Leading the Blind: France versus England

While blind people across Europe shared certain experiences because of their disability, there were also substantial differences in its construction from country to country. Such differences separated France and England in spite of their intertwined history in the Middle Ages. This divergence is apparent in the lexicon for visual impairment in each country’s language.

Through the early Middle Ages, the most common French words denoting blindness, the noun cécité and the adjective cecus, which was often used substantively to represent a blind person, were derived from the Latin caecitas and caecus. The twelfth-century Vie de Saint Alexis contains the earliest extant written appearance of the adjective aveugle, derived from the Latin ab oculis, “deprived of or without eyes.” I believe that this etymology is deeply significant because of the use of blinding as punishment in that century, which will be discussed later. In their etymological dictionary Bloch and von Wartburg speculate that aveugle must have reached popular French through medical Latin (“D’une locution ab oculis, propr. “privé d’yeux,” qui a dû être créée dans le latin médical et pénétrer dans la langue commune”). This hypothesis seems unlikely: even the least perceptive, least analytical medical observers of blindness would have distinguished between non- or malfunctioning eyes and the complete absence thereof. Indeed, as shown in chapter 7, medical discourse about blindness described blind eyes in detail in the hope of understanding the causes of the impairment. Given the synchronism of the appearance of the word aveugle and the use of blinding as punishment in the eleventh century, it seems more plausible that the word would have entered the language through legal rather than medical Latin, where it would have very precisely described the condi-
tion of those who underwent this terrible mutilation. Furthermore, it is significant that the earliest appearances of the word are in a poem written within sixty years of the Norman Conquest. The oldest extant copy of the Vie de Saint Alexis is generally agreed to be in the Saint Albans Psalter, probably commissioned by Christina of Markyate and completed around 1123 (though the poem may have circulated earlier). Given the surviving records of the Norman use of blinding as punishment soon after the Conquest, the word may have gained some currency around this time.

The entrance of aveugle into French as an adjective resulted in a confusing variety of nominal forms for the impairment as it came into common usage: Godefroy lists aveuglerie, aveuglesse, aveugleté, aveugleur, aveuglissement, and aveugloison as nouns that were used in the Middle Ages, though aveuglement, the most common form, became the accepted term for blindness. However, the word aveuglement in both its medieval and modern forms is interestingly ambiguous, since it can mean both “blindness” and “the act of blinding,” and thus for medieval speakers the word could have suggested the possibility of juridical violence even when it was used to describe a purely natural condition. And given the use of this punishment, the verbs aveuglir and aveuglier also entered the language at the time of the Vie de Saint Alexis.

Furthermore, a synonymous but less popular verb for “to blind,” essorber or assorber, appears in Anglo-Norman in roughly 1121, very nearly the date of the composition of La Vie de Saint Alexis. According to Godefroy, its earliest extant use is in La Vie de Saint Thomas le Martyr by Guernes de Pont-Sainte-Maxence, where Saint Thomas à Becket is arguing with King Henry II about appropriate punishments for lawbreaking clerics. Thomas, who favors the use of canon law rather than the king’s law in such instances, says that first the miscreant clerics should be defrocked, and then if they break the law again, they can be blinded, flayed, or hanged, according to the king’s will: “E se puis resunt pris, dunc seient essorbé / Escorchié u pendu, a vostre volonte.” So not only was blinding culturally significant enough to merit more than one term for the practice, but also it was so unquestioningly accepted that it could be recommended by a saint.

By contrast, the Middle English lexicon relating to visual impairment is impoverished if less ambiguous. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the first written witnesses of the noun blindness and the adjective blind, both Teutonic in origin, date from about 1000. The Middle English Dictionary cites the earliest uses of both blind and blindness in the Homilies in Bodleian MS 343, ca. 1175. The earliest extant witness of the verb
blinden in the Ancrene Wisse, ca. 1250, deploys it in a figurative, spiritual sense. In light of the relative scarcity of blinding as punishment in England, it is telling that the first surviving use of the verb to represent literal, physical blinding around 1325, is in the long religious poem Cursor Mundi in the story of Samson; this is more than two centuries after the verb first appeared in Old French. Otherwise, unlike French with its Latinate cécité and somewhat more vernacular aveuglement, Middle English has no precise synonym for the noun blindness. (While the rather awkward modern English double compound sightlessness is roughly synonymous, it did not enter the language until 1847 and has different connotations.)

