Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind

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Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability. 

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While researching my book *Mastering Aesop: Medieval Education, Chaucer, and His Followers*, I became interested in pedagogical texts that present animals or humans with disabilities as immoral, with the “incompleteness” of their bodies often representing that of their souls. In fable literature and beyond, this connection appears in the most common anti-Semitic trope in medieval Christianity, the “blindness” of the Jews, which remained pervasive because it was reinforced by other cultural constructions of blindness. This trope led me to a broader exploration of the history of this disability.

Substantial differences in attitudes toward blindness separate France and England, related partly to the Norman use of blinding as punishment both in Normandy and in England after the Conquest. Concomitantly (and probably not coincidentally) the Normans began establishing hospices specifically for the blind, and among the founders was supposedly William the Conqueror, who often blinded his enemies. Institutions for the blind were opened in France later in the Middle Ages, the best known of which was founded by Louis IX. These practices and institutions in France resulted in attitudes that commodified human sight and resulted in inhumane satire against the blind in French secular literature. On the other hand, the English generally did not use blinding as punishment, and there were no institutions devoted exclusively to the care of the blind in England during the Middle Ages. These differences precluded the commodification of sight, leaving blindness within the realm of divine will rather than human negotiation. The less prominent position of blind people in society resulted in noticeably fewer cruel representations in English literature.

Although disability studies provides a useful vocabulary for discussing my topic, I have had to adapt it to premodern history. My first chapter, “Crippling the Middle Ages, Medievalizing Disability Theory,” proposes that in medieval studies such theories must negotiate between Bakhtin’s perva-
sive theory of the grotesque and the modern “social versus medical” models of disability. The social model was common in precapitalist Europe: people with disabilities remained integrated in local social structures, often among their own families. However, the modern medical model, whereby science and the medical profession dominate discourse about disability in order to keep it within their domain, generally does not apply to the Middle Ages. Instead, citing the Bible, patristic writing, and historical documents, I posit a “religious” model of disability that preceded the emerging medical model. The church exercised a good deal of control over the meaning of disability, partly because the care of the disabled (notably in religious foundations such as hospices) could be lucrative for the church, and also because almsgiving to disabled beggars showed Christian compassion as part of the economy of charity and salvation. Paramount among disabilities in Christian discourse was blindness, since Jesus himself miraculously cured the blind.

These theories of disability inform my historical survey of blindness. Chapter 2, “Leading the Blind: France versus England” examines both the practice of blinding as punishment in medieval England and France, and Louis IX’s foundation in 1265 of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts in Paris (an earlier version of the section of the chapter devoted to the Quinze-Vingts appeared under the title “Blindness, Discipline, and Reward: Louis IX and the Foundation of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts” in Disability Studies Quarterly [Fall 2002]: 194–212). While the hospice exemplified some problematic aspects of institutionalized care, it offered its residents relative freedom in comparison to many institutions, both medieval and modern. Residents could have their families living with them, vote on some matters of governance, and hold jobs outside the hospice. Most importantly, this institution was the first of its kind not to be under church control (and the hospice’s richly documented medieval history is full of conflicts with the bishops and clergy of Paris). In France, this hospice and later ones modeled on it effected a significant rupture in the social construction of blindness: the presence of royally protected blind people in Paris improved the lives of residents but also created a higher public profile for them, leading to envy and contempt. No such institutions existed in England: evidence shows that people with all kinds of disabilities except leprosy shared English hospices.

Nevertheless, England and France shared certain prejudices against blind beggars who did not have the protection of a king, a community, or a family. I explore their treatment in chapter 3, an earlier version of which appeared in Exemplaria (October 2002: 351–82) under the title “‘Blind’ Jews
and Blind Christians: The Metaphorics of Marginalization.” It builds on the historical material in the previous chapter with evidence of how Jews, metaphorically “blind” in the common Pauline trope, and blind people were controlled in medieval Europe. The chapter examines stereotypes shared by these two groups, such as greed, laziness, and sexual excess, especially in Continental sources; it also examines the laws that limited the economic activities and mobility of the Jews and the blind and that created complex social structures whereby they became dependent on those in power. The chapter concludes with a focus on drama in Latin, French, and English that calls for the performance of Judaism and blindness. The “performance” of blindness by sighted actors reinforced social anxieties about nondisabled people feigning disability to avoid work.

Chapter 4, “Humoring the Sighted: The Comic Embodiment of Blindness,” is devoted to the substantial corpus of literature, nearly all of which is Continental, in which blind characters are called upon to demonstrate their impairment in humiliating ways. The representations of the blind here intersect with several of the conventions and stereotypes discussed in earlier chapters, including avarice, sexual excess, and general grotesquerie.

The literary stereotype of blind people as sexually excessive or perverse leads into chapter 5, “Blinding, Blindness, and Sexual Transgression.” Often the gods or other supernatural figures blind characters for sexual sin, but significantly, this type of punishment is largely absent from French literature. This motif informs such works as Chaucer’s “Merchant’s Tale” and “Man of Law’s Tale,” Thomas Chester’s “Sir Launfal,” Robert Henryson’s Testament of Cresseid, and others.

Chapter 6, “Instructive Interventions: Miraculous Chastisement and Cure,” elucidates the religious model of disability in miraculous blindings and cures of the blind in hagiographic literature. The French predilection for blinding as punishment makes itself felt in French hagiographies, which feature blindling much more frequently than English ones; furthermore, after the Norman Conquest of England, blinding frequently made its way into hagiographic literature about English saints that was rewritten under the auspices of the newly installed Norman clergy. The chapter continues my reading of the two Chaucerian texts introduced in the previous chapter, “The Merchant’s Tale” and “The Man of Law’s Tale,” analyzing the dynamics of each tale’s miraculous cure of blindness.

The final chapter examines the intersection between medical treatments of blindness and blind historical figures, with special attention to the only cure that medieval medicine could effect with some success, cataract re-
moval. As well as reading accounts of Jean l’Aveugle, the blind king of Bohemia who underwent unsuccessful cataract surgery and was later killed at the battle of Crécy, I discuss the poetry of two blind medieval clerics, the Picard Gilles le Muisit and the English John Audelay. Gilles was blinded by cataracts in 1345 and had them removed six years later. His poems provide a summary of not only self-loathing attitudes about the disability but also the appropriate religious responses to his cure. Audelay, who apparently saw his blindness as punishment for a very public sin that he had committed, mentions no possibility for medical intervention and strives to come to terms with his disability.

I began this book at Hamilton College, to whose Dean and Board of Trustees I am grateful for research support between 1999 and 2005. The seed money for the project came in the form of an Emerson Grant for Student-Faculty Collaboration, which allowed me to spend three months studying disability theory with a remarkable student, Jill Allen, whose experience of disability made our reading much more immediate and compelling. Jill was instrumental in founding Hamilton’s Disability Action Group, for which I served as faculty adviser, and they also contributed significantly to my education. A reading group of my colleagues at Hamilton patiently and perspicaciously read early versions of two of the chapters here, for which I thank Chris Georges, Kevin Grant, Martine Guyot-Bender, Onno Oerlemans, Kyoko Omori, Lisa Trivedi, Bonnie Urciuoli, Thomas A. Wilson, and Steve Yao. I’m also grateful to Bonnie Krueger for her interest in my work and her companionship as a medievalist.

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