Liminality, in its meaning of being on the border, in-between, not one or the other, has proved a useful concept when discussing medieval medical notions of (physical) impairment. Medieval concepts of health and illness in relation to physical impairment have shown that the impaired body was neither sick nor healthy, in extreme cases some individuals were even described as being neither dead nor alive, and therefore liminal. Liminality may also lead to special status and/or powers for an impaired person, such as people with magical powers like the witch, whereby status is either defined by or acquired from literally being between two places, and metaphorically being between two worlds. The present paper will analyse if and how such concepts are relevant for medieval bodies of difference.

‘Space’ in this paper is taken to have two meanings. The first is physical space, such as topographical or structural space. The second meaning is abstract or conceptual space. With regard to the disabled body and physical space, this article will investigate where disabled bodies were in life—confined in special places such as medieval hospitals or mingling freely with non-disabled bodies.

Liminality is not to be equated with exclusion, nor is it the same as marginality. In contrast to the “formalized marginality” inflicted on groups such as Jews, there is a more transient position, where people “find themselves outside normative family and social structures”. This is the liminal condition. I have chosen liminal over marginal, since it better

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1 See the discussion in Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400*, Routledge Studies in Medieval Religion and Culture 5 (London and New York, 2006), pp. 31 and 68.


3 Old High German *hagazussa* meant ‘the sitter or rider on the fence’. Old English had related terms such as *‘hægtesse’*, from which derived the more familiar ‘hag’. See I. Metzler, “Responses to Physical Impairment in Medieval Europe: Between Magic and Medicine,” *Medizin, Gesellschaft und Geschichte* 18 (1999), 29–30.

describes the in-between phase that physically impaired people find themselves in, because they are between normatively fixed positions (such as healthy or ill, alive or dead, male or female) rather than completely outside of traditional structures. This distinction between ‘liminality’ and ‘marginality’ (or exclusion) is not always made clear by modern scholarship; all too often the two terms are used interchangeably, whereas they are neither verbally nor conceptually identical. For instance, Roberta Gilchrist described the liminality of what she called “the other monasticism”, including hospitals, as “a situation beyond the boundaries of ordinary existence.”5 But liminality implies being right on the boundary, not beyond (which would be marginal), and therefore constructs a completely different picture of the cultural, social or religious location of liminal persons, objects or spaces. So with regard to physical impairment one might say that while disease can initiate a “pattern of separation, transition, and reintegration”6, impairment permanently locates the affected person at the transition stage of this sequence.

If one extends this line of thought, one may think of other (spatial) areas where people are separated, and perhaps even liminal, but certainly not marginal, in fact where they are powerful: where these people are located in spatial difference while actually being at the political or social centre, e.g. the lord behind the walls of his castle, or the bishop in his immured cathedral precinct (Domfreihet). It becomes truly interesting when people and edifices are actually located on such a boundary. There are cases of buildings being sited at the liminal juncture itself, such as the row of market-stalls, later becoming merchants’ houses, built alongside the western flank of the boundary wall separating the bishop’s cathedral immunity from the secular world, in evidence to this day at the Hanse town of Münster (Westphalia) where these structures now form the semi-circular bow of the principal market (Prinzipalmarkt) (Fig. 39).7 For an English example one may look to the market place at Reading, which was situated just in front of the abbey wall and close to the abbey’s main gate.8

6 Goodich, Other Middle Ages, p. 223.
8 In fact, the market had to move from its earlier location at St Mary’s Butts when the abbey was built in the 1220s, so it then became sited outside the main west gate of the abbey; cf. M. Petyt, ed., The Growth of Reading (Stroud, 1993), p. 44.