As these differing linguistic constructions imply, cultural practices and institutions constructed blindness differently on the two sides of the Channel, and two of the most important of these are the use of blinding as punishment and the foundation of hospices specifically for blind residents.

BLINDING AS PUNISHMENT

Blinding as a punishment in Western Europe was first documented in Rome in 303 when the emperor Diocletian began using it to punish Christians; Constantine the Great called a halt to the practice. In Constantinople the punishment was first recorded in 705. It was generally enacted upon “those found guilty of high treason, those practicing oracular arts, captives, . . . whoever belonged to the vanquished side in religious controversies . . . [and] conspirators, insurgents, and above all, leaders of revolts against Byzantine emperors, or further those suspected of such a crime.” The punishment was carried out by destroying the eyes, often with fire, or by pulling them out. Likewise, in early medieval western Europe, the penalty of blinding was generally meted out by rulers. Geneviève Bührer-Thierry has shown that any such ruler “acted within a clearly determined framework: if not a law code, at least a system of references and ideas that recognized his monopoly on this particular form of violence.”

Blinding as punishment was evidently very rare in Anglo-Saxon England, and extant records indicate that it was used by kings against powerful political enemies. For example, in his chronicle Simeon of Durham states that in 798 Cenwulf, king of the Mercians, invaded Kent, captured the Kentish king Eadberht, and ordered that his eyes be put out and his hands cut off. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle states that in 993, King Æthelred the Unready “had Ælfgar, son of Ealdorman Ælfric, blinded,” and in 1006 he ordered the same punishment for Wulfheah and Ufegeat. Before 1066,
only under the early eleventh-century king Cnut is blinding mentioned as punishment in Anglo-Saxon law. There it is listed as one of many possible mutilations for a criminal’s second conviction via the so-called three-fold ordeal; blinding was reserved for criminals who had committed multiple crimes, and it was to be used only after the criminal’s “hands, feet, or both, in proportion to the deed, are . . . cut off.” And after these mutilations, blinding was only one of several options for punishment that included cutting off the criminal’s nose, ears, and upper lip. The goal of these punishments was to avoid killing the criminal, thus “preserv[ing] the soul.” For the purposes of my argument it is significant that this law was enacted not under a native English king, but under a foreigner: Cnut was Danish. I have seen no documentation suggesting that this punishment was ever actually enacted.

The death of Cnut in 1035 and the subsequent struggle for power resulted in a famous instance of blinding recorded in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. Alfred, the son of King Æthelred and Emma, who later married Cnut, wanted to visit his mother at Winchester. Allies of Cnut’s sons, notably Earl Godwine, intervened, variously slaying, selling, and blinding Alfred’s men, and then blinding Alfred himself and delivering him to the monks of Ely. He remained there for the rest of his life, and the precision with which the chronicler locates Alfred’s burial place within the cathedral (the south aisle of the west transept, near the steeple) all but recommends it as a worthy pilgrimage site.

While it is difficult to extrapolate from such a small number of instances of blinding as punishment, there is some consistency among them. Those who were blinded were all nobles or men closely associated with nobles who were the political enemies of the rulers who ordered the blinding. Three of the blindings take place under King Æthelred the Unready, whom the Chronicle generally represents as a weak, unwise ruler. The chronicler also mourns the blinding of Alfred and his men as one of the most terrible events ever to take place on English soil. If we were to generalize from these scant historical records, we might say that blinding as punishment was kept close to the court, where it was a fairly direct representation of what Bührer-Thierry calls the ruler’s “monopoly on this particular form of violence.” Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe rightly asserts that the mutilated bodies of these people “became texts of their behaviour and its lawful consequences” (when the king controls the law), and this observation is particularly applicable to mutilated men whose tongues are left intact and who can speak of the royal power enacted on them.
Regardless of how the evidence of blinding in Anglo-Saxon England is understood, the real significance of these incidents lies in their paucity. Even if we take into account the fact that only a small fraction of Anglo-Saxon writings have survived, and if we assume that records relating to the aristocracy and royalty will be more plentiful than those relating to other classes, chronicle literature about England before the Norman Conquest contains surprisingly few mentions of blinding. Pollock and Maitland, in their authoritative History of English Law Before the Time of Edward I, listed a number of forms of mutilation used as punishment in pre-Conquest England (“loss of ears, nose, upper lip, hands, feet,” as well as castration), but blinding is significantly absent from their list.

