Sarah Künzler
Flesh and Word

Trends in Medieval Philology

Edited by
Ingrid Kasten, Niklaus Largier
and Mireille Schnyder

Editorial Board
Ingrid Bennewitz, John Greenfield,
Christian Kiening, Theo Kobusch,
Peter von Moos, Uta Störmer-Caysa

Volume 31

Sarah Künzler

Flesh and Word

Reading Bodies in Old Norse-Icelandic and
Early Irish Literature

DE GRUYTER

Contents

Preface

I write about bodies because I am surrounded by bodies, bodies that communicate. I also write about bodies because I have a body, a body that bears my personal history. It was perhaps this awareness of the gazes of others on my own body that I felt gave me the permission to openly gaze back at other bodies, both medieval and modern, literary and real. What I discovered was that although I too looked at other people's bodies as marked by discourses of identity and social affiliation, the fact that I had consciously and visibly modified my own body seemed to give people permission to voice their judgement about it in various contexts. Some people – usually but not exclusively the ones sharing similar ideas of beauty – freely expressed their appreciation. Others needed to voice their disapproval or their opinion that this could not possibly be seen as desirable.

The constant classification of my own body, and the increasing interest in classifying the bodies of others, led to the conclusion that bodies are always assessed, whether consciously or unconsciously, in public or in private (or in secret). Over the years, it became clear that I was not the only person to consciously invite but at the same time also guide the looks of other people on my body. This realisation in turn made me ponder if this idea of 'look at me, but look at this!', of controlling what other people perceived (first or most vividly) about me, could also be observed in other contexts. Eventually, it was a chance encounter towards the end of the research project which put my ideas in a new perspective. It taught me that one and the same body can be looked at and read very differently. Its reading can depend on who reads it with what kind of knowledge and in what context. Only at the end of the research did I therefore finally grasp the full scale of what I was talking about: I realised that through these prolonged gazes, each body begins to unfold its own identity and position within the world it inhabits (and shapes) in relation to a particular gaze (and observer). As a medievalist, it was therefore only a matter of time before I started asking how bodies in medieval texts are shaped and perceived, gazed at and spoken about. Did those texts share my interest in reading bodies and, if so, in what contexts can bodies be read?

In reading through medieval literature as widely as possible, it quickly became clear that by no means all texts focus on bodies. Yet some offer deep insights into how bodies can be used to express matters far beyond their corporeal being. It also emerged that, in some particular cases, the texts are as mesmerized by bodies as I am. This study zooms in on such moments, but it does so by trying to understand the concepts of the past and how bodies are created in a particular text rather than by presenting my own, post-modern ideas. Of course, one can

never leave one's own eyes in observing but, as CAROLYNE WALKER BYNUM suggests, 'awareness of our individual situations and perspectives can be freeing rather than limiting, for it removes the burden of trying to see everything.'[1] I hope that through my gaze, an initial appreciation of the extent to which bodies contribute to the fascination of medieval literature may be achieved, even if, ultimately, everybody has to look for him- or herself.

In looking back on the process of research, I look back not only on countless hours spent in libraries and at my desk, but first and foremost on the many wonderful encounters I had over these years. It is the nature of a preface that one cannot thank everybody who helped along the way. Yet some people I cannot help but thank, as they became hugely involved with this PhD thesis in one way or another. Most importantly, I would like to thank my supervisor, Prof. Jürg Glauser, for letting me read the texts in my own way but directing my gaze to where it was most needed. An inexpressibly big *go raibh maith agat* also goes to my second supervisor, Dr Geraldine Parsons, for guiding me through these years by always encouraging me to keep going but pointing me in the right direction; and for introducing me to many medievalists in Scotland. To the doctoral programme *Mediality. Historical Perspectives* at the Universität Zürich I am indebted for its extremely generous financial support. The programme allowed me to visit many conferences and also to organise two workshops at the Universität Zürich and it was also very generous in assisting with the printing of this PhD thesis. The doctoral programme, together with the Oskar Bandle Stiftung, also made a research stay at the University of Glasgow possible.

A special thanks also goes to the many people who passed on valuable advice on the individual chapters. Prof. Erich Poppe kindly read drafts and sent me important articles that I could not have obtained in Switzerland. A hearty thanks also goes to my fellow skin-enthusiast, Dr Nicole Nyffenegger, who at a critical point reminded me to show the readers the bodies above all else. I am also indebted to Prof. Gísli Sigurðsson, who spent some of his time at Zürich reading through an early draft, and my colleague and *mellon*, Dr Gerard Hynes, for his time and companionship. Prof. Ralph O'Connor kindly let me look at one of his articles before publication and this, together with his many comments on my own work, greatly sharpened my gaze. Other people shared their thoughts with me in conversation or personal correspondence: Prof. (em.) Hildegard L. C. Tristram, Dr Katherine Forsythe, Dr Kate Louise Mathis, Prof. (em.) Doris Edel, Dr Cherie Peters and Dr des. Ute Kühlmann. I am also grateful to Dr Patricia Ronan, for giving me the rare opportunity

---

1 CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM, 'Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective', *Critical Inquiry*, 22/1 (1995), 1–33 (p. 31).

1 Introduction

Kein Bild, damit das Bild über die Sprache entstehen kann.[1]

1.1 Bodies and *Mediality:* Mapping Horizons

Bringing together bodies and *mediality* in the study of medieval texts is perhaps comparable to the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* ('The Voyage of St Brendan'), an Irish hagiographical text that in content and structure resembles the *Immrama,* the Irish voyage tales. In search of the *Terra Repromissionis*, Saint Brendan and his companions navigate (somehow) biblical yet still distinctly Irish scenery in a small boat. Throughout their journey, they visit various islands, never quite sure what awaits them there, how this microcosm might function, what the inhabitants will look like and what surprises and challenges lie ahead. Discussing broad concepts such as bodies and *mediality* in *literary criticism* is similar to exploring these islands, as the concepts can relate differently in each text and in their plurality exhibit almost unlimited potential for creating meaning. This project, therefore, permits a variety of possible approaches. Selecting a focus, the islands to visit, so to speak, is crucial to avoid getting lost in the sea of bodies in medieval texts. On the other hand, the various possible glances on bodies allow a researcher to navigate new routes, to focus on hitherto unnoticed or overlooked particularities. This is what this study seeks to offer.

Because terms such as *mediality* and body are used so broadly in contemporary research, there arises a need to critically engage with one's own understanding of the concepts before the individual textual analyses and to continuously reassess and develop this understanding. This introduction attempts to delineate an overview of the two concepts at the heart of this study. It also outlines the general approach to the texts and briefly introduces the genres and texts discussed in the individual chapters.

Bodies are the focus of a large number of studies on contemporary subjects in the humanities. Yet to discuss bodies in medieval texts in relation to their function in *mediality* discourse is a comparatively new approach. It may surprise my own generation of students and scholars that until relatively recently, bodies

---

1 Mireille Schnyder, 'Mittelalterliche "Audiovisualität"', in *Der unfeste Text*, ed. by Barbara Sabel and André Bucher (Würzburg, 2001), pp. 132–153 (p. 142); 'to have no image so that the image can be shaped by language.' This and all subsequent translations from secondary literature in German are my own.

had gone somewhat unnoticed in humanities research in relation to any such concepts – they seem to have been quite simply overlooked. It is only in the past two decades that bodies have started to appear more and more in humanities research as the prime focus of attention. While in 1994 ELIZABETH GROSZ still found that the body 'has remained a conceptual blind spot'[2] in various fields, the last decade in particular has seen bodies being studied and explored from countless perspectives. As a researcher in this area, one is aware that critical voices may even bemoan that the body is creeping in everywhere: in every academic field, every period and also in every library and curriculum. A possible response to this statement is that bodies, far from creeping in, were always already there. The body's former 'absent presence'[3], as CHRIS SHILLING terms it, has simply been replaced by an ever-present presence; where they had been overlooked before, bodies were now inspected from various angles. This eventually led to an interdisciplinary field of research in the humanities, often referred to as *body criticism*.

What has changed with the emergence of *body criticism* is that bodies are now understood and observed as complex semiotic entities. CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM emphasises that in previous research it was often accepted that '[f]rom Plato to Descartes, the Western tradition was [...] dualist'[4], that is, adhering to theories which propose a (however rigid) distinction between mind (soul, spirit) and matter (the body). Until the second half of the twentieth century, the body was often perceived as belonging entirely to nature, as being merely a material container of the soul. This philosophical dualism is not reflected in all medieval sources and its prevalence in Western thought has also been challenged. In relation to medieval eschatological literature, BYNUM finds that 'theorists [...] tended to talk of the person not as soul but as soul and body' and that 'a number of scholars have established [that] Platonic definitions of the person as the soul were explicitly rejected by the middle of the twelfth century'[5], a period from

---

2 ELIZABETH GROSZ, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington, IN & Indianapolis, IN, 1994), p. 3.
3 CHRIS SHILLING, *The Body and Social Theory* (London, 1993), p. 19. A notable exception is FRIEDRICH ENGELS' *Die Lage der arbeitenden Klasse in England* (Leipzig, 1845), which openly engages with bodies and their role in social discourse.
4 CAROLINE WALKER BYNUM, 'Why All the Fuss about the Body? A Medievalist's Perspective', *Critical Inquiry*, 22/1 (1995), 1 – 33 (p. 6).
5 BYNUM, 'Why All the Fuss', p. 19. Some texts may have originated much earlier but in the extant versions that are discussed here they may nevertheless reflect concepts and concerns prevalent at the time they were compiled and/or edited, an issue which is addressed below.

and after which the majority of the texts discussed here stem. Bynum's findings suggest that, in some areas of medieval thought, bodies were not as removed from the construction of identity as previous research had claimed.

In the humanities, however, bodies were seen as rooted in biological discourse(s) for a considerable time. Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong, for instance, remark that '[d]ans la discipline historique, longtemps a régné l'idée que le corpse appartenait á la nature, et non la culture.'[6] The proclamation that the body is part of and shaped by culture was first articulated in the second half of the twentieth century. As Makiko Kuwahara summarises: 'Adopting and developing the phenomenological approaches of Husserl (1889) and Merleau-Ponty (1962), which are out of historical and social context, Foucault (1973, 1978 and 1979) and Bourdieu (1977) demonstrate that the body is socially and historically constructed.'[7] Useful detailed summaries of the history of *body criticism* have already been provided, for instance by Bernadette Wegenstein.[8] It therefore suffices to note that these researchers were particularly interested in the importance assigned to bodies in the processes of forming identity and social relations.

Subsequent studies by feminists such as Judith Butler and Susan Bordo have further 'challenged understandings of the body as biologically given and fixed, and argued that the human body is both culturally and historically specific [...]'[9], as Mary Evans sums up. While Butler views bodies in a 'wholly social' instead of a 'wholly natural' discourse[10], in *Unbearable Weight* Bordo acknowledges that there exists a discourse of the natural, biological body, as well – an idea that implies that a dualistic perspective on the body is (also) possible.[11] The benefit of these works lies in that they initiated a growing interest in these subjects across academic disciplines and made it possible to study bodies as *semi-*

---

6 Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong, *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge* (Paris, 2006), p. 18; 'in the field of history the idea that the body belonged to nature and not to culture prevailed for a long time.' All translations from this work are my own.

