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## Recovering Disability in Early Modern England

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## Performing Blindness

Representing Disability in  
Early Modern Popular Performance and Print

SIMONE CHESS

While scholarship has often attended to the metaphor of blindness in early modern literature, little attention has been devoted to instances in which literary texts present us with representations of individuals who are actually blind.<sup>1</sup> Disability theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder argue that metaphors of disability, like blindness, within narrative are used to give a “tangible body” to abstract ideas.<sup>2</sup> But what are we to make of instances of “real” visual impairment, after having been so long conditioned to think of blindness less as a disability than a metaphor? What is the purpose of these blind characters on the stage and on the page? What can we learn from the textual specifics of their disabled bodies and of their use of adaptive language and technology? What does the spectacle of visual impairment mean for sighted (and for blind) readers or audiences?

As a metaphor, blindness—along with paralysis, limited mobility, cognitive difference, and other disabilities—is generally presented in negative

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ways.<sup>3</sup> In their book *Narrative Prosthesis*, Mitchell and Snyder explain this pattern: “while literature often relies on disability’s transgressive potential, disabled people have been sequestered, excluded, exploited, and obliterated on the very basis of which their literary representation exists.”<sup>4</sup> And yet, in select textual instances where blindness is presented as a physical condition, the metaphorical trappings of visual impairment are reduced in a way that makes evident other, more material early modern concerns about disability. Rather than normalizing or erasing the presence of blind characters on the stage or page, these instances reveal early modern interest and investment in medical knowledge and in the lived experiences of the blind.

Using examples of blind and blinded characters in sources that include Shakespeare’s *2 Henry VI* and the anonymous sixteenth-century play *Jacob and Esau*, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century scientific texts, and cheap-print ballads and broadsides, this essay explores how examining these representations of blindness on the stage and in print (and, alongside them, representations of the adaptive technologies used by early modern blind individuals) can unsettle the relationship between seeing and knowing, disability and agency, blindness as metaphor and as experiential. While it is unlikely that any of the blind characters were played by blind actors, I hope to show that physically blind characters, as opposed to metaphorically blind characterizations, had some of the same kinds of impacts as contemporary disabled performance artists who often use their own bodies on stage or in visual media as a way of “challenging both tired narrative conventions and aesthetic practices.”<sup>5</sup> Further, by focusing on blindness as a real and embodied historical experience, these representations disrupt theoretical ideas of performativity, since, as Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander put it, “the notion that disability is a kind of performance is to people with disabilities not a theoretical abstraction, but lived experience.”<sup>6</sup> If everyday life can be experienced as performance for people with visible disabilities, then early modern representations of disability on stage and in cheap print have the potential not only to displace metaphorical uses of disability with performances of actual disability but also to offer, through those performances, a glimpse at the everyday, lived “performance” of the early modern blind.

While perhaps the most attention to any moment of blindness in early modern drama has focused on Gloucester’s blinding in *King Lear*, early modern attitudes toward blindness are more explicitly demonstrated in a strange (hundred-line) subplot of Shakespeare’s less-discussed *The First Part of the Contention (2 Henry VI)*.<sup>7</sup> In this subplot, the soon-to-be-overthrown King Henry is interrupted in his hunting by reports of a miracle at Saint Albans. This miracle, that one Simon Simpcox, born blind, has miraculously recov-

ered his vision, is especially exciting to Henry, who immediately redirects his hunting party to see the supposed wonder.<sup>8</sup> When he hears that “a blind man at Saint Alban’s shrine / Within this half-hour hath received his sight— / A man that ne’er saw in his life before now” (2.1.66–68), the king exclaims, “God be praised, that to believing souls / Gives light in darkness, comfort in despair!” (69–70). Though King Henry is willing to accept Simpcox’s “miracle” based on his and his wife’s testimonies, telling Simpcox that “God’s goodness hath been great to thee” (86), his advisor and Protector, Gloucester is far more critical of Simpcox’s recovery to sightedness. This attitude was realistic, informed by the medieval and early modern problem of beggars who feigned disabilities such as blindness.<sup>9</sup>

More than serving as a mere digression, then, Simpcox and his faked blindness provide Shakespeare with an opportunity to stage the scientific process through which this deception was famously uncovered. Though Simpcox’s story of having been born blind has already been announced by the messenger (“ne’er saw in his life before”), confirmed by the king (“hast thou been long blind and now restored?”), and sworn by Simpcox and his wife (“Born blind, an’t please your grace”; “Ay, indeed was he.”), Gloucester repeats the question: “How long hast thou been blind?” (99). The play’s intense focus on the fact that Simpcox claims to have been blind from birth makes him the perfect subject of scientific and philosophical inquiry. Georgina Kleege explains that “the hypothetical blind man” in philosophy “is always assumed to be both totally and congenitally blind,” even though “real blindness, today as in the past, rarely fits this profile.”<sup>10</sup> In emphasizing, through repetition, the fact that Simpcox is “born blind,” Shakespeare allows for a performance of an important thought experiment in understanding blindness, conducted by Gloucester for the benefit of the audience at large.