Blinding as punishment is recorded far more frequently in England after 1066 and during the period of Norman control of England. As the Normans exercised their power over the newly acquired territory, William the Conqueror and his successors blinded their enemies repeatedly. In 1068, the citizens of Exeter mounted an unsuccessful campaign of resistance against William when he visited the city, and to reassert his power, he blinded one of the rebels in a public display. In 1075 William punished the Breton allies of the half-Breton Ralph Guader, Earl of Norfolk, who led an attempt to overthrow him; in The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle this mass punishment earned a mnemonic verse at the end of the entry for the year: “Some of them were blinded, /And some banished from the land /And some were put to shame. Thus were the traitors to the king brought low.” Pollock and Maitland quote a statute of William the Conqueror that states, “Interdicto etiam ne quis occidatur aut suspendatur pro aliqua culpa, sed eruantur oculi, et testiculi abscondantur” (It is forbidden that anyone be killed or hanged for any crime, but his eyes may be pulled out and his testicles cut off). According to The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, William made poaching a crime punishable by blinding.

He made great protection for the game
And imposed laws for the same
That those who slew hart or hind
Should be made blind.

Before the end of the eleventh century, other Norman leaders began to use blinding as punishment to solidify their power. For example, in 1087, citizens of Canterbury joined the monks of St. Augustine’s Abbey in opposing the installation of a Norman abbot; these members of the laity were blinded by order of the Archbishop Lanfranc.
In *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry*, David Bernstein argues that blinding as punishment was well enough known among the Normans that it could be used symbolically in art, specifically in the most famous representation of the Norman Conquest. He points out that the earliest datable chronicles (*The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, and those by William of Jumièges and William of Poitiers) do not mention how King Harold died at the Battle of Hastings, though the tapestry’s representation of Harold shot in the eye with an arrow has come to be accepted as “truth.” According to Bernstein, the blinding of Harold should be read as a result of his having been crowned king after Edward the Confessor’s death, thus breaking an oath to help William the Conqueror to the English throne. But as Bernstein also indicates, Harold’s death is not caused by the hand of God (which could have been depicted in the tapestry); the killing was at the hand of man. In describing the meaning of blinding in the centuries around the Conquest and constructing a symbolic reading of the blinding of Harold, Bernstein cites texts and visual representations that deploy blinding as punishment; they lead him to the conclusion that “from the perspective of the native English and those who identified with their experiences since 1066, blinding was almost synonymous with Norman law enforcement.”

Blinding as punishment continued in England under the Norman rulers of the late eleventh and twelfth centuries. William the Conqueror’s son, William II, ordered the blinding and castration of William of Eu in 1095 after his public conviction of treason. In 1124 the Norman Henry I blinded three noblemen in spite of the protests of Charles, marquis of Flanders, who accused the king of “doing something contrary to our custom in punishing by mutilation knights captured in war in the service of their lord.” Henry responded by saying that their misplaced loyalty constituted treason, and “therefore they deserve[d] punishment by death or mutilation.” One of the captured men, Luke de la Barre, who had been accused of spreading scurrilous songs and jests about the king, “chose rather to die wretchedly than to live without light”; when the king’s officers were trying to pinion him, he dashed his head against a wall and died. Suger of St. Denis wrote that Henry had such a strong fear of being murdered that he employed a large group of guards, but when one of them was discovered to be plotting against the king, he “mercifully” (“misericorditer”) ordered the guard blinded and emasculated.

The Normans also took the practice of blinding as punishment with them while exercising colonial rule elsewhere. In Sicily in the mid-twelfth
century William I gained a reputation for ruthless tyranny that was chronicled by his detractor Hugo Falcandus in *Historia de rebus gestis in Siciliae rego*. In 1156 or 1157, a group of nobles that had turned against William sought refuge with a certain Matthew Bonellus. After a great deal of negotiation, the king and Bonellus agreed to allow the nobles to seek exile in royally sponsored ships, and the king also said he would “take Matthew . . . back into his friendship.” However, a noble counselor persuaded the king that Bonellus was likely to become a traitor, so he was arrested as he approached the palace. According to Hugo, “Matthew Bonellus’s eyes were gouged out and he was hamstrung. He was utterly removed from the sight of the sun and thrust into a frightful dungeon, wrapped forever in the darkness both of his own sightlessness and that of the place. His cousin Matthew of Santa Lucia and his seneschal John the Roman were blinded and assigned to separate dungeons.”