7 Makiko Kuwahara, *Tattoo: An Anthropology* (Oxford, 2005), p. 3.

8 Bernadette Wegenstein, *Getting Under the Skin: Body and Media Theory* (Cambridge, MA, 2006).

9 Mary Evans, 'Real Bodies: An Introduction', in *Real Bodies*, ed. by Mary Evans and Ellie Lee (Basingstoke, 2002), pp. 1–13 (p. 1). Possible reasons for this may be the shift towards a more sociologically orientated 'historicism' that focuses on social structures and stratification. Furthermore, the growing awareness of the modern body as something that can be shaped according to both a sense of self and cultural prerogatives may also have instigated this shift, especially in connection with feminist theories.

10 Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, NY, 1993).

11 Susan Bordo, *Unbearable Weight* (Berkeley, CA, 1993). See also Kuwahara, *Tattoo*, p. 4.

otic systems of social significance in various sources – such as medieval literature.

It is of course useful to at least initially engage with such fundamental approaches if one seeks to examine bodies in any particular context. However, these studies cannot readily be applied onto a medieval corpus for various reasons. For one, they deal with real, lived bodies and their conclusions are of little importance in relation to bodies in literary texts, and medieval literary texts in particular.[12] Furthermore, these studies are primarily concerned with modern phenomena (such as eating disorders), or they examine topics solely from an (often post-)modern perspective (in the case of body modification). In many cases, they deal explicitly with 'marked bodies' or 'body inscriptions', that is, with bodies that are consciously altered within a social discourse that the person is part of, and with the person's consent. Most importantly, bodies in literary texts lack the physical materiality that for so long had clearly placed real, lived bodies in a purely anatomical-physiological discourse. The characters in secular medieval literature also generally (but not always) lack the self-awareness and body-issues of modern subjects. With the exception of grooming, they (generally) do not consciously alter their own bodies to express themselves or their social and/or cultural belonging (or at least this is not narrated in the texts), a practice found in many aboriginal cultures as well as in modern body modification.[13]

The fundamental differences between bodies in the post-modern world and in medieval texts instigated an awareness of another critical point in *body criticism:* the nature of the subject. Although, or rather because bodies are familiar to us all, some preliminary remarks as to how they are understood in the following analyses are in order. This is especially important since there is no single definition of the nature of 'a body' provided in *body criticism.* Individual studies have either taken their subject for granted and not engaged with questions of how bodies are constructed, represented and/or perceived, or they have offered a variety of individual characterisations and classifications. The need to engage with the nature of the subject may have been overlooked in many previous studies because, until recently, 'the body' has never been questioned as a concept. Even if placed in a social discourse, it seems to have been presumed that 'the body' was somehow 'naturally' fixed and pre-given, whether it appeared as a real, physical entity or within literary, legal or theological texts.

---

[12] As it is customary in *body criticism* to refer to bodies in the real world as 'real, lived bodies', this term will also be used here.

[13] This practice is found in various Irish hagiographical sources, a group of texts outside the present corpus.

One of the most comprehensive monographs about medieval bodies, Le Goff and Truong's *Une histoire du corps au Moyen Âge* ('A History of the Body in the Middle Ages'), still employs this view of the tension-loaded but somehow 'singular' body. The authors express the opinion that '[a]u Moyen Âge, le corps est [...] le lieu d'un paradoxe' and that '[l]a conception du corps, sa place dans la société, sa présence dans l'imaginaire et dans la réalité, dans la vie quotidienne et dans les moments exceptionnels ont changé dans toutes les sociétés historiques.'[14] Le Goff and Truong plainly acknowledge the various forms in which bodies can appear and hence, by extension, the various body-concepts or *ideas* of bodies (a term explained below) extant in medieval sources. Yet throughout their study they continue to work with the concept of 'The Body', a practice grounded perhaps in the perceived stable physical reality of their own (real, lived) bodies.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss, on the other hand, argue against the use of the capitalised singular: 'The Body' to them (as to me) 'suggests a bounded and autonomous entity, universal but at the same time singular, atemporal, and therefore unmarked by history.'[15] In order to foreground the fluid concepts also acknowledged by Le Goff and Truong and to emphasise the various manifestations of bodies in medieval texts, the present study proposes to use the term bodies as a shorthand in the sense of *ideas* of bodies.[16] This stresses that in medieval texts bodies can be variously shaped and developed according to different cultural concepts, in relation to the time in which a text was produced, compiled, edited, re-produced or translated but also according to the narrative concerns within which the bodies are discursively constructed. All of these factors combine to shape a particular *idea* of a body and these *ideas* are manifest in

---

14 Le Goff and Truong, *Une histoire*, pp. 39 & 11; 'during the Middle Ages, the human body was the site of paradoxes'; 'the concepts of the body, its position within society, its presence in fantasy and reality, in every-day life and exceptional circumstances have been shaped anew in each historical society'.

15 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss, 'Introduction: Bodies at the Limit', in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Gail Weiss (New York, NY, 2003), pp. 1 – 10 (p. 1).

16 A comparable term in German is *Körperbilder*, which places the focus less on the actual bodies but instead on images that these bodies evoke. Grosz also advocates the use of the plural (and a concept of body specifications) but since her argument is somewhat inconsistent at this point her term will not be applied here. See Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. 19.

individual texts.[17] The need to acknowledge these underlying *ideas* about bodies and embodiment has been wittily phrased by BYNUM:

> it would be no more correct to say that medieval doctors, rabbis, alchemists, prostitutes, wet nurses, preachers, and theologians had 'a' concept of 'the body' than it would be to say that Charles Darwin, Beatrix Potter, a poacher, and the village butcher had 'a' concept of 'the rabbit'.[18]

BYNUM's comment underlines that the various concepts are always dependent on context and that different observers may arrive at very different interpretations. It therefore introduces, if only implicitly, the notion of a point of view from which a body is approached, the ideas that a reader or observer may implicitly or explicitly project onto a body.[19]

In using the term *ideas* rather than concept, this study seeks to foreground the subtle and creative individual manifestations of bodies over somehow (pre-)fixed, rigidly defined (or definable) concepts. The recognition of both the *ideas* of bodies behind the creation of a literary body (i.e. the aims and context(s) which create and shape a particular body) as well as the thoughts an observer might bring to it is important to keep in mind. This is especially important in relation to medieval texts that were transmitted over various centuries. The understanding of the compilers and/or redactors of a particular manifestation of a text may have been rather different from those of the audience, and they may also have differed from the concepts of the compilers/redactors of earlier or later versions of the same text. *Ideas* of bodies is a term that draws attention to these multiple perspectives and emphasises the complex nature of representations of bodies in medieval texts.

Throughout the analyses, bodies (i.e. the use of the plural) corresponds to these *ideas* of bodies and likewise emphasises the plurality of these manifestations. The use of the singular, body, is reserved for occasions where a particular body is discussed in its unique appearance. Despite the call for acknowledging the plural manifestations of bodies, it is with these individual, concrete representations of underlying *ideas* that this study is concerned. Scholars are increasingly focusing on these 'nuanced representations of the body that inhabit virtually

---

17 The italicized use of the term *idea(s)* denotes my own concept whereas a more general understanding of the term, as, for instance, in Christian ideas or general thought, is marked by a lack of italics.

18 BYNUM, 'Why All the Fuss', p. 8.

19 The importance of the point of view has already been mentioned in the preface and will be properly introduced in the next chapter.

every level of medieval discourse'[20], as Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross phrase it, and it is important to draw attention to the processes which shape and form these nuanced representations of bodies in medieval texts. This of course also entails that observations made about a 'body' in a 'text' may not readily be transferred onto other bodies and texts and that similarities and differences need to be discussed carefully. As Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp proclaim, 'there is not one medieval body, but a plethora of medieval bodies'.[21] Or, perhaps more precisely, there is a plethora of *ideas* of bodies and bodily discourses that create and reflect on particular manifestations of bodies in medieval texts.

However, it is not the aim of this study to try to group these individual *ideas* of bodies into fixed concepts. Previous research has attempted to express the multifaceted appearance of bodies through various (sub-)categorisations. Thomas J. Csordas conveniently summarises such concepts of the multiple body in past research. He contends that Mary Douglas distinguished two bodies, while Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock proposed three and John O'Neill even argued for five bodies to be discerned.[22] They all of course argue not for different material entities but for different mental concepts of bodies, generally posing the natural body against the social body and thus creating and/or reinforcing a dichotomous perception.

Other classifications are concerned with how to approach bodies. One example is the historian Roy Porter's scheme of seven different perspectives from which bodies in 'historical sources' – which are as much textual constructs as bodies in literary texts – can be considered.[23] Such approaches, although interesting to consider in relation to their grounds for argumentation, can be said to present 'a somewhat fragmented view of the body parcelled off into artificially

---

20 Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross, 'Introduction: Limits and Telology: The Many Ends of the Body', in *The Ends of the Body: Identity and Community in Medieval Culture*, ed. by Suzanne Conklin Akbari and Jill Ross (Toronto, 2013), pp. 3 – 21 (p. 8).
21 Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp, 'Introduction: Re-Writing the Medieval Body', in *Fleshly Things and Spiritual Matters: Studies on the Medieval Body in Honour of Margaret Bridges*, ed. by Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp (Newcastle Upon Tyne, 2011), pp. 1 – 10 (p. 6).
22 Thomas J. Csordas, 'Introduction', in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. by Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 1 – 24 (p. 5). Csordas refers to Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols* (New York, NY, 1973); Nancy Scheper-Hughes and Margaret Lock, 'The Mindful Body: A Prolegomenon to Future Work on Medical Anthropology', *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 1 (1987), 6 – 41; John O'Neill, *Five Bodies: The Shape of Modern Society* (Ithaca, NY, 1985).
23 Roy Porter, 'History of the Body Reconsidered', in *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, ed. by Peter Burke, 2nd edn (Pennsylvania, PA, 2001), pp. 233 – 260.

discrete sections'[24], as Conklin Akbari and Ross conclude in relation to Porter's heuristically driven categorisation. These classifications focus solely on the various aspects that distinguish (literary or real, lived) bodies from each other rather than on the plurality of their appearance. This reinforces a notion of bodies as something that can be categorised by strict boundaries. By working with *ideas* of bodies and studying the *gazes* (a term introduced below) on particular bodies, the present study hopes to acknowledge the complex plurality of depictions and experiences of bodies without having to think about categorising them along rigid lines. The representations of the bodies thus take centre stage and the analyses foreground a body's individuality by examining its peculiarities and its position within a text.