This scientific spectacle takes place through an interrogation of Simpcox’s story, his history, and his blindness. Curious over the fact that Simpcox is lame from a fall from a tree, Gloucester asks how he managed to climb it, if he was blind from birth. Unsatisfied with Simpcox’s (lewd) answers, Gloucester launches into a rapid-fire volley of questions, designed to undermine the “subtle knave” (105). The speed and focus of Gloucester’s investigation is striking, as is the dissonance between this dialogue and the rest of the scene, act, and play:

GLOU: Let me see thine eyes: wink now, and open them.

In my opinion thou seest not well.

SIMP: Yes, master, clear as day, I thank God and Saint Alban.

GLOUCESTER: Sayst thou me so? And what colour is this cloak of?

SIMP: Red, master, red as blood. . . .

GLOU: And what colour's my gown?

SIMP: Black, sir, coal-black as jet. . . .

GLOU: Tell me, sirrah, what's my name?

SIMP: Alas, master, I know not.

GLOU: What's his name?

SIMP: I know not. . . .

GLOU: What is thine own name?

SIMP: Simon Simpcox, an it please you, master.

GLOUCESTER: Then, Simon, sit thou there the lying'st knave

In Christendom. If thou hadst been born blind

Thou mightst as well have known our names as thus

To name the several colours we do wear.

Sight may distinguish colours, but suddenly

To nominate them all—it is impossible.

Saint Alban here hath done a miracle. (107–35)

Gloucester's examination of Simpcox, and his verdict against the man, is based on two major tests: the ability to recognize, differentiate between, and name colors; and the ability to recognize, sort, and identify people. As Gloucester sums up in his conclusions, this test is based upon the scientific or philosophical notion that "Sight may distinguish colours, but suddenly / To nominate them all—it is impossible." In this way, Gloucester outthinks Simpcox and proves that he is a fraud. But the scene renders visible some of the early modern stereotypes about vision loss, as well as some optical theories about the role that vision plays in determining color and identifying people.<sup>11</sup>

The scene of Simpcox's interrogation is enabled by the fact that Simpcox is posing as Kleege's "hypothetical blind man" so often used in philosophy: "He is the patient subject of endless thought experiments where the experience of the world through four senses can be compared to the experience of the world through five."<sup>12</sup> The Simpcox interlude, presented as it is as a pure thought experiment about the experience of blindness, requires Shakespeare to explore blindness on a physical and medical level.<sup>13</sup> The fact, for instance, that Gloucester is so interested in color reflects scientific interest in the ways that the eye could process, understand, and also misunderstand color. In his 1608 scientific text, *The Vanitie of the Eie*, George Hakewill discusses how the eye itself can offer false reports to the seer.<sup>14</sup> He likens the eye's trouble in discerning certain colors to our difficulty in seeing perspective:

Colours, in which reason by conclusions drawn out of her principles often checks & controules this sense for false reporting; for instance we need go no farther than those colours which appear in the rainbow, or on a doves neck by the reflection of the sunne's beames, those night-chasms & gapings in the firmament . . . These things all men knowe, and the greatest part acknowledge, to be errors of the eie, Though the learned only, search into and find out the causes of it.<sup>15</sup>

Hakewill understands the eye as an unreliable informant to the mind and understanding; even in cases of full sightedness, where the eye is functioning at its best, it can present confusing misinformation to the seer. At the same time, though, even as Hakewill enumerates the many untrustworthy qualities of ocular vision, he pushes for a single human understanding of sight when he asserts that “all men knowe” when they are being fooled by their eyes. This inconstancy between Hakewill’s main point (that eyes are false informants prone to error) and his weak conclusion (that there is a universal agreement about which sight is authentic and which is fraudulent) reveals his hope that scientific inquiry can “search into and find the causes” of optical illusion, mis-sight, and, ultimately, visual impairments and idiosyncrasies. Indeed, by admitting the huge variety of visual misunderstandings that can happen in a sighted context, Hakewill reveals that full sightedness is unstable and that blindness and visual impairment, rather than being major variations from the norm, are actually the farthest points on a spectrum of inconsistent and unreliable sight.

Both Hakewill and Shakespeare approach their discussions of the nature of vision through the problem of misinterpreted visual data. In this manner, scientific analysis and dramatic representation are grounded in a shared interest in the working of the eye, and in interrogating the limits of vision and sight.<sup>16</sup> Though Simpcox was never actually blind, the evidence through which Gloucester reveals that he is faking simultaneously renders all vision and sightedness unfamiliar—Gloucester’s questions reflect an early modern wonder at how it is that *anyone* can tell the difference between colors, or how any color can be a definitive thing, since even functioning eyes can deceive us (as Hakewill points out). Hakewill’s casting of vision in this dubious light, according to Stuart Clark, is “the best example of the demolition of Renaissance optimism about vision.”<sup>17</sup> In proving that Simpcox can see, Gloucester disrupts the audiences’ intuitive sight, drawing attention to the act of looking and seeing, and potentially casting doubt on the efficacy of all sightedness. In this way, Simpcox’s trial breaks down some of the seemingly clear distinction between able and disabled bodies; though the surface of the

