the practice of tonsure among the Merovingians, and the punishment of shaving the head imposed by the Visigoths on usurpers<sup>18</sup>. Attacks on markers of masculinity thus prove to be effective weapons in political conflicts<sup>19</sup>. But physical ailments are not always an obstacle to the exercise of power: the long illness from which Alfred, King of Wessex, suffered throughout his life does not seem to have prevented him from governing. In the writings of the monk Asser, the king's illness becomes an asset that demonstrates his moral strength and his triumph over the

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<sup>15</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Étymologies*, ed. W. M. Lindsay, *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum Sive Originum*, Oxford, 1911, II, p. 23.

<sup>16</sup> Christopher D. Fletcher, Sean Brady, Rachel Moss E. and Lucy Riall (eds.), *The Palgrave handbook of masculinity and political culture in Europe*, London, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Klaus van Eickels, « Gendered Violence: Castration and Blinding as Punishment for Treason in Normandy and Anglo-Norman England », *Gender & History* 16, 2004, pp. 588-602.

<sup>18</sup> Bruno Dumézil, « La peine de décalvation chez les Wisigoths », in Bertrand Lançon and Marie-Hélène Delavaud-Roux (eds.), *Anthropologie, mythologies et histoire de la chevelure et de la pilosité : le sens du poil*, Paris, 2011, p. 135-147.

<sup>19</sup> Christopher D. Fletcher, *Richard II: manhood, youth, and politics, 1377-99*, Oxford, 2008.

flesh<sup>20</sup>. Consequently, we will see how discourses on the body reflect social and political practices as much as they function as discursive tools intended to legitimize or challenge the authority of the elite.

### Theme 3 – Male Bodies and Social Status

This topic also raises questions about different forms of masculinity and the expectations they place on the body. In the medieval period, these different models of masculinity often corresponded to different social groups. First, we can consider this question in relation to laypeople, drawing a distinction between the elite and men from the lower classes. In fact, lay masculinity in the medieval period has been studied primarily through the lens of elite men, among whom masculinity was expressed through military exploits and, more generally, the exercise of violence. But what about the *inermes*, who do not bear arms, whose bodies may be damaged by labour and who are supposedly distinguished from warriors by characteristic physical traits? Do the sources question the masculinity of these men excluded from the spheres of power? Furthermore, in contrast to laymen whose masculinity is expressed notably through their reproductive sexual capabilities, members of the clergy are required to maintain a form of bodily purity. This distinction led to tensions surrounding masculinity at the time of the Gregorian Reform. The 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries, known as a period of significant restructuring of the gender system<sup>21</sup>, provided an opportunity for the Church – particularly its monastic wing – to promote a new model of clerical masculinity based not on sexual prowess but on resistance to temptation. The failing body then becomes one that cannot control itself, and must be put to the test, as in the case of Robert of Arbrissel, accused of sleeping among women<sup>22</sup>. However, this opposition should not be overinterpreted, since some clerics did not renounce sexual activity, which also demonstrates the strength of the “hegemonic masculinity” embodied by laymen<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> Asser, *Ælfredi regis res gestae*, éd. et trad. Alban Gautier, *Histoire du roi Alfred*, Paris, 2013. chap. 74, p. 106-111 ; Janet L. Nelson, « Monks, secular Men and Masculinity, c.900 », in Dawn M. Hadley (eds.), *Masculinity in medieval Europe*, London, 1999, p. 121-142.

<sup>21</sup> Jo Ann McNamara, « The ‘Herrenfrage’: the Restructuring of the Gender System, 1050-1150 », in Clara A. Lees (eds.), *Medieval Masculinities: Regarding Men in the Middle Ages*, Minneapolis, 1994, p. 3-29.

<sup>22</sup> Jacques Dalarun, « Robert d’Arbrissel et les femmes », *Annales. Économies, sociétés, civilisations*, vol. 39, n°6, 1984, p. 1140-1160.

<sup>23</sup> Jennifer D. Thibodeaux (eds.), *Negotiating Clerical Identities: Priests, Monks and Masculinity in the Middle Ages*, Basingstoke, 2010 ; Michelle Armstrong Partida, « Mariage clérical et masculinité sacerdotale dans la Catalogne du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle », in M. Fournié, D. Le Blévec, J. Théry-Astruc (eds.), *L’Église et la chair (XII<sup>e</sup>-XV<sup>e</sup> siècle) (Cahiers de Fanjeaux, 52)*, Toulouse, 2017, p. 423-465.

## **Submission Guidelines**

Paper proposals, limited to one page, must include a working title and a short biography. They must be submitted by email no later than July 1<sup>st</sup>, 2026, to all three members of the organizing committee, using the following addresses: [jaudebrand@dhi-paris.fr](mailto:jaudebrand@dhi-paris.fr) ; [margot.laprade@univ-paris1.fr](mailto:margot.laprade@univ-paris1.fr) ; [valentine.ferreira@sorbonne-universite.fr](mailto:valentine.ferreira@sorbonne-universite.fr). Presentations, lasting 25 minutes, may be delivered in French, English, or German. A publication is being considered.

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