The present approach sees the bodies in the individual examples not as fictional yet stable entities, but as open to embodying various (medial and other) concerns through their contextual nature and discursive construction. This echoes an understanding of bodies voiced in relation to real, lived bodies. Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou and Effie Yiannopoulou believe that the body 'is never divorced from thought processes, cultural production, historical developments, ideological and material interests.'[25] In relation to the at times deliberate but always culturally and historically contingent construction of bodies in medieval literary texts, their statement gains even more significance. Although (some) bodies may at first appear static (as fixed, stereotypical entities) in texts, they appear astatic when engaged with. This is, of course, rather challenging as for each body it needs to be individually examined how it is created and how it relates to other bodies within the text and to other manuscript version or recensions, as well as to the time and place of the compilation/redaction of a text.

In order to emphasise this connection between the depictions of bodies in medieval texts and their various contexts it is beneficial to contend that these bodies are discursively constructed. The present use of the terms 'discourse' and 'discursively' is indebted to Foucault, for whom discourses are 'mediale Wissensformationen'[26] and as such inherently tied to *mediality*, yet they can

---

24 Conklin Akbari and Ross, 'Introduction', p. 5.

25 Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou and Effie Yiannopoulou, 'The Flesh Made Text Made Flesh: An Introduction', in *The Flesh Made Text Made Flesh: Cultural and Theoretical Returns to the Body*, ed. by Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou and Effie Yiannopoulou (New York, NY, 2007), pp. 1–10 (p. 4).

26 Quoted from Philipp Dressen, Łukasz Kumiega and Constanze Spiess, 'Diskurs und Dispositiv als Gegenstände interdisziplinärer Forschung. Zur Einführung in den Sammelband', in *Mediendiskursanalyse: Diskurse – Dispositive – Medien – Macht*, ed. by Philipp Dressen,

also be said to manifest particular *ideas*. Robert Gugutzer explains this as follows:

> Diskurs bestimmt Foucault als eine „Menge von Aussagen, die einem gleichen Formationssystem zugehören […]“. Als geregelte Verknüpfungen oder Formationen von sprachlichen Aussagen – so genannten „diskursiven Formationen“ […] – sind Diskurse gewissermaßen die Materialisierung dessen, was in einer Gesellschaft oder Kultur zu einer bestimmten Zeit gesagt und gedacht wird […].[27]

> Foucault defines discourse as 'a group of utterances which belong to the same formation-system […]'. As regulated connections or formations of linguistic utterances – so-called 'discursive formations' […] – discourse appears as the materialisation of what is said and thought in a particular culture at a particular time.

Discourses do not simply transfer reality into language, they are integral in producing what they signify, such as *ideas* about the normative or the abnormal or about beautiful and ugly bodies.[28]

In the present case it will therefore be proposed that the discursive manifestations of bodies in texts are reflections of particular *ideas* of bodies. In relation to bodies it follows that, as Anne Waldschmidt finds:

> Diskurse regulieren und beschränken das Wissen vom Körper, sie konstruieren Körperbilder und beeinflußen Körpererfahrung, gleichzeitig generieren sie […] immer auch Neues, beispielsweise neuartige Grenzziehungen zwischen dem, was als ›ganz normal‹, als ›noch normal‹ oder als ›anormal‹ zu gelten hat.[29]

> Discourses both regulate and limit the knowledge about the body, they constitute ideas of bodies and influence the experiences of bodies. At the same time they generate […] new ideas, for instance in redefining the borders between what is perceived as 'truly normal', 'still normal' or 'abnormal.'

It is the discursive construction of bodies that can shape different contexts for *mediality*, i.e. many possible grounds on which the conditions for potential *mediality* rest. In the use of the term *discourse* in the individual analyses it will become clear that the present approach resembles more the English *Critical Dis-*

Łukasz Kumiega and Constanze Spiess (Wiesbaden, 2012), pp. 9 – 22 (p. 9); 'formations of knowledge in *mediality* discourse'.

27 Robert Gugutzer, *Soziologie des Körpers* (Bielefeld, 2004), p. 74.

28 Gugutzer, *Soziologie des Körpers*, p. 75.

29 Anne Waldschmidt, 'Behinderte Körper: Stigmatheorie, Diskurtheorie und *Disability Studies* im Vergleich', in *Marginalisierte Körper: Zur Soziologie und Geschichte des anderen Körpers*, ed. by Torsten Junge and Imke Schmincke (Münster, 2007), pp. 27 – 43 (p. 35).

course Analysis with its interdisciplinary method than the intra-disciplinary concepts of the *Diskursanalysen* used in German scholarship.[30]

This implies that the discourses that continuously shape literary bodies are themselves subject to individual contexts. JEFFREY JEROME COHEN expresses this as follows: '[t]he bodies that populate these medieval texts are discursively constructed in ways that are inescapably specific to histories behind their production and dissemination, serving particular and often readily identifiable cultural needs.'[31] Underlying such approaches is a (post-modernist) idea of bodies as text in that, as GAIL WEISS asserts, 'to say that the body is a text in turn means that it is not outside of or opposed to discourse, but is itself discursively constructed.'[32] The following analyses of course deal with bodies that are constructed only on a textual level. Yet the analyses will show that these bodies are not only texts in that they are discursively constructed, but also in that they are read much like a text in many instances. To outline these observations on discursive practices is important for the present understanding of bodies in texts and allows one to establish the underlying potential for *mediality* inherent in – and visible on – these bodies.

These observations closely reflect MARGRIT SHILDRICK's dictum that '[t]he body [...] is not a pre-discursive reality, but rather a locus of production, the site of contested meaning, and as such fluid and unstable [...]'.[33] The present approach also argues that the bodies in these literary texts are products of deliberate discursive construction rather than 'given' in the sense that they merely represent stereotypes – a stigma which has long hindered a deeper engagement with depictions of bodies in medieval texts.[34] In her study on modern-day, Western body modification, VICTORIA PITTS explains the advantages of a post-structuralist approach to bodies. PITTS asserts:

---

30 For this see ŁUKASZ KUMIEGA, 'Medien im Spannungsfeld zwischen Diskurs und Dispositiv', in *Mediendiskursanalyse: Diskurse – Dispositive – Medien – Macht*, ed. by PHILIPP DRESSEN, ŁUKASZ KUMIEGA and CONSTANZE SPIESS (Wiesbaden, 2012), pp. 25–45 (p. 25).
31 JEFFREY JEROME COHEN, *Medieval Identity Machines* (Minneapolis, MN, 2003), p. xviii.
32 GAIL WEISS, 'The Body as a Narrative Horizon', in *Thinking the Limits of the Body*, ed. by JEFFREY JEROME COHEN and GAIL WEISS (New York, NY, 2003), pp. 25–35 (p. 25).
33 MARGRIT SHILDRICK, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (London, 2002), p. 10.
34 SHILDRICK, *Embodying the Monster*, p. 4.

> Post-structuralism emphasizes the historicity of such forces, their contingency on history, sociality, and politics, and explores the ongoing politics of the shaping of selves, bodies, desires, and pleasure though language, representation, and 'discourse', to use Foucalt's term.[35]

Allowing for the crucial difference that in medieval literature it is the texts as well as their compilers and redactors that are subject to the historicity of these forces (and the latter account for the politics of shaping bodies), the comment is a useful one to bear in mind as it draws much needed attention to the processes of production ('politics of the shaping').

The following analyses are guided by an interest in 'the discursive models of how such bodies can and should be imagined, with the body as a sign within a text'[36], as BETTINA BILDHAUER characterises her own approach. For the present corpus, it can also be proposed that the bodies are fashioned with the purpose of being read as signs as well as imagined as bodies. BILDHAUER proposes a similar point of view when she argues that when

> in the following, I speak of bodies being constructed, like BUTLER, I am not implying that they are 'made up' and do not really exist, but simply that they are fashioned in a certain way so that they become accessible to our understanding, in the sense of 'conceptualized' or 'conceived'.[37]

In order to emphasise that in the texts and episodes presented here bodies may be consciously 'fashioned' in a certain way to openly exhibit their potential for *mediality*, the term to *install* will be used in the following analyses in the sense of 'to set up' or 'to stage'. It implies that in these special and often exceptional cases, bodies are deliberately created and used as mediators. It also presupposes that various narrative strategies are employed in order to draw attention to the bodies to be *read*, a term which denotes the interpretation of an *installation* and is explained in the following subchapter (1.3.). As such, the bodies can never be seen as purely passive carriers: they are always already actively constructed within the text.

This outline has shown that in the wake of the Platonic preference of spirit over matter, current scholarship increasingly engages with the social position of bodies and with their role as signs. This recent shift towards viewing the body as 'all culture' instead of 'all nature' and as such as solely defined by discourse has,

---

35 VICTORIA PITTS, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York, NY, 2003), p. 29.

36 BETTINA BILDHAUER, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff, 2006), p. 8.

37 BILDHAUER, *Medieval Blood*, p. 9.

however, not gone unchallenged. Of course, a study of bodies in literary texts works with bodies that do not have concrete material form outside the text; they are created by textual discourse and narrative strategies and imagined beyond the text. Thus such arguments as, for instance, Grosz's denial 'that there is the "real", material body on the one hand and its various cultural and historical representations on the other'[38] are of no concern, since there simply is no 'real, material' body extant in texts. Yet a close observation of the texts suggest that there may nevertheless be an imagined materiality, although this aspect has seldom been addressed in *literary criticism*.

Terence Turner in fact observes a prevalent 'propensity to ignore the primary character of the body as material activity in favour of an emphasis on the body as a conceptual object of discourse.'[39] His comment initiated a profound engagement with the texts discussed in this study in order to examine how they perceive the relation of social significance and materiality and whether the bodies in these texts are indeed truly devoid of all fleshly matters (beyond the oft-cited sexual ones). While Terence Turner is right in pointing out that Foucault's category of the body 'has no flesh'[40], could the same be said for these medieval sources? It therefore needed to be determined whether such a discourse of the biological body, or of aspects reflecting the concept of biological bodies, was evident in the texts under consideration, and whether bodies are also perceived as materiality within the texts.

A careful analysis of the medieval texts showed that the product of the discourses that form bodies is (often but by no means always) perceived as physical reality within the texts. This led to the necessity of acknowledging and discussing both aspects and again following the individual texts in their representation of bodies. As Weiss suggests in her claim for viewing the body outside this limiting dichotomy, '[b]y rejecting this dualistic model, we avoid the intractable problem of determining exactly how two allegedly distinct phenomena – the natural and the cultural – interact to comprise a unified sense of self.'[41] Asking how discourses of natural and cultural aspects may contribute and relate to the bodies provided an interesting point to consider (and eventually resulted in chapter

---

38 Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, p. x.

39 Terence Turner, 'Bodies and Anti-Bodies: Flesh and Fetish in Contemporary Social Theory', in *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*, ed. by Thomas J. Csordas (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 27 – 47 (p. 28). See also Detsi-Diamanti, Kitsi-Mitakou and Yiannopoulou, *The Flesh Made Text Made Flesh*.

40 Turner, 'Bodies and Anti-Bodies', p. 36. In this article, Turner also outlines the contradiction apparent in Foucault's reasoning of this concept.

41 Weiss, 'Narrative Horizon', p. 25.

five). While BRYAN S. TURNER insists that ultimately, it is not possible to write about the body without avoiding its contradictory nature, the following analyses will show that the two discourses need not be contradictory in all cases.[42] In following the sources in their assessment of 'their' bodies (and these assessments can be contradictory in themselves), it is possible to examine such issues through the actual texts. This is preferable to avoiding them or over-theorising them.