plot proves that Simpcox can see, and that his blindness was a false miracle, the mechanism for revealing this fraud causes more doubt than clarity.<sup>18</sup> Like Hakewill's *Vanitie of the Eie*, Shakespeare's *The First Part of the Contention* reveals that the idea of a pat universal visual ability is a false construction.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to exploring theoretical and philosophical aspects of vision and blindness, Gloucester's interrogation of Simpcox also offers a moment to consider early modern ideas about the experience of blindness. As a person claiming to be blind from birth, Simpcox says that he dreamed of regaining his sight but reports having led a rowdy, tree-climbing life. His blindness is not meant to reflect on his personality but rather to have been a disability that he lived with until the miracle. As a fraudulent blind person, Simpcox's choice to be cured of his "blindness" hinges upon a fascination the sighted have with imagining what blindness, or living with a disability more broadly, is like. The overrepetition of the word "blind" and focus on Simpcox's ostensibly congenital blindness reveals this fascination with difference; Gloucester's questions, then, reflect early modern questions about the way that blind people might experience the world. In this way, though Simpcox is not blind, the staged representation of his blindness, and the exploration of the nature of blindness through the device of uncovering the false miracle, reveals an interest in examining what blindness is all about. Unexpectedly, in trying to understand Simpcox's blindness, Gloucester reveals how sightedness is subjective and unstable; if all eyes are false informants, then all sight is as subject to doubt as Simpcox's. Finally, through staging a public performance of scientific inquiry into Simpcox's blindness, the play encourages audiences or readers to stare at the blind and, in so doing, to use the spectacle of visual impairment as a means through which to evaluate the limits of disability together with the possibility of adaptive strategies and possibilities.<sup>20</sup> Even though Simpcox is revealed to be sighted, and even though we learn that he was never technically blind, we also get to watch him embody the position of disabled individual and, from that space, challenge and undermine a king, an advisor, and an entire system of scientific evaluation for visual function. In the end, our pleasure in staring at Simpcox is predicated on the idea that the truest workings of his sight are ultimately unknowable.

IF THE Simpcox interlude allows the audience to observe an actor performing blindness, and to think through what the experience of blindness might be, those issues are explored in a more material and sustained manner in the anonymous sixteenth-century Old Testament play *The Historie of Jacob and Esau*.<sup>21</sup> Though the play generally follows the parameters of the biblical

story of Jacob and Esau, the anonymous author devotes great detail to the strategies that blind Isaac uses to maneuver in the world; the author even invents a boy character, Mido, who serves as a guide and narrator of events for Isaac. Perhaps because the story hinges on Isaac's blindness, and his subsequent inability to differentiate between his sons, the author takes pains to show how Isaac uses and refuses assistance. In this way, the play ultimately becomes as much about the limits or possibilities of perception for a blind person—or about the failure of Isaac's adaptive systems—as it is about Rebecca and Jacob's deceit.

In adapting the story of Jacob and Esau, the play's author creates an original character called "Mido, the ladde that leadeth blind Isaac." When we first see Isaac on stage, he is calling for Mido to lead him. The dialogue shows us how Isaac uses Mido as a guide who helps him navigate in the world; in their first appearance, Mido instructs Isaac to "lay your hande on my shoulder, and come on this way" (284). In staging a blind character, the author finds it necessary to represent his adaptive or assistive navigation system as well.<sup>22</sup> In fact, the idea of leading or guiding the blind, an idea not rooted in the biblical source, becomes a central concern of the play. This addition is refreshingly direct and based in material realities. While Isaac's blindness certainly represents anxieties about life with a disability—after all, his blindness causes him to make a tremendous and weighty error—the play also focuses on what his disability means in a more pragmatic way. The primary focus on the mechanics of adaptation, rather than or in addition to the emotional and metaphoric trappings of Isaac's blindness, offers a frank analysis of disability that resists becoming purely didactic or representational.

When Mido considers the possibility that he may become blind when he is old, he asks, "How shall I grope the way, or who shall leade me then?" (329); he is worried not about making life-changing decisions like Isaac's but about getting around. The play certainly exploits the metaphorical potential of Isaac's need for leadership: when Rebecca takes over the job of leading Isaac, she says, "it is my office as long as I am by. / And I would all wives, as the worlde this day is, / Woulde unto their husbands likewise do their office" (467–69). Here the distinction between metaphor and representation is especially clear since Rebecca will metaphorically lead Isaac toward giving Esau the birthright, even as she literally fulfills her job as a physical guide. And when Isaac is about to be fooled by Jacob, Mido observes that "Jacob leadeth Isaac" (1307).