While in scholarly circles there is a general agreement that bodies matter, the present study also engages with the more recent call to bring the matter (the fleshness) back into *body criticism.* In some texts, the bodies discussed can appear as matter not just in that they are inscribable and suffer incisions into their surface but also because they are perceived as living, breathing, bleeding and defecating entities. One of the most striking areas in which this becomes apparent is when the bodies' surface, the skin, is foregrounded by being wounded and permanently altered. Other characters are taunted for flaws that lie in the perceived physicality of their bodies (being unable to grow a beard, for instance) and are outside their control. This shows that even such apparently biological aspects (to the modern mind) were thought about and developed in the creation of literary characters. To disregard these perceptions of physical materiality and physical flaws would mean overlooking many aspects of the bodies' inherent *mediality* that are tied to these issues. In the present analyses, the physical matter is therefore allowed to matter, to be of importance but also to be perceived as matter. Yet it is clearly stated that such 'imaginings of materiality' are rooted in cultural perceptions and not in biological ones: they are imagined flesh.

This leads to a distinction between how something is constructed – textual discourse and narrative techniques – and what the result of this construction is – a body perceived as flesh within the text. CHRISTIAN KIENING notes that medieval texts are somehow oscillating *zwischen Körper und Schrift* ('between body and writing').[43] The title of this study, *Flesh and Word*, expresses a similar view of medieval texts (and the bodies therein) but stresses a more inclusive angle. It highlights that from the perspective of modern researchers, and perhaps even from that of the medieval audience and the compilers/redactors of the texts, there is always a double perspective on the creating word and the resulting fleshly body. Or in other words: the bodies are composed of writing but this evokes organic materiality. In many literary representations of bodies, the two are irrevo-

---

42 BRYAN S. TURNER, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford, 1984), p. 7.
43 CHRISTIAN KIENING, *Zwischen Körper und Schrift: Texte vor dem Zeitalter der Literatur* (Frankfurt a. Main, 2003).

cably intertwined, with the bodies oscillating between both concepts. It is important to acknowledge the processes by which imagined flesh(ness) could be turned into words and writing by the compilers/redactors of the texts, how it could be perceived through spoken words and/or silent reading to in turn become imagined flesh again in the mind of the audience. In relation to *mediality* discourse, it is important to outline both the construction of a body within a text and the experience of this body within the world depicted by the text. This study is therefore a call to examine both the construction/portrayals of bodies and their perception within and without the textual universe, to determine how they are created and *read*.

Bryan S. Turner also recognises the complex nature of bodies, albeit in a different context when he states that the body

> is a material organism, but also a metaphor; it is the trunk apart from head and limbs, but also the person [...]. The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphorical, ever present and ever distant thing – a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity.[44]

Bryan S. Turner talks about modern and real, lived bodies, yet it will be argued that in certain medieval texts, bodies are depicted in very similar vein. This suggests that they must have been imagined by medieval compilers/redactors and audiences in much the same way. An interest in how bodies are constructed and perceived in medieval texts as both material and socially meaningful entities is evident also in the research questions (see 1.2.), which aim to include not merely talk about bodies but communication from them as well.

The title *Flesh and Word* reflects the call to consider the fleshness of bodies as an integral part of their representation. Such a focus is unusual but by no means unique. In relation to (modern) real, lived bodies Shildrick asserts that

> rather than being material and graspable from the start, [bodies] are materialised through a set of discursive practices. It is over a period of time that the process comes to instantiate the effects of the solidity, surfaces and boundaries that mark out the material.[45]

In her comment Shildrick acknowledges that the discursive production of bodies can result in something material and graspable, at least within a text. To highlight the imaginative engagement with this process of production and the narrative artistry that leads to the bodies' materialisation is one of the proclaimed aims of this

---

44 Turner, *Body and Society*, pp. 7–8.
45 Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster*, p. 10.

study. In the examples discussed here (but by no means in all medieval texts), the perception of bodies as materiality is a vital prerequisite for medial processes to function successfully. The approach hopes to delineate the texts' engagement with these *ideas* and their artistic creation of bodies, as well as their imaginative engagement with human flesh on pages made of animal skin.

Like *body criticism*, *mediality* has enjoyed considerable academic interest in various disciplines of the humanities in recent years (especially in German-speaking areas). Despite its growing popularity the term *mediality* still requires introduction, especially but not exclusively for an English-speaking audience. *Mediality* denotes a multi-dimensional concept, at the heart of which lies an interest in processes of transmission. Because these processes are in themselves diverse, DIETER MERSCH claims that *mediality* 'selber nicht "Eines" ist, das eine bestimmbare Identität aufwiese, sondern sich als Pluralismus entpuppt, der von Fall zu Fall dechiffriert werden muss.'[46] On the most basic and also on an etymological level, MERSCH stresses, 'media' stand between two entities and become 'Instanzen der Übermittlung, Darstellung, Verbreitung, des Austausches und der Wiederholung [...]'.[47] While to a modern mind media are often inextricably linked to mass media such as newspapers and television, academic opinion holds that anything can function as a medium as long as it can be recognised as a medium in a particular context. Branded clothes, roses or raised middle fingers can thus all function as transmitters of intended messages, but only if the recipient views them as media and understands their intended meaning.

The capacity to (however briefly) store and transmit meaning and the potential for being recognised as a medium are broadly defined requirements of media, yet recent scholarship stresses that media are much more than simple transmitters. As ŁUKAS KUMIEGA asserts, media 'erscheinen als Produkte einer komplexen Maschinerie, als gesellschaftlich oder kulturell grundlegende Wahrnehmungsanordnungen und nicht als bloße Kommunikationskanäle oder Distributoren von Inhalten.'[48] In this understanding, a medium is inextricably linked to perception and to social and cultural practices. Media thus occupy

---

46 DIETER MERSCH, *Medientheorien zur Einführung* (Hamburg, 2006), p. 10; 'in itself is not "one", [i.e. exhibiting a fixed, distinctive identity], but reveals itself as a pluralism which has to be deciphered on a case by case basis.'

47 MERSCH, *Medientheorien*, p. 9; 'are authorities of transmission, performance, distribution, of exchange and repetition [...]'.

48 KUMIEGA, 'Medien im Spannungsfeld', p. 36; 'appear as products of complex collusions, as systems of perception grounded in social or cultural concepts rather than as simple channels of communication or distributors of content.'

an important position in social discourse, yet they also link sender, message and recipient in a process of communication. Media materialise this connection and the process of transmission because for the recipient of a message, it is the medium that is tangible and somehow embodies its message. Through this process a medium may itself become invested with an aura. It can thus draw attention to itself and, by extension, to the various ways in which transmission and perception can operate.

The idea that media draw attention to the cultural forms of perception that underlie particular, successful acts of transmission is a central thought in *mediality* studies. Kiening proposes that *mediality* can be understood 'als ein formales "Dazwischen" [...], das nicht das Reale verbirgt oder verstellt, sondern Bedingung der Möglichkeit von deßen Erscheinen ist – insofern mit diesem untrennbar verknüpft und doch nicht identisch.'[49] Kiening's proposition of the medium as not identical with what it mediates will have to be carefully reflected on in relation to bodies in medieval texts, especially with regards to bodies expressing identity. Still, Kiening's call for attention to the conditions that need to be fulfilled to make a process of transmission possible ('Bedingung der Möglichkeit des Medialen' in Kiening's terminology)[50] is an appropriate starting point for considering questions of *mediality*. Reflecting on these conditions on a very general level allows for a first, tentative characterisation of *mediality*. For the present purpose, *mediality* designates the study of a) processes of transmission; b) the relation of medium, message and recipient to each other; and c) the conditions that need to be fulfilled for something to function as a medium and hence for successful transmission to take place.

The present understanding of the concept of *mediality* is highly indebted to the doctoral programme *Mediality. Historical Perspectives* at the Universität Zürich. The doctoral programme promotes an appreciation of *mediality*'s multifaceted appearance and an interest in the underlying conditions for transmission. As Kiening asserts, *mediality* is 'nicht einfach das Prinzip von Vermittlung und Übertragung, sie zeigt sich vielmehr an dem Prozess, der zwei Entitäten auf-

---

49 Christian Kiening, 'Mediale Gegenwärtigkeit: Paradigmen – Semantiken – Effekte', in *Mediale Gegenwärtigkeit*, ed. by Christian Kiening (Zürich, 2007), pp. 9–70 (p. 23); 'should be perceived as a technical "in-between" which neither hides nor distorts reality but is the underlying condition for its potential to appear – in as much as it is inextricably linked with but not identical to it.'

50 Kiening, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', p. 342.

einander bezieht.'[51] In the case of bodies in medieval literature, these processes connect not just characters within a text but also the text with its audience, as bodies can signify both intra- and extra-diegetically.[52] Not only do the bodies within a text send messages to both entities, both characters and audience also have their own bodies (fictional and real, respectively) and as such can be said to relate to the medium through their own being. Despite this universal presence of corporeal *mediality*, the following analyses will show that in many instances the ways in which literary bodies are *installed* as mediators are very specific and cannot be satisfactorily explained by general theories. Medial functions of bodies in medieval literature can also appear as fundamentally different from the *mediality* discourse proposed for modern bodies, both literary and real.

To adequately describe these manifestations of *mediality*, specific emphases will need to be chosen in the individual chapters and subchapters. KIENING stresses the importance of focusing on the 'Prozesse, Situationen und Semantiken, aus denen partiellere, aber auch tiefenschärfere Bilder vormoderner Medialität hervorgehen können.'[53] These, KIENING argues, are both vital and interesting for a 'Beschreibung der historischen Bedingungen der Möglichkeit des Medialen.'[54] In the present case this entails engaging with the questions of how and under which circumstances bodies can function as media. KIENING's comment also calls for detailed and systematic analyses of individual examples, thus advocating studies of *mediality* that are founded on example-based yet contextualising analyses rather than on (however rigidly) applied broad theoretical frameworks.

MARTINA STERCKEN and KIENING formulate some thought-provoking questions for analysing the conditions that facilitate medial processes:

---

51 CHRISTIAN KIENING, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', *Poetica*, 39 (2007), 285 – 352 (p. 331); 'not simply the idea of mediation and transmission but becomes tangible in the process of relating two entities to each other.'
52 The term audience as used here denotes any recipient of a text, whether s/he reads it or whether it is read to him or her. The influence a literary body has outside the text will only marginally be discussed here, yet it is imperative to note that bodies are media that can and do function intra- and extradiegetically.
53 KIENING, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', p. 342; 'processes, situations and semantics [ideas about meaning] from which more case-bound but also profounder images of pre-modern *mediality* may emerge.'
54 KIENING, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', p. 342; 'description of the historical conditions of the potential for *mediality*.'

> [s]ichtbar wird dabei aber immerhin, daß die Frage, was Medien seien, nicht zu trennen ist von anderen Fragen: Was kann in welchen Situationen unter welchen historischen Gegebenheiten als Medium fungieren? Wie sind die Stellen, die Orte, die Konstellationen beschaffen, an denen Medialität beobachtbar wird? Wie lässt sich das Funktionieren von Vermittlung beschreiben?[55]

> It at least becomes apparent that the question what media are cannot be separated from another question: what can, under which circumstances and under which historical conditions, fulfil the function of a medium? What is the nature of the loci, the places and the patterns on and in which mediality can be observed? How can the functional aspects of transmission be described?

It follows that the question of what media are may be rephrased to 'what can function as a medium under which conditions?'[56] STERCKEN and KIENING assert that media are products of a complex interplay of social and cultural perceptions and that individual manifestations of *mediality* are deeply rooted in the time, space and culture that produced them. Studying these perceptions together with the (material) media can lead to better insights into medial processes and their individuality. The idea of context is central to all of STERCKEN and KIENING's questions, and hence this issue will also be raised in the following chapters.

Since all texts discussed can be said to be medieval (although some are preserved in manuscripts of later date) they exhibit a temporal and cultural alterity to modern texts and modern audiences. It is important to fully acknowledge their difference to appreciate the texts in their particularities. It is equally important to apprehend that because of this alterity, modern media theories (formulated on contemporary sources) cannot readily be applied to medieval texts. While modern media theories can present possible ways of approaching medial processes by asking inspiring and challenging questions, they cannot adequately describe the processes of *mediality* in medieval literature. STERCKEN and KIENING again offer useful suggestions.

> Weder in einem Absehen von den Kategorien der Moderne noch in deren Applikationen auf die Vergangenheit wird eine solche Präzisierung [medialer Prozesse in mittelalterlichen Texten] erfolgen können. Auszuloten sind vielmehr spannungsvolle und wechselnde Relationen, mit deren Einfaltung sich der Anspruch verbinden könnte, nicht einfach Medientheorien zu historisieren, sondern die historischen wie systemischen Bedingungen der Möglichkeit des Medialen ans Licht zu bringen [...].[57]

---

55 CHRISTIAN KIENING and MARTINA STERCKEN, 'Einleitung', *Das Mittelalter*, 15 (2010–2012), 3–8 (p. 3).

56 KIENING, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', p. 331.

57 KIENING and STERCKEN, 'Einleitung', p. 4.

> Neither a complete disregard for nor an application of modern theories to the past will explain these matters conclusively. Instead, it is more fruitful to focus on tension-loaded and changing relations. By examining these there emerges a demand not just to historicise media theories but to reveal the historical and methodical conditions of the potential for mediality [...].

This study seeks to draw attention to the particularities of the systematic conditions that allow medial processes to function successfully in medieval texts. It does so by examining extraordinary and particularly interesting moments in medieval narratives in which the processes of and conditions for *mediality* become visible. As will become apparent in the research questions formulated below, an acknowledgement of the multifaceted appearance of medial processes opens the field to consider hitherto overlooked examples. It also emphasises that although *mediality* is a convenient umbrella term for such occurrences of auralised transmission, it is the plurality of the phenomenon that needs to be foregrounded if the question concerning the underlying conditions for medial processes is to be addressed.

Acknowledging the alterity of medieval texts is a vital starting point for considering the questions posed by STERCKEN and KIENING.[58] This alterity entails that in medieval texts the researcher's attention might have to be directed to different places and different structures. STERCKEN and KIENING argue that while in (post-)modern media theories aesthetic and technical aspects are most frequently described, medieval texts may exhibit different interests. Therefore

> hat eine genuin historische Betrachtung überhaupt erst einmal zu bestimmen, in welchen Modellen im Mittelalter Mediales gedacht und gestaltet, imaginiert und inszeniert worden ist. In den Blick zu nehmen sind Konstellationen und Situationen mittelalterlicher Kultur, in denen Sinngefüge entworfen werden die medialen Phänomenen eine paradigmatische, anschlussfähige Form geben. Zu analysieren sind Momente, in denen der Umgang mit den Eigenarten und Strategien von Vermittlung mit einer expliziten oder impliziten Reflexion über deren Charakter einhergeht. Zu untersuchen sind die je spezifischen Bedingungen, die es medialen Grundmustern ermöglichen, Sinn zu generieren [...].[59]

> A genuinely historical reading has to determine the ideas through which medial matters were thought and formed, imagined and installed in the Middle Ages. The focus will need to lie on constellations and situations in medieval culture in which systems of meaning are created and in which medial phenomena are given paradigmatic, relatable form. It is therefore important to analyse instances in which an engagement with the peculiarities and strategies of transmission is combined with an explicit or implicit reflexion of their

---

58 KIENING and STERCKEN, 'Einleitung', p. 3.

59 KIENING and STERCKEN, 'Einleitung', pp. 5 – 6.

character. It is also important to analyse the specific prerequisites that enable basic medial patterns to generate meaning [...].

These prerogatives can be seen as the underlying incentive for the following chapters and many of the chosen foci reflect these concerns about studying individual manifestations of *mediality*. The subsequent chapters attempt to follow the texts in their own generation of meaning and to describe their individual structures, contexts and agendas.

In this respect it is useful to consider a concept which Stercken and Kiening have termed 'Modelle des Medialen' ('models of *mediality*'). 'Modelle', Kiening and Stercken propose, 'können als mittlere Grössen zwischen der Ebene der Phänomene und jener der Theorien verstanden werden.'[60] The term emphasises the relationship between the actual manifestations of medial processes in a specific case (here texts) and the underlying structures which facilitate this particular transmission. Although this study is not explicitly concerned with theoretical approaches, the individual chapters show that, just as is the case with bodies, there are different conceptual *ideas* discernible in the examples. The chapters are attempts to group such related *ideas* of *mediality*, a term which is to be understood analogous to *ideas* of bodies. Yet this does not mean that the chapters argue for unified structures. Rather, the *ideas* should be understood as reflecting the varying interests the texts exhibit in relation to medial constructions. The chapters also serve as suitable umbrella-structures to classify certain *ideas* about the medial potential of bodies through which related modes of transmission may be explored. In order to present a coherent study it was helpful to group the examples along these shared interests, yet these by no means exhaust the *mediality* discourses observable in medieval texts.

By and large, medieval texts do not seem to exhibit the same (frequently explicit) self-awareness of *mediality* as many modern texts do. In their own engagement with processes of *reading* bodies they nevertheless exhibit a considerable ingenuity in presenting and developing the subject.[61] According to Stercken and Kiening it is not unusual for medieval (literary) texts to show 'Formen, in denen kein systematisch durchdachtes, aber ein explizites Wissen über Medien und Medialität zum Ausdruck kommt [...]'.[62] Applying rigid theoretical models (especially before carefully regarding the texts) would have risked missing

---

60 Kiening and Stercken, 'Einleitung', p. 5; 'may be understood as entities in between the level of theory and its [the theory's] manifestation in a text.'

61 The term reading will be introduced in depth in 1.3.

62 Kiening and Stercken, 'Einleitung', p. 5; 'usages in which not a systematically thought out but nevertheless an explicit knowledge about media and *mediality* is expressed [...]'.

these specifically medieval concepts of *mediality*, as they may lack the systematic nature on which modern theories are based. Through critical *close readings* of particular episodes it is surprisingly often revealed that in and through bodies the texts do show a reflective engagement with *mediality*, albeit on various levels and to different degrees.

1.2 Research Questions

There are many questions that could be asked, many points of departure that could be chosen, in relation to bodies in medieval literature. To present a coherent analysis it is therefore beneficial to limit one's focus. The present study consequently considers only two – often related – questions. On the one hand, it is important to determine what it is that bodies (can and do) mediate. What is the nature of the 'information' that is transmitted and/or expressed through the body, and how does what is transmitted relate to and function within the world portrayed in a text? In addition, it will also be critically discussed how bodies fulfil a medial function. How does a body function as a mediator, how is it *installed* as a mediator and how does an individual process of *mediality* (inscription – transmission – deciphering) work?

Throughout the following chapters the second set of questions takes precedence over the first, mainly because it highlights a more interesting side of *mediality* discourse. The question draws attention to Kiening's 'Bedingung(en) der Möglichkeit des Medialen'[63] and thus offers an insight into how medial processes were imagined and presented in medieval texts. However, to focus solely on these technical aspects and wholly disregard what it is that bodies mediate would mean to deny them their actual purpose – to study a process and neglect its aim. It would also mean overlooking the, at times message-specific, processes of transmission and the complexity and ingenuity of these narratives. In fact, the two points of departure often intersect and overlap, and hence the questions are not always strictly divisible but are sometimes addressed together. However, for the purpose of this introduction, an attempt will be made to elucidate their importance individually.

In order to engage with these questions it is vital to address some general observations about medial functions first. On the most basic level, a process of transmission may be reduced to the following components: i) a message or information which is ii) inscribed or already inherent in a (possible) medium and

---

63 Kiening, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', p. 342.

is iii) retained there long enough to be iv) deciphered by another entity that is capable of deciphering and understanding the semiotic code of the message. The inscriber of the message may or may not be identical to the medium (one can inscribe oneself with a message), but if communication should take place, the position of the reader/decipherer needs to be filled by one or more external entities.

The first characteristic, the possible message to be mediated, largely correlates with the question of what it is that bodies mediate. The nature of the information they mediate often appears rather trivial – identity being the simple answer in many cases. The nuanced concepts of identity that can be mediated may, nonetheless, be seen as connected to the medial processes themselves. This suggests that the two matters are related. The concept of identity that is mediated through bodies in literary texts will be defined in chapter two. It suffices to say here that in addition to the simple expression of a literary character's disposition and narrative role, bodies can also mediate concerns about (and/or a critical engagement with) such modes of identity construction. They thus engage with the social system of their *narrated world* and the paradigms that constitute it. This shows that, through bodies, systems cannot just be created and confirmed but also reassessed, criticised and transgressed. In relation to shape-shifting, when the unity of body and self appear disturbed by a Carthesian divide and a fear that the body might be changed while the substance remains the same, the texts actually express considerable unease with the medial potential of bodies: in these cases, bodies may even come to mediate anxieties about unfixed boundaries and transgressions of categories.

Two further points that bodies can mediate in medieval texts are addressed in chapters four and five: memory and/or history and social organisation. The former is addressed in chapter four primarily through depictions of marked skin and/or flesh, creating a strong parallel with the vellum on which the texts themselves are inscribed. The second point is explored through the depiction of natural bodily matters – urination, defecation and menstruation – and their role in mediating human culture and social and geographic organisation, as is discussed in chapter five. Urination and menstruation can also become an indicator of femininity and are thus mediators of gender in relation to medieval theories about the female body. These short comments demonstrate that bodies can mediate in a variety of discourses and carry a range of meanings.