But even as *Jacob and Esau* plays with the metaphor of leading blind Isaac, it also presents, again and again, the blind man navigating the stage with the help of his boy guide. The play thus differentiates between Isaac's



ability to be misled and the fact of his blindness. We observe that Isaac can adapt to being blind with the right kind of assistance; he has a much harder time dealing with metaphoric blindness. In fact, including adaptive technology in the world of the play is one way that the author plays up the disjuncture between blindness as a disability and a metaphor.<sup>23</sup>

When Mido is Isaac's guide, he provides more than just navigational aid. He frequently narrates or describes situations for his blind master. So, for instance, he helps Isaac spy on Rebecca by reporting to Isaac, "Yonder she is speaking; whatever she doth say: / By holding up his hands, it seemeth she doth pray" (394–95). Though this observation obviously promotes the plot development, it also provides a glimpse at the assistive purpose of a real guide to the blind; Mido provides not only basic facts (where Rebecca is) but also visual detail that carries implications for Isaac's understanding of the situation.<sup>24</sup> At one point, Isaac tells Mido that he can do nothing without Mido's help. But rather than making Isaac seem helpless, the author's inclusion of a devoted and trained guide for Isaac actually demonstrates the efficacy of assistance for a person who is blind. In fact, Isaac starts being blind only in the metaphoric way—not understanding what he's doing or who he's blessing—after he sends Mido out of the room. In the end, it is Mido who reveals Rebecca and Jacob's plot to Isaac, and who helps him navigate as he attempts to repair the situation. By adding Mido's character to the play, the author hints at a pragmatic alternative to the biblical story of paternal deception: an option in which Isaac, though blind, has the resources and assistance to avoid deception. Indeed, though Mido is presented as silly and boyish when he is "off duty" in the play, he also performs his work for Isaac with apparent honesty and transparency. Even as the audience understands that Mido might at any point accidentally or intentionally mislead Isaac, the play presents the possibility that access to good, responsible, adaptive assistance can work. In fact, when the technology of Mido-as-guide is working, the focus is redirected away from the boy and toward Isaac and his actions and decisions.

In *Jacob and Esau*, Isaac deals with the kind of total blindness that Simpcox was feigning in *2 Henry VI*. His blindness is depicted as very real and, in many ways, limiting. Isaac explains, for example, that "Saving that what so ever God doth is all right, / No small grieffe it were for a man to lacke his sight" (301–2). Part of the spectacle of this play would have been the uncomfortable pleasures of watching the blind man negotiate the stage and story of the play. Mido himself draws attention to the impulse to stare at difference, and to the distinct specificity of blindness as an embodied disability. As Rosemarie Garland-Thomson explains it, "When we do see the usually concealed sight of disability writ boldly on others, we stare in disbelief and

uneasy identification.”<sup>25</sup> In *Jacob and Esau*, the audience is already uneasily identified with Isaac, watching helplessly and with dramatic (and biblical) irony as he heads unknowingly toward giving the mistaken birthright to Esau from the start of the play. And yet, the author also uses the character of Mido to showcase the kind of uneasy identification with disability that Garland-Thomson suggests. At several points in the play, Mido imitates Isaac’s movement and reports, “I have done so ere now both by day and by night / As I see you grope the way, and have hitte it right” (332–33). Interestingly, Rebecca chides Mido for these impressions, accusing him of “couterfaiting” (337) his blind master, an accusation that predicts the kind of false miracle scene depicted by Shakespeare in *2 Henry VI*.<sup>26</sup>

At the same time as the play encourages its audience to stare at Isaac’s non-normative negotiations (reemphasizing the non-normative ways that Isaac moves and gropes), and even as it showcases his major blindness-based error (blessing the wrong son), it also stages blindness as a disability that can be managed and, with adaptation, successfully negotiated. Further, it maintains the audience’s uneasy identification with Isaac and his blindness; at one point, Isaac tells Mido: “For who so to old age whill here live and endure, / Must of force abide all such defautes of nature” (326–27). In his scientific treatise, Hakewill marvels at the vulnerability of the eye, which he claims is “subject to far more diseases from within, and casualties from without, than any other member,” in part because of the complexity of its “diverse pieces,” each of which can be diseased; plus “to these internal diseases we joine those externall accidents, offensive to it, winde, dust, bruses sometime to the dimunation, and sometime to the deprivation, and not seldome to the total losse and perishing of the sight.”<sup>27</sup> Hakewill’s description supports Isaac’s claim that anyone who could live long enough would likely outlive his sensitive eyes. Like Gloucester’s examination of Simpcox’s visual experiences, Isaac’s candid assessment of visual vulnerability exposes the blurry boundaries of visual disability; not only are eyes false informants that show us sights our minds recognize as misleading, but eyes are also always already in the process of failing, either gradually or entirely. Rather than functioning as the norm, sightedness is exposed in *Jacob and Esau* to be inconsistent and transitory, while blindness and visual impairment become the general expectation.

Writing about blindness in the medieval period, Edward Wheatley confirms that “varying degrees of visual impairments must have been so widespread as to be unremarkable, especially before the Italian invention of eyeglasses for the nearsighted in the 1280s and for farsightedness in about 1450.”<sup>28</sup> At the same time, this idea resonates with the disability studies model in which the term “able-bodied” is replaced by “temporarily able-

bodied,” acknowledging that even with medical advances, we are still all likely to experience disability as we age.<sup>29</sup> In both early modern and contemporary contexts, then, the experience of watching Isaac negotiate his disability is perhaps instructive as well as voyeuristic. For the audience who stares at Isaac’s negotiations of the stage (as represented, perhaps, through Mido’s mimicry of Isaac’s way of walking), the experience of uneasy identification with a blind man is rendered even more powerful by the gradual realization that his disability is neither unique nor avoidable. Instead, the audience acclimates to Isaac’s blindness and learns that sightedness is unstable and incomplete.

SOME OF THE most explicit sources for an investigation into the material realities of early modern blindness and the public reception of assistive technologies are evident in cheap-print texts such as ballads, which, because of their short form, huge proliferation, and broad popular circulation, often capture thematic elements, such as ideas about disability, that are less transparently addressed by more formal print and performance cultures.<sup>30</sup> I now turn, therefore, to two seventeenth-century ballads from the Pepys collection, each with an unexpected take on blindness.<sup>31</sup> In these ballads, even more than in *Jacob and Esau*, blindness is taken as a medical or physical reality that informs, but does not necessarily define, the characters that are blind. Further, the woodcut images that accompany the texts fill in missing information about adaptive tools for the blind while simultaneously providing the reader with an uninterrupted look—an opportunity to stare—at a blind person in action. These ballads, then, while certainly not accurate reports on actual, lived experiences of blind individuals, can perhaps take us one step further from metaphorical blindness toward a consideration of how real people might have negotiated loss of sight. The ballads would have been read and heard by able-bodied and disabled audiences alike: for blind audience members, these blind characters provide models of adaptive living and potential messages of solidarity and unity; for sighted audience members, blindness ballads enable an empathetic and experiential connection with blindness.

The woodcut for “The rarest Ballad that ever was seen, / Of the blind beggar’s Daughter of Bednal-Green” offers an image of a blind man navigating with perhaps the most complete suite of adaptive technologies that I’ve found thus far.<sup>32</sup> More autonomous than Isaac could be when he relied on Mido, here the blind beggar’s tools include a bell, a dog, and a long cane.<sup>33</sup> The woodcut suggests, even before we read the ballad, that this blind beggar

has many resources at his disposal. For this reason, though the ballad initially highlights the man's deficits, the visual evidence of his autonomy and adaptation undercuts this message and instead demands that the beggar be recognized and admired for his obvious capacity and agency. The woodcut emphasizes the beggar's blindness but also emphasizes his mobility and centrality in his own story, thus resisting the idea that his agency is dependent upon sight.

Over the course of the ballad, the beggar's young and beautiful daughter, Bessee, decides to leave Bednal-Green because none of her suitors will marry "a Beggar his heir." In a new town, she gathers a collection of suitors, all begging to marry her. She then reveals her family origins:

My father quoth she, is plain to be seen,  
The silly blind begger of Bednal-green,  
That daily goes begging for charity, . . .  
He always is led with a dog and a bell. . . .

One by one, each of Bessee's suitors turns her down when they hear who her father is; readers are encouraged to empathize with unmarried Bessee, and, by extension, with her father the blind beggar, whose disability and status make her undesirable. Later, when Bessee meets a knight who is willing to marry her, a merchant suitor challenges the marriage at the beggar's doorstep. In defense of his daughter, the blind beggar speaks up and offers a financial challenge to Bessee's enemy: "Rail not against my child at mine own door, / Though she be not deckt with Welbet and Pearl, / Yet I will drop Angels with thee for my Girl." It is an incredible scene, in which the beggar miraculously and inexplicably produces three times as much gold as the rich man who has insulted his daughter. Though blind, he defends his own, reveals remarkable resources, and even seems able to count coins without impediment: "Then there's (quoth the begger) for pretty Bessee, / With that an Angel he cast on the ground, / And dropped in Angels full three thousand pound."

Here, the beggar provides his daughter's dowry in a showy display of wealth, literally showering her and her suitor in gold coins such that "So as the place whereas he did sit, / With gold was covered every whit." If his patriarchal and masculine powers have been undermined elsewhere in the ballad, here he aggressively competes with the suitor, ultimately humiliating him by outpacing him in the tossing of coins. The scene is a triumphant one for the beggar, and for audience members identifying with him. But it is also the turning point in the ballad where the already hyperbolic tale moves

toward pure fantasy. In terms of the beggar's disability, though the beggar is literally blind, he suffers from none of the metaphorical weaknesses generally attached to blindness. As his woodcut suggests, he is savvy, forward thinking, and totally in control despite (or because of?) his physical disability, adaptive tools, and apparent class status; so much so, in fact, that he causes jealousy and admiration:

The Gentleman all that this treasure had scene,  
 Admired the begger of Bednal-green.  
 And those that were her suitors before,  
 Their flesh for very anger they tore.

Here, the beggar is not even described as blind anymore, and his other characteristics seem more important. For a mixed reading and listening audience that included working-class and disabled individuals, this ballad offers a moment of identification and validation as the beggar impresses and outdoes the very gentlemen who dishonored his family.