The second point in fact covers two aspects: that of identifying a possible medium and of inscribing/infusing it with a message (if the message is not already inherent in the medium). As for the first aspect, the understanding of bodies as social entities has led to the awareness that bodies (literary or real) are *read* almost universally and are meaningful at all times. Douglas' studies, for

instance, propose that bodies carry meaning in all known cultures.[64] Bodies thus appear as something like the 'ultimate mediator'. However, this universality of making sense of the human body is paralleled with highly culture- and time-specific mechanisms of *reading* bodies (i.e. of the cognitive processes that lead to information being extrapolated from a body), and of *installing* them as mediators. Or, as DOUGLAS phrases it in advancing her argument, '[t]he scope of the body acting as a medium is restricted by the demands of the social system to be expressed.'[65] The messages that bodies provide can be *read* only within a social system and this system needs to be examined if one seeks to know how bodies can (and do) function as media.

GUGUTZER expands on a very similar point by outlining that, from a sociological perspective, the interest lies in how a body can be used as a social system.[66] GUGUTZER also acknowledges that the manner in which bodies are used as medial entities is dependent on individual cultures. He adds: '[e]ntsprechend ist hier die Beziehung zwischen dem *Sozialsystem* (Gesellschaft, Kultur) und dem *Symbolsystem* (Körper als Ausdrucksmedium) und insbesondere der Einfluss des ersteren auf das zweite von Relevanz.'[67] Only a detailed analysis of both the individual bodies – the sign systems expressing *mediality* – and their position within a society in the textual universe (i.e. the *narrated world*, a term explained below and here corresponding to GUGUTZER's *Sozialsystem*) can reveal comprehensive results from a *mediality* perspective. It should be noted that changing an entity into a medium by charging it with meaning (from the outside) is not a necessary part of a medial transmission related to bodies in medieval texts. The idea of being inscribed or invested with meaning at a fixed moment of inscription is, in fact, the only aspect that may be absent. It will be argued that bodies in and of themselves are perceived as mediators, that they appear as always already charged with social meaning (referring back to the point that bodies are *read* in all known cultures).[68] This is one of the most notable but also most crucial peculiarities to consider in the discussion of bodies in *mediality* discourse.

The second point, needing to retain the information for some time until it can be *read* – or for a whole lifetime in the case of bodies expressing identity

---

64 DOUGLAS, *Natural Symbols*.

65 DOUGLAS, *Natural Symbols*, p. 79.

66 GUGUTZER, *Soziologie des Körpers*, p. 83.

67 GUGUTZER, *Soziologie des Körpers*, p. 83; 'it follows that was is important is the relationship between the social system (society, culture) and the symbolic system (body as a medium for expression) and especially the influence of the former on the latter.'

68 DOUGLAS, *Natural Symbols*.

–, is related to the bodies' discursively constructed physical materiality. The texts often show that only because bodies are matter, and because they retain what is inscribed in their flesh, can they begin to mediate between a character and society or between an act of inscription (like wounding) and its deciphering. The ability to bear such signs is one of the central conditions 'unter denen etwas als Dazwischen, Vermittlung oder Übertragung dienen kann.'[69] The way in which the retaining qualities of bodies are *installed* in medieval texts differs considerably, depending on the information they bear.

The processes of *reading* bodies are specific to a *narrated world* (both terms will be explained shortly) and show bodies as totally embedded in culture, albeit a culture which is created and tangible solely through the text (and hence through literary discourse). In some cases, the *reading* is a fairly straightforward one-to-one deciphering of symbol and related meaning, but in other cases bodies present highly multifaceted signs exhibiting almost inexhaustible potential for meaning. It needs to be noted that even in medieval texts bodies are not singular symbolic manifestations but occur within other symbolic systems in the text. As KIENING asserts: 'Körper sind, wo sie in schriftlicher und bildlicher Überlieferung begegnen, von Zeichen umgeben und fungieren selbst als Zeichen [...]'.[70] Even for the other characters inhabiting the world created by the text, the *reading* of bodies is a complex process of relating a specific body to other signs within the text (including their own bodies).

These factors can be discerned as the general conditions under which a body may be *installed* as a medium. The question of along which lines bodies do mediate in certain (con-)texts still needs to be addressed. Of course, the possibilities are almost endless and this study can only present three *ideas* of *mediality* developed in (and on) the selection of literary texts: *expressive mediality*, *transmissive mediality* and the *mediality* discourse of natural bodily matters. It is along these *ideas* that the chapters are grouped. Chapters two and three are concerned with *expressive mediality*. The term denotes that bodies express the identity of a character and therefore enable social identification. Bodies thus function as a visible expression of identity and hence as a mediator between an individual character and the society (or societies) in a text. ANKE ABRAHAM also discerns a wide-spread 'Verwendung des Körpers als soziale[s] Zeichen, das Prestige, Zu-

---

69 KIENING, 'Medialität in mediävistischer Perspektive', p. 327; 'conditions which allow something to function as an in-between, mediator or transmitter'.
70 KIENING, *Zwischen Körper und Schrift*, p. 179; 'wherever in textual or pictorial transmission bodies appear, they are surrounded by signs and simultaneously function as signs themselves [...]'.

gehörigkeit und Abgrenzung [...] ausdrücken kann'[71] – all factors which are here conflated into the term *expressive mediality*.

The term *expressive mediality* stresses that the information is made visible, i.e. expressed, on the outside through the body. In the present context, the term is limited to the God-given (i.e. bequeathed and unaltered) form of bodies and does not include any deliberate alterations (grooming etc.). What is mediated is perceived in the *narrated world* as always already inscribed in the body and there is no external or specific moment of inscription. It is important to stress that this does not suggest that the body is an outer shell that simply mediates inner disposition. In the examples presented body and character are perceived very much as one, and the body is merely what makes this holistic understanding of an individual visible and tangible. The majority of the medieval secular texts discussed in this publication present a recognisable, normative system of correspondence between bodily appearance and aptitude or narrative role.[72] *Expressive mediality* can thus be said to create and reflect a system in which bodies, identity and/or narrative roles are inextricably linked. Furthermore, they stand in open relation to what is normal or abnormal, social or anti-social in a particular text.

In chapter four it will be argued that there are various examples in which bodies are not simply *read* as a whole and in terms of identity construction but that they also carry signs or inscriptions which are meaningful in their own right. In these narratives or episodes, bodies can be said to mediate primarily through signs on their skin or in their flesh (such as scars or wounds), or more broadly, through alterations to the surface of the body. Since these bodies are viewed in the texts as transmitters of signs, their inherent *mediality* has been termed *transmissive*. Ultimately, these signs are also part of the idea of *expressive mediality* and identity in that they are always *read* in relation to the character that bears them. What calls for a separate idea of *mediality* is the focus of the texts or episodes. On the one hand, these signs are subject to a certain moment of inscription, an act that may carry significant meaning in itself. In certain episodes these signs are *read* under special circumstances and are seen as transmitting a very particular meaning. Finally, the deciphering of the signs is often artfully *installed*. The idea of a body carrying specific signs or marks is widespread

---

71 Anke Abraham, *Der Körper im biographischen Kontext* (Wiesbaden, 2002), p. 16; 'usage of the body as a social symbol which can indicate prestige, inclusion or disassociation [...]'.
72 For a brief discussion of the wider context of this dichotomy see Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin, 'Introduction', in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, ed. by Sarah Kay and Miri Rubin (Manchester, 1994), pp. 1–9.

in medieval literature and also occurs frequently outside early Irish and Old Norse-Icelandic literature.[73]

CLAUDIA ÖHLSCHLÄGER and BIRGIT WIENS propose that bodies can be a 'Medium der Erinnerung, der Einschreibung, Speicherung und Transformation kultureller Zeichen [...]'[74] in relation to alterations of the surface of the body, the skin. Skin is a boundary between the self and the world, and thus visually displays these signs to observers. PITTS notes that in indigenous cultures 'the body, especially the skin, often appears as a surface upon which social hierarchies, such as age, status, and clan, are inscribed or codified. [...]'.[75] These signs, PITTS concludes, 'can mark the body to indicate social position.'[76] Medieval texts can develop similar concerns about social positioning through the topos of the 'marked skin'.

Chapter five deals with the representation of natural bodily matters in *mediality* discourse. This idea differs considerably from the previous chapters on various grounds. For one, very specific aspects of a body are foregrounded: the natural processes of defecation, urination and menstruation. Encountering these matters in other studies was a vital reminder that, although admittedly very rarely, aspects of the natural, physiological body are also discernible in literary texts. The related questions of why these matters are only mentioned so scarcely and (more importantly) why they are mentioned precisely in the cases in which they are led to surprising insights. Nonetheless, it must be noted that these particular cases significantly depart from the system of *mediality* initially proposed. For one, what is read is quite literally already 'within' the bodies, but it is meaningful only when it leaves the body and becomes visible to (and can be smelled by) other characters. Through the act of passing physical matter, that matter's position(ing) within society is foregrounded. Still, meaning may be mediated through these acts and unearthing and describing these unusual processes proved a rewarding challenge.

Expressive mediality, *transmissive mediality* and the *mediality* discourse of natural bodily matters are the three *ideas* of *mediality* that will be discussed

---

73 A very thought-provoking reading of marked saintly skin as expressing identity has recently been presented by NICOLE NYFFENEGGER, 'Saint Margaret's Tattoos: Empowering Marks on White Skin', *Exemplaria*, 25/4 (2013), 267–283.

74 CLAUDIA ÖHLSCHLÄGER and BIRGIT WIENS, 'Einleitung', in *Körper – Gedächtnis – Schrift: Der Körper als Medium kultureller Erinnerung*, ed. by CLAUDIA ÖHLSCHLÄGER and BIRGIT WIENS (Berlin, 1987), pp. 9–22 (p. 10); 'a medium for memory and inscription, for storing and transforming cultural signs [...]'.

75 PITTS, *Flesh*, p. 30.

76 PITTS, *Flesh*, p. 31.

in more detail in the following chapters. Many more *ideas* could have been presented and, as so often happens, a clear distinction between such *ideas* is at times difficult to argue. It is hoped that grouping ideas of *mediality* along the lines of their individual processes of transmission draws attention to the multitude of *mediality* discourses found in medieval texts. The categories are to be seen as frames of thought emerging from the texts themselves. They are fit for further revision and expansion rather than being rigid classifications, and future studies may discern many more *ideas* of *mediality* in medieval texts.

Most importantly, these *ideas* should not be seen as universal concepts. They may or may not be reflected in texts not considered here, or the existing categories may be revised and expanded in the discussion of other narratives. The main aim of formulating such *ideas* is to draw attention to similar or related ways of thinking about bodies as mediators and to guide the reader through the many examples to follow. This detailed introduction to the research questions and the chapters is perhaps a bold move since it seems to give away many of the conclusions up front. On closer examination this is not the case, as the full scope of the conclusions is by no means revealed. But this short overview allows for the underlying structures, peculiarities and individual developments to become more clearly foregrounded in the chapters. It also allows for time to reflect on such general assumptions and, most importantly, to examine the individual structures and processes of *mediality* that led to or question them.

1.3 Studying Bodies in Medieval Literature: Some Remarks on Concepts and Terminology

Two main theoretical points must be outlined in order to clarify the present approach to the texts, while less central concerns may also be introduced here to contextualise the following chapters and leave more time for the actual *close readings* of the texts. The two main points that need to be discussed are the methodology applied and the terminology employed in the individual discussions.