Though the ballad reduces references to the beggar's blindness as his power and control increases, the author does not include disability in the list of ways that the beggar is not who he seems: though the beggar seems poor, he is revealed to be rich; though he seems without social capital, he is revealed to be gentry; though he seems to be emasculated, he is revealed to be a powerful patriarch; conversely, the beggar not only seems but is blind, all the way to the end of the ballad. The woodcut image of the beggar navigating with his dog and his bell, then, can equally represent the seemingly disenfranchised beggar of the start of the ballad or the victorious hero of the ballad's conclusion. The signifiers of blindness are as much a mark of accomplishment as weakness, since both beggar and beggar-hero are equally blind. By resisting the potential of curing the beggar's blindness as part of the ballad's pat, fairy-tale ending, the author prevents a neat conclusion that the beggar has somehow "overcome" disability. Instead, his blindness proves to be among his only core identity qualities and, as such, is presented as part of his victory.<sup>34</sup>

The ballad closes with Bessee's wedding to her knight at which her father is first notably absent (she excuses him by saying that he is too "base" to attend), then present as a singer, and, finally, he reveals himself through his song to be a noble who, blinded in battle, has lived for forty years as a beggar. The ballad's conclusion resolves the mystery of the beggar's heaps of gold (and the tension of the beggar's daughter so quickly becoming a lady) by revealing his class background. While this ending may seem like a cheat,

the text resists an entirely conventional conclusion by leaving the noble man as blind as the beggar: the beggar never stops being blind, nor does he seem to regret his blindness. His song ends on a triumphant note: “Full forty long winters thus have I been. / A silly blind Begger of Bednal-green.” To the end, the beggar names his own blindness as part of his identity, and that blindness is meant only as a description of his inability to see. Though blind, the beggar is noble; though blind, he is honorable; though blind, he can see his daughter’s beauty and worth.<sup>35</sup>

Blindness represented with adaptive technologies, as in the case of Isaac with Mido or the beggar-turned-noble with his dog, stick, and bell, is taken to perhaps its furthest extreme in a ballad called “The Scoulding Wife, or, The Poor Man’s Lamentation of his Bad Market in His Chusing Him a Wife,”<sup>36</sup> in which the long cane is used as a weapon. This ballad, which Pepys included in his category on “Marriage,” describes an unhappy domestic scene in which a jealous wife attacks her husband’s former sweetheart after the husband gives the sweetheart an “innocent” kiss. After this brutal fight between women, the ballad takes a dark turn when the husband, tired of his wife’s constant scolding, replaces her medicinal eyedrops with “a liquor . . . ’twas Henben and steep’t in Whay.” When the husband treats his wife with the switched eye drops, “she Curst and Swore, well she might, / For never since that day she got her sight.” Thus, the ballad gives us a backstory for the wife’s blindness, which was caused by her husband’s malicious intent. The ballad likewise claims that, through becoming blind, the wife is transformed from a scold to an obedient spouse. The husband explains:

And I provided a dog and a Bell,  
 To carry her about, from place to place:  
 Then she cries Husband, I hope all is well:  
 But before it was Togue, add Cuckold to thy Face.  
 The blessed be Heaven, and Mercury strong,  
 They made a change in my Wifs Tongue;  
 For it is a medicine, both certain and sure,  
 To bee cured of a Scold, but I’le say no more.

On the surface, the conclusion of this ballad is deeply disturbing, simultaneously misogynistic and ableist in its implications that the wife deserved to be blinded because she was a scold and that her condition of blindness would lead to a submissive personality. In the text of the ballad, as narrated by the seemingly triumphant husband, the wife is given a guide dog and bell and then expected to serve as an example for other scolding wives.<sup>37</sup> The

“I’ll say no more” at the end of the ballad seems a nod to an audience of henpecked husbands who, the narrator hopes, may try the “certain and sure” medicine of blinding their own wives. And yet, the woodcut that accompanies the ballad undermines all of these messages, providing sighted readers of the ballad with a visual anecdote to the text.

In this remarkable image, the cuckolded husband, horned, kneels and cowers before a wife, who is poised to strike him. But, while the image ostensibly shows the wife *before* blindness has cured her of her bad behavior, the weapon she raises against her husband looks suspiciously like one we have come across before: the guidance cane used by early modern blind individuals. If we take the weapon to be this cane, a marker of blindness and an adaptive tool that helps blind people move autonomously through the world, then the woodcut serves as a *postscript* to the ballad: the blind wife’s revenge against her husband. Since the cane’s threat is exclusively visual, it is inaccessible to fully blind ballad audiences; nevertheless, it is a powerful reminder to sighted readers that blindness is neither a successful disciplinary tool nor a sign of weakness. The cane’s double use as adaptive and defensive provides a model (albeit a violent one) for empowerment for a blind woman and also functions as a threat to those who might attack or abuse her.

The early modern period marked a moment where visuality and the ability to see were becoming increasingly important and central to cultural production, in part because of the proliferation and dissemination of images and texts meant to be seen. In his 1616 *Mikrokosmographia*, Helkiah Crooke declared that, amongst all of the senses, “sight is the principall. . . . For those who either by Nature or by Accident are blinde do account themselves therein miserable.”<sup>38</sup> And yet, the texts and images discussed here, through their serious consideration of the ways that a character might use human, animal, and material tools to adapt to being blind in a visual world, begin to reframe early modern disability as less about limitation and more about strategy. Indeed, the more that a text dismantles the correlation between the use of blindness as metaphor and the loss of power for a blind person, the less blindness has to *mean* something else. The more deeply we can find evidence of the experience of blindness itself, moving away from the idea of blindness as a tragic punishment and toward blindness as a biological fact, the more clearly blindness becomes one of many characteristics that contribute to selfhood and identity. The fraudulent blind man who could climb trees, the biblical father who used a guide, the blind beggar-hero of a single ballad, and the revolutionary image of a raised cane are hardly enough to suggest that blindness was ever considered an *asset* in early modern representation. But these representations do serve to complicate the discourse and meanings

of early modern blindness and to suggest that, by reducing the “trappings of metaphor” and attending to disability and the adaptive tools that come with it, we might perceive a fuller picture than mere metaphor can provide.<sup>39</sup> This fuller picture suggests that the experience of staring at disability, on the stage or in a woodcut, may be less about didactic messages and more about the invitation for identification and instruction. In their discussion of the often-fraught relationship between literary analysis (or, more broadly, the humanities) and disability studies, Mitchell and Snyder claim that “while the representational portraits we investigate [through literary analysis and historicism] often prove unsatisfactory, they allow us to viscerally encounter disability in a way that we could not otherwise.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, these representations of physically blind persons in plays and cheap print allow an encounter, however flawed, with early modern attitudes toward, and lived experiences of, blindness.

## Notes

1. For a broad history of Western attitudes toward disability, see Stiker, *History of Disability*. Stuart Clark gives a thorough cultural history of vision in *Vanities of the Eye: Vision in Early Modern European Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), and Moshe Barasch, in *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in Western Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2001), analyzes representations of blindness from antiquity through the eighteenth century. In *Narrative Prosthesis* Mitchell and Snyder use the term “narrative prosthesis” to describe the twofold function of disability in literary narratives: “first, as a stock feature of characterization and, second, as an opportunistic metaphorical device” (47).

2. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 56.

3. Mitchell and Snyder call this sort of representation, and the critical approaches which reveal and theorize it, “Negative Imagery”; *ibid.*, 17–21.

4. *Ibid.*, 8.

5. This description of the work of some disabled performers and theater artists comes from Carrie Sandahl and Philip Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion: Disability and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 4. For more on contemporary disability performance studies, see Telory Davies, *Performing Disability: Staging the Actual* (Germany: VDM Publishing, 2009); Bruce Henderson and Noam Ostrander, eds., *Understanding Disability Studies and Performance Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2010); and Petra Kupperts, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (New York: Routledge, 2003), *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), and *Disability Culture and Community Performance: Find a Strange and Twisted Shape* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Previous to these modern disability performances, staged public performances in madhouses and asylums showcased the mentally ill and disabled; see Jackson, *Separate Theaters*.



6. Sandahl and Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion*, 2.

7. Quotations from *2 Henry VI* are from Greenblatt et al., *Norton Shakespeare*, 203–91. Subsequent references will appear within the text.

8. For a detailed history of the Simpcox story, see Row-Heyveld, “The Lying’st Knave in Christendom.” As Row-Heyveld observes, this story had been in circulation since at least 1529 when Thomas More recorded the incident in his *A Dialogue Concerning Heresies*, claiming to have heard the story from his own father, Sir John More. Simpcox’s story was included in Richard Grafton’s *A Chronicle at Large* (1562), John Foxe’s *Actes and Monuments* (in the 1570, 1576, and 1583 editions), and finally in Shakespeare’s play, probably written in 1591.

9. Wheatley discusses medieval anxieties about feigned blindness in *Stumbling Blocks*, 22. Rosemarie Garland-Thomson situates the start of law focused on disabled fakery to the “inception of the English Poor Laws in 1388” in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 48. See also Susan M. Schweik, “Dissimulations,” *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 108–40.

10. Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 396.

11. Stuart Clark (*Vanities of the Eye*, 2) explains the disruption of an Aristotelian link between seeing and knowing, and the particular crisis in certainty about vision that marked the European Renaissance.

12. Kleege, *Sight Unseen*, 391.

13. Kleege offers the example of Descartes’s 1637 *La Dioptrique*, in which a hypothetical blind man calculates the distance between two objects by using two walking sticks; *ibid.*, 391–92.

14. George Hakewill, *The Vanitie of the Eie* (Oxford: Joseph Barnes, 1608), 49–53.

15. *Ibid.*, 50.

16. See Stuart Clark, *Vanities of the Eye*, esp. 9–38, for a discussion of Hakewill and developments in Renaissance theories of vision.

17. *Ibid.*, 25.

18. For further discussions of the history of “miracle cures” for the blind, see Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, esp. 155–85; and Barasch, *Blindness*, esp. 45–66.