1.3.1 Studying Texts as Texts

In terms of methodological approaches, the analyses are first and foremost close, critical and contextualised *readings*. The methodology of *critical* or *close readings* is 'indebted methodologically to post-structuralism [and *critical readings*] traverse the text homing in upon a few elements and exposing the text's rhetorical complex-

ity and semantic inexhaustibility [...]'[77], as Jürg Glauser summarises. They also consciously acknowledge that what they present is one possible *reading*, not the (conclusive or exhaustive) one. This is in line with the medieval sources treated here. For, as Ralph O'Connor also asserts in relation to early Irish literature, 'the concept of a single, "correct" meaning is alien to the purposes of this literature (not merely its later readers) [...]'.[78] The present *readings* therefore present what Eckart Conrad Lutz calls '[ein] aus bestimmten historischen, allgemeinen und besonderen Bedingungen heraus sich entwickelnder Erkenntnisprozess.'[79] This process in itself is valued as highly as possible conclusions. The analyses thus stress the importance of differences over a perceived unity of bodies and acknowledge multiple possible meanings over universalising approaches. Ultimately, it is the actual texts that are foregrounded and, with them, 'their' bodies. Because a very similar cognitive process can be observed in relation to the characters in a *narrated world*, the term *reading* will henceforth denote the intradiegetic as well as the extradiegetic *reading*, yet the two will be readily distinguishable by context.

These *readings* are contextualised on four different levels. This attempt chimes with O'Connor's concern that 'close attention to form and technique – to the "effects" created by a text – can and should be combined with close attention to its content and especially to its social and historical contexts.'[80] The first level of contextualisation indicates that the individual *close readings* of episodes are placed in the wider context of the whole text and its genre, which is often important for understanding a particular portrayal of a body. For instance, the different worlds portrayed in the original *riddarasögur* and the *Íslendingasögur* generate bodies on which very different concerns are observable. Likewise, neglecting the focus on everlasting fame and its proper transmission in *Táin Bó Cúailnge* would lead to a lack of appreciation of the episode *Caladgleó Cethirn*. It follows that these bodies have to be discussed against the textual universe

---

77 Jürg Glauser, 'The Speaking Bodies of Saga Texts', in *Learning and Understanding in the Old Norse World: Essays in Honour of Margaret Clunies Ross*, ed. by Judy Quinn, Kate Heslop and Tarrin Wills (Turnhout, 2007), pp. 13–26 (p. 15).

78 Ralph O'Connor, *The Destruction of Da Derga's Hostel: Kingship and Narrative Artistry in a Mediaeval Irish Saga* (Oxford, 2013), p. 7.

79 Eckart Conrad Lutz, 'Lesevorgänge: Vom punctus flexus zu Medialität', in *Lesevorgänge: Prozesse des Erkennens in mittelalterlichen Texten, Bildern und Handschriften*, ed. by Eckart Conrad Lutz, Martina Backes and Stefan Matter (Zürich, 2010), pp. 11–33 (p. 26); 'as (a) cognitive process(es) which emerge(s) from certain historic, general and particular conditions.'

80 O'Connor, *Narrative Artistry*, p. 7.

in which they occur, and this can only be undertaken if one acknowledges the particularities of the genre. As GEORGES DUMÉZIL declares,

> [b]efore asking which features, great or small, he [the historian of religions] can extract from to support his thesis, he must read and reread them, immerse himself in them passively and receptively, being extremely careful to leave all features in their places, both those that support him and those that resist him [...] one must understand their internal structure, which justifies the ordering of their elements, even the strangest and most bizarre.[81]

Such a broad overview of all features of a text is important for understanding the relation of bodies to other signs (and sign systems) in a text.

Bodies must therefore be *read* in relation to other signs (and other bodies in the text), yet they also must be *read* against the context (genre, time and culture) that produced them (and the texts), even if defining this context is no easy task. The second level of contextualisation is, therefore, concerned with establishing and assessing the cultural and temporal peculiarities that produced and/or altered a text. Although this introduction emphasises that the texts and their bodies are viewed as highly culture-specific products, the analyses do not argue that the texts simply reflect the historical world that produced them. This is because, as KIENING emphasises, texts 'spiegeln nicht einfach Wirklichkeit, sie bilden eigene Formen symbolischer Ordnungen.'[82] In other words, the *expressive* merit of texts can be acknowledged in their own right. As CHRISTIAN BARMES notes,

> Texte als expressive Gestaltungsformen zu begreifen bedeutet [...] sie zur Aussprache ihres eigenen Sinnes zu bringen. Handelt es sich doch auch um die – wiederum als Kulturfaktum zu betrachtende – Einsicht, dass Texte, wie Cassirer betont, nicht schlicht eine Wirklichkeit spiegeln oder abbilden, dass sie aber auch nicht unabhängig von jeder Wirklichkeit beschrieben werden können. Doch die eigentliche Wirklichkeit ist nun die eigene Wirklichkeit der Sinngestaltung selbst, des Sinnes im Werden.[83]

> To see texts as expressive modes of formation means [...] to make them express their own, individual meaning. This reflects the – albeit culturally determined – realisation that, as Cassirer emphasises, texts do not simply reflect or represent (a) reality but that they also cannot be described as independent of reality. But their true realism lies in their own reality, in generating meaning, and thus in becoming meaning.

---

81 GEORGES DUMÉZIL, *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. by EINAR HAUGEN (Berkeley, CA, 1973), p. 15.

82 KIENING, *Zwischen Körper und Schrift*, p. 26; 'are not simply representations of reality but create their own forms of symbolic order.'

83 CHRISTIAN BARMES, 'Die Kultur des Textes: Eine Einleitung', in *Die Kultur des Textes: Studien zur Textualität,* ed. by CHRISTIAN BARMES, ERNST WOLFGANG ORTH and PETER WELSEN (Würzburg, 2009), pp. 9 – 20 (pp. 13 – 14).

While of course the bodily discourses of the societies and times that produced the texts are not completely detached from them, the present approach merely examines the text-internal *mediality* of bodies and disregards their possible intended text-external value 'specifically' for the historical audience.

The question of the transmission and the context of individual texts will be briefly addressed when a text is introduced, even though this is not the main focus of this study. It is nevertheless an important point to address, since all of the narratives discussed in the following chapters were transmitted over several centuries and the bodies within them are shaped by the processes of transmission and the changing historical environment.[84] How bodies are *installed* and perceived in a text also depends on such contexts, as will become clear, for example, in the discussion of Cú Chulainn's body, a body which might have been deliberately developed by an interpolator (or interpolators). In the Old Norse-Icelandic tradition, courtly standards might be combined with Norse *ideas* of bodies, and the resulting characters are complex figures full of cultural meaning and literary imagination.

Although this study examines concrete appearances of bodies within a single manifestation of a narrative, it clearly acknowledges that, as EDGAR SLOTKIN emphasises for early Irish texts, scribes 'did not treat saga texts as fixed texts in the way in which we think of fixed texts' and hence every saga 'must be evaluated, and each manuscript of each saga, separately.'[85] This is, of course, not possible for a study with such a broad focus, but at least it is made clear in each case which edition, manuscript and/or recension is referred to. I will also be attempting to outline my own view of the texts, even though this too is no easy task. For instance, Old Norse-Icelandic sagas can be viewed from a variety of angles.[86] The present study sees the *Íslendingasögur* (largely) as imagining a past through the present (of the writing down/compiling) but the imagination of the various scribes/compilers/redactors (and hence also their understanding of and attitudes towards bodies) may have considerably changed through the transmission of a narrative or text. The original *riddarasögur*, on the other

---

84 The terms text and narrative relate to each other in a very similar way as MIEKE BAL proclaims. BAL sees a *text* as a narrative in any medium but 'with an emphasis on the finite nature and structuredness of narratives.' MIEKE BAL, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (Toronto, 1985), p. 6. In the present context, text thus refers to a written document that develops a narrative. A narrative, on the other hand, is an abstract idea, the 'story' independent of any fixing medium, thus comprising of both BAL's *story* and *fabula*.

85 EDGAR M. SLOTKIN, 'Medieval Irish Scribes and Fixed Texts', *Éigse*, 17 (1977–1979), 437– 450 (pp. 449–450).

86 I thank Prof. Jürg Glauser for stressing and clarifying this point in his comments on an earlier draft.

hand, combine Norse *ideas* with courtly ones, and in this respect their bodies are the products of merging cultural perceptions. Such issues will be addressed only marginally in the analyses, but they are addressed where they do become important.

Contextualised of course also means contextualised with reference to earlier research. The ardent reader will notice that despite the novelty of the approach larger amounts of secondary literature could have been included or more fundamental theories might have been discussed. The decision to limit the secondary material presented (although a lot more was studied during the research process) stresses that ultimately my own critical *close readings* take centre stage. Finally, the individual representations of bodies are contextualised in relation to narrative techniques. This means that the narrative contexts in which bodies are described should also be considered. It is important to ask the following questions: in what place/environment and at what point in a text is a body presented/described, who presents and observes this body and how is its medial function *installed* and deciphered according to particular concerns and agendas?

In this respect it is imperative to properly introduce a central term of this study: *narrated world*.[87] Drawing attention to this concept is vital because, as ARMIN SCHULZ maintains, every literary text designs the structure (and, one may add, appearance) of 'a' world, and it does so through *descriptions* as well as through metaphorical systems.[88] As bodies are part of this textual world, their assessment should be based on a close observation of this fictional reality and its individual manifestation in terms of time, space and social norms.[89] The term to denote this concept, *narrated world*, designates what has so far been called the textual universe or the world depicted in a text. It is modelled on (but not completely congruent with) the German term *erzählte Welt*. In short, *narrated world* denotes the fictional world created by and thus depicted in the text, the world that the literary characters inhabit.[90] On one level, this includes as-

---

87 In general, providing definitions for my own terminology proved a difficult enterprise and one in which BAL's comments about definitions were repeatedly recalled. BAL argues that her own definitions 'are not meant to hold the truth of their object; rather to make it accessible' and that the reader should 'fall back on such definitions, test them against analyses and interpretations, and check their consistency.' BAL, *Narratology*, p. 3. It is in similar vein that the here proposed working definitions should be understood.

88 ARMIN SCHULZ, *Erzähltheorie in mediävistischer Perspektive* (Berlin, 2012), p. 292.

89 SCHULZ, *Erzähltheorie*, p. 161.

90 The term *narrated world* also emphasises the process of narrating a world as well as the complete cosmos presented through narrative techniques. FOTIS JANNIDIS presents a thorough theoretical introduction to the term 'erzählte Welt' in relation to *possible worlds theory*. As this study presents its own definition of the term, these concerns do not need to be related here in any

pects such as the geography and topography of a text's natural world, its flora and fauna, but also social aspects such as the nature of settlements and architecture. On a more abstract level, *narrated world* also refers to the fictional setting in time and space, the structure and values of the text's society (or societies), the appearance and customs of characters, how they interact with each other and many other factors. The *narrated world* thus creates a tangible and perceptible space within the text and a meaningful sphere in which the literary characters, as the inhabitants of this world are called here, (inter-)act.

LUBOMÍR DOLEŽEL distinguishes six characteristics of what he calls fictional worlds (a term largely congruent with the present use of *narrated world*) and these are conveniently summarised by FOTIS JANNIDIS.[91] While DOLEŽEL's theory is based upon studying modern literature and its finer points reflect this basis, his main points also provide a helpful incentive for thinking about *narrated worlds* in medieval texts. Two of his points provide particularly thought-provoking *ideas*. These are the concepts of being created as a meaningful structure that adheres to other prerogatives than the real, extradiegetic world and the idea of incompleteness in that the audience can know only what is being narrated about this world (although their imagination may fill in various gaps).[92]

The first point has already been addressed implicitly in relation to KIENING's comment that texts can be said to create their own symbolic order.[93] In relation to the second point, ARMIN SCHULZ likewise emphasises that *narrated worlds* are never presented in their entirety but only in fragments and thus imply rather than fully show a model of a fictional world.[94] It is therefore especially important to assess what information is provided and for what reason it may be given, as this may offer vital clues about the structure that a text wants to foreground in its *narrated world* (or on a body). If nose and eyes go unmentioned in the description of a literary character but his hair and beard and various scars are described, this does not mean that this particular character lacks the undescribed features. Rather, it is assumed that the text wants to focus on certain aspects for a

---

depth. See further FOTIS JANNIDIS, *Figur und Person: Beitrag zu einer historischen Narratologie* (Berlin & New York, NY, 2004), pp. 66–70.

91 JANNIDIS, *Figur und Person*, pp. 67–68.

92 This is especially important in the case of medieval literature. SCHULZ addresses the issue that many modern readers subconsciously read information into texts. What is less (but by no means un-)problematic in the case of modern literature leads to categorically wrong assessments of medieval texts, when for instance a modern understanding of sexuality or moral behaviour are inferred. SCHULZ, *Erzähltheorie*, pp. 8–10.

93 KIENING, *Zwischen Körper und Schrift*, p. 26.

94 SCHULZ, *Erzähltheorie*, p. 292.

particular reason (or reasons) and that the audience is free to imagine the remaining, unmarked details by themselves.

In order to express that each *narrated world* exhibits its own system of making sense of this world, the term *semiotic system* is introduced. Like *narrated world*, it is a working definition for this study and in this case the term is only loosely based on previous terminology (KIENING's symbolic order, for instance).[95] As it is used here, *semiotic system* denotes a socially constructed system of (an) organisation of meaning. The system thus expresses what is meaningful and which meaning these factors are associated with. The concept of a *semiotic system* is inspired by the German term *Sinnsystem* and hence loosely modelled on NIKLAS LUHMANN's idea of *Sinn*. The German *Sinn* has a semantic range of both 'sense' as well as 'meaning', yet in English translations the former is preferred in denoting LUHMANN's concept. HANS-GEORG MOELLER classifies LUHMANN's *sense* as completely rooted in culture, as the '"universal medium" [...]. Society and minds are continuously "making sense" – they are "sense-constituting systems". Minds make sense of the world and themselves, and so do social systems.'[96]

In stressing the importance of such a system, SARAH KAY and MIRI RUBIN determine an (almost?) universal desire for a 'dialectically related process of ordered division, through schemes of knowledge and systematic hierarchies [...]'.[97] The distinct terminology employed in this analysis therefore proposes not a new concept but merely a convenient way of referring to these matters in English. It follows that a *semiotic system* is a vital factor in constituting human culture and can be expressed on many different levels, from the arrangement of the cosmos to the *reading* of bodies in texts. The consideration of *semiotic systems* allows for contextualising the meaningful factors and paradigms (on a specific body or in general) of a particular *narrated world* or even in the development of a particular episode. Therefore, a careful and contextualised analysis of what makes what sense, and to whom, is undertaken in relation to each of the *narrated worlds* discussed here.

A short example from a medieval text should help to outline how reflectively and imaginatively medieval texts can engage with this issue. In *Vilmundar saga Viðutan*, the main character Vilmund grows up very isolated, living on a farm with his reclusive parents, who (having seemingly retired from a life at court)

---

95 KIENING, *Zwischen Körper und Schrift*, p. 26.

96 HANS-GEORG MOELLER, *Luhman Explained: From Souls to Systems* (Chicago, IL, 2006), p. 65.

97 KAY and RUBIN, 'Introduction', p. 6.

teach him courtly things but do not allow contact with the outside world.[98] When Vilmund finally leaves his home to look for a stray goat, he encounters a princess living in what appears to him to be a mountain (which a medieval audience perhaps readily identified as a castle).[99] While the identity of the princess and the surroundings (which provide a vital clue to this identity) are soon clear for the audience, Vilmund seems baffled because he has never seen anything like this before. He bluntly asks the woman if she is human, a troll or an elf. The rather amused princess in turn asks whether she looks like a troll to him, showing that in her view, such matters may be discerned by appearance. To this Vilmund replies that he cannot say because he has seen neither troll nor elf nor humans other than his parents. Even compared to his parents, one may suspect, the princess looks different enough to make Vilmund question whether they do in fact belong to the same category, human.[100]

Vilmund's inexperience with the world outside his farm means that he lacks a *semiotic system* in which to firmly place the appearance of this 'creature'. He may have an abstract idea of a princess as his parents may have told him about such a woman.[101] Yet because he has never seen one, Vilmund fails to identify 'this woman' as 'a princess'. To him the paradigms she embodies – beautiful body, female, noble, lives in a castle – are simply not enough to relate to this concept. This demonstrates that in medieval texts, social identity is as much based on being recognised by others as it is on the expression of that identity through, for instance, a beautiful body or regal attire. This brief encounter consequently reveals as much about successful instalments of *mediality* as it does about Vilmund and his position in the *narrated world* he inhabits.

---

98 The whole episode is recounted in *Vilmundar saga Viðutan*, chapters 8 – 10. The saga is extant in almost fifty manuscripts, the oldest of which date back to the fifteenth century. JÜRG GLAUSER and GERT KREUTZER, who provide a German translation, assume that the saga dates back to the fourteenth century and assert that it is difficult to assign a particular genre to this narrative. The saga is found in *Isländische Märchensagas: Ritter- und Heldenerzählungen aus Islands Spätmittelalter*, trans. by JÜRG GLAUSER and GERT KREUTZER (München, 1998). The text is edited by AGNETE LOTH, *Late Medieval Icelandic Romances* IV (Copenhagen, 1964), pp. 137 – 201.

99 The mention that servants are said to enter this big house with golden vessels is another clue for the audience, yet the text ingeniously adopts Vilmund's point of view.

100 This brief mention draws attention to how such categories are defined and how the boundaries of this particular category may appear to a person totally devoid of personal experience.

101 Of course one could argue that if Vilmund's parents had repeatedly told him about princesses as incorporating aspects such as female, beautiful, live in a castle with servants etc. this may have facilitated recognition. Yet the text does not concern itself with this possibility and instead develops a different issue: that of linking seeing with identifying.

One of the main aims of this study is to examine the texts as texts – that is, as independent literary creations. It follows that to determine the strategies that create a fictional world it is beneficial to approach them from narratological viewpoints. The idea of considering narratological objectives in the study of bodies in medieval texts is justified because, quite simply, it is the texts that create the bodies. JANNIDIS in particular draws attention to questions of how literary characters are 'shaped'. Although his comments arose from the study of modern literature, they can still provide important questions for examining bodily representations in medieval texts.

JANNIDIS proposes to ask for how long (in relation to the length of the text) a character is described, how much (homogenous or varying) information is presented, on which narrative level(s) the information is presented, where in a text and in what context and with what aim the character is described and in what relation his or her *description* stands to *descriptions* of other characters within the *narrated world*.[102] These questions can help to determine if a body is a continuous mediator of identity throughout the text or if it only mediates that identity once, perhaps at a particular point in the narrative. Furthermore, it is important to discuss on what narrative level(s) the process of mediation is *installed* and how these levels influence the medial process. Does a body mediate particular issues at a particular point in a text and for a specific reason? By connecting the process of *mediality* with the narrative techniques creating a character, the interrelatedness of body and process is suitably and consciously foregrounded.

Attention also has to be paid to how bodies are presented and made tangible within a text, i. e. by what narrative techniques the bodies are made visible. JANNIDIS expresses the opinion that the meaning of signs (linguistic signs in his case) can only be analysed if the communicative events and the relevant contexts are likewise considered in the analysis.[103] His judgement provided the incentive to also draw attention to the contexts and events in which bodies are presented as signs. In this respect, it is imperative to also determine how and by whom information about a body is presented and how this relates to other pieces of information provided.

Two such 'voices' may be determined in medieval texts: the *narrative voice* and the words spoken by other characters who are also part of the *narrated world*. This study understands *narrative voice* as the fictional entity that (generally in an omniscient way) provides information about a *narrated world* through

---

102 JANNIDIS, *Figur und Person*, pp. 220 – 221.
103 JANNIDIS, *Figur und Person*, p. 80.

the voice of the text. The *narrative voice* is independent of any characters in the text and therefore provides a point of view independent of their subjective knowledge.[104] As will become obvious in the following chapters, some *narrative voices* consciously evaluate a character or tell the audience how to assess certain pieces of information, while others appear content to deliver the information without interpretative guidance. In the case of other characters relating information about a body, it must be noted that this has always already been perceived in the text before it is perceived by the audience (or researcher).

A difference is also observable in how the audience comes to view and hence to imagine the bodies. While the *narrative voice* can apparently offer untainted information for the audience (but can also evaluate), the comments by other characters (implicitly) contain a double perspective: what the audience perceives has already gone through the perception of and is shaped by the words of a character. Discussing this perspective also means engaging with questions about who is doing the looking (or often the conscious *gazing*), who talks about a body and what kind of body is displayed. These strategies help to consider how a text may stage the process(es) of visual perception. Listening to who is speaking is important in discerning the narrative levels of construction as well as the evaluations of both bodies and (by extension) characters. In both cases, an examination of which *descriptive paradigms* are mentioned, foregrounded or absent can offer valuable information about what impression of the body should linger and how the body should be visualised by the audience.

The fact that both the visualisation by the audience as well as the observers in the text (other characters) are important may be grounded in the central role visual observance held in medieval thought. Theories about vision as extramissive (going back to Plato and Galen), that is, of the eyes emitting light and hence turning observing into an interactive process, were known in medieval Ireland at least.[105] This theory may therefore have provided the fundamental structure for the very developed visualisations of bodies in these texts, as Sarah Sheehan contends.[106] From Augustine to Roger Bacon, vision has often been classified

---

104 The *narrative voice* should not be associated with the author or compiler of a text, whether medieval or modern.

105 So far I have not been able to determine whether the same can be argued for medieval Iceland.

106 Sarah Sheehan, 'Feasts for the Eyes: Visuality and Desire in the Ulster Cycle', in *Constructing Gender in Medieval Ireland*, ed. by Sarah Sheehan and Ann Dooley (New York, NY, 2013), pp. 95–113 (pp. 96–97).