19. Thanks to Allison Hobgood for her suggestion that Simpcox’s interrogation and its resulting doubt of visual efficacy breaks down the seeming difference between able and disabled bodies such that, in a radical shift, “disability becomes the norm.”

20. The term “stare,” an “interpersonal action through which we act out who we imagine ourselves and others to be,” is Garland-Thomson’s in *Staring*, 14.

21. The 1586 title page gives the full title of the play as *A neue mery and wittie Comedie or Enterlude, newly imprinted, treating upon the Historie of Iacob and Esau, taken out of the xxvi Chap. Of the first booke of Moses entituled Genesis*. For a discussion of the play’s fraught publication history, see Paul Whitfield White, ed., *Reformation Biblical Drama in England: An Old Spelling Edition* (New York: Garland, 1992), xxxiv–xlv. References to the play within the text are cited by line and refer to White’s edition, 67–133.

22. For a historical examination of visual representations of guides for the blind, see Barasch, *Blindness*, 103–14. David Houston Wood rightly points out the connection between Isaac led by Mido in *Jacob and Esau* and Samson led by a “guiding hand”

(line 1) in Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671); see *Time, Narrative, and Emotion in Early Modern England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009), 139–70.

23. Discussing Jaehn Clare's modern performances of disability, which incorporate her wheelchair, for example, Johnson Cheu argues that "such actions help viewers to see the permanence of the disabled body, while asking viewers to redefine able-bodied notions of what it means to be disabled. The viewer begins to understand disability as both a corporeal entity (impairment) and as a social construction." "Performing Disability, Problematizing Cure," in Sandahl and Auslander, *Bodies in Commotion*, 135–46.

24. For a brief discussion of the problems of adequate and respectful service providers for the blind, see Harlan Lane, "Construction of Deafness," *The Disability Studies Reader*. 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 82–83.

25. Garland-Thomson, *Staring*, 20.

26. Barasch (*Blindness*, 105–6) argues that while the guide has been a familiar element in depictions of the blind since antiquity, the motif of the guide shifts in the early middle ages.

27. Hakewill, *Vanitie of the Eie*, 92–94.

28. Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks*, 8.

29. For a discussion of the notion that we are all Temporarily Able Bodied (TAB), see Carol A. Breckenridge and Candace Volger, "The Critical Limits of Embodiment: Disability's Criticism," *Public Culture* 13, no. 3 (2001): 349–58.

30. Tessa Watt, *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), estimates that ballads at this time were similar to the modern newspaper, printed in the millions, 11. See also Natascha Würzbach, *The Rise of the English Street Ballad, 1550–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); Diane Dugaw, *Warrior Women and Popular Balladry, 1650–1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Joy Wiltenburg, *Disorderly Women and Female Power in the Street Literature of Early Modern England and Germany* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1992); and Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007).

31. The entire Pepys collection is available through the English Broadside Ballad Archive at the University of California, Santa Barbara, at [http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad\\_project/](http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad_project/).

32. Pepys 1.490–91, [http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad\\_project/ballad\\_image.asp?id=20231](http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad_project/ballad_image.asp?id=20231). Hereafter, all in-text quotations come from this source or, subsequently, "The Scoulding Wife, or, The Poor Man's Lamentation of his Bad Market in His Chusing Him a Wife," Pepys 4.136.

33. Little is known about the historical trajectory of each of these adaptive technologies. The bell was the most common sign of blindness in the early modern period, used to alert sighted individuals to clear the way for the blind and as an accessory to begging. Generally, seeing-eye guide dogs became popular following World War I, while the white cane came into popular use in the 1970s. Still, images of guide dogs and adaptive canes go back as far as the classical period and can be found in many medieval and early modern visual and literary texts. For other markers of blindness in visual representation, see Barasch, *Blindness*, especially the sections on veils and blindfolds (82–92), guides (99–101; 103–14), and stumbling or groping (101–3).

34. The beggar's victory here is impressive and joyful, but it also participates in what Eli Clare terms "supercrip stories," which focus on disabled people "overcoming" disabilities; see *Exile and Pride: Disability, Queerness, and Liberation* (Cambridge: South-End, 1999).

35. The blind beggar ballad ultimately resists the rehabilitative resolution outlined in Mitchell and Snyder's *Narrative Prosthesis*, esp. 53–54, by retaining the beggar's disability despite his restored reputation.

36. Pepys 4.136, [http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad\\_project/ballad\\_image.asp?id=21800](http://emc.english.ucsb.edu/ballad_project/ballad_image.asp?id=21800).

37. For more on domestic dispute and spousal violence in early modern literature, including ballads, see Frances Dolan, *Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), esp. 67–96.

38. Helkiah Crooke, *Mikrokosmographia*, 2nd ed. (London: W. Iaggard, 1618), 535.

39. I borrow the phrase "the trappings of metaphor" from Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and AIDS and Its Metaphors* (New York: Picador, 1989). Sontag suggests we can remove these trappings by reconnecting metaphors of blindness to the actual bodily disabilities from which they stem.

40. Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 45.