When the German emperor Henry VI conquered Sicily in 1197, he ordered that his rival for the throne, William III, be blinded and castrated, a punishment that is recorded in both an English and an Italian source. Van Eickels asserts that the event’s absence from German chronicles was due to German disbelief that their emperor was capable of “so strange a punishment,” but perhaps he knew of its recent application on Sicilian soil by the Norman colonizers. The Normans may also have introduced the double punishment of blinding and castration to Ireland, where records of the practice appear from 1194.

Blinding as punishment also appears in Anglo-Norman literature in the *Fables* of Marie de France, probably written in England roughly a century after the Conquest. In Fable 23, “The Bat,” Marie writes of that animal’s indecision about which troop to join in the upcoming battle between the birds and the quadrupeds. Initially he decides to side with the animals because they appear to be more numerous, but he changes his mind when he sees the assembled birds. He then attempts to join them, but the animals see his feet and cry out to the Creator, who curses him by taking away his eyesight (“Tut clarte li ad tolue”) and depriving him of his feathers. Marie then uses the moral of the fable to discuss the nature and proper treatment of traitors.

Autresi est del traitur
Que meseire ves sun seignur,
A ki il deit honur porter
E lëauté e fei garder. . . .
Cum fu dunc la chalve suriz
Que ne deit mes par jur voler,
Ne il ne deit en curt parler.

[That traitor’s case is similar
Who wrongly acts toward his seignior.
He should give honour to his lord
And should be loyal, keep his word. . .
Our story of the bat’s the same:
He cannot every fly by day
And can’t at court have any say. (90–91, ll. 49–52, 64–66)]

Marie stops short of fully exploiting the plot allegorically by stating that the prerogative of blinding a traitor belongs to the betrayed lord, opting for a more general reading about disempowerment instead. However, given the established practice of blinding as punishment in Norman government, her original readers may have seen contemporary practices implied in the tale.

The Angevin kings followed the example of their predecessors. In 1184, Richard Coeur de Lion, having won a battle at Gorre near Limoges, drowned some captives, beheaded others, and blinded eighty of them.38 In 1188 Count Raymond of Toulouse blinded and castrated some Poitevin merchants and executed others when he entered the conflict against Richard and Henry II, according to chronicler Roger of Howden.39 Richard had recourse to the blinding of his enemies again in 1198 while defending Normandy against the French king Philip Augustus; Richard had fifteen French prisoners blinded and sent three back to the king, led by a one-eyed man.40 (These are instances in which blinded French veterans would presumably have been accorded respect for suffering this punishment at the hands of their enemies.) Chronicler Ralph of Coggeshall tells of how King John’s advisers suggested that he order the blinding and castration of his nephew, Arthur of Brittany, because of the young man’s treasonous claim to be legitimate heir to Richard Coeur de Lion.41

Under the Angevins, the use of blinding in England extended beyond warfare and poaching. The Pleas at Shrewsbury in 1203, during the reign of King John, include an instance of a woman who was sentenced to have her eyes torn out for taking part in a murder, stealing some of the victim’s chattels, and then lying about how she had acquired them. According to the account of the Hundred at Bradford, for these deeds Alice Crithecreche “has
deserved death, but by way of dispensation [the sentence is mitigated so] let her eyes be torn out."

I have been unable to find any examples of blinding as punishment in England after 1223, but it evidently existed as a possible punishment in at least one area of the country until later in the century. In Borough Customs, an extensive compendium of local customary laws, Mary Bateson includes a law from Portsmouth from around 1272: “And also if we take a thief he shall be scalde and his eyen put owte, and if there be any woman her tetys shall be kyt of at Chalcrosse.” In her introduction, Bateson singles out Portsmouth as having punishments that are “singularly barbarous,” and the horrifying uniqueness of this mention of blinding—as well as the mutilation reserved for female thieves—in the two-volume collection bears out her evaluation. (But Bateson herself doubts the reliability of the text that she consulted, a nineteenth-century copy of a lost copy of the laws from 1727 that claimed to be from a medieval exemplar; she admits that the extant manuscript “gives but an imperfect idea of the contents of the lost original.”) As late as 1285 it was evidently still possible for English people to assume that a blind person’s disability was punishment for crime. The Calendar of the Patent Rolls for that year includes notification that one Peter Peverer of the county of Essex lost his eyes through disease, not because of a judicial sentence. Presumably Peverer himself sought this official statement in order to deflect the stigmatization inherent in real or potential accusations of past criminal activity.

On the other hand, during the thirteenth century some laws that allowed the use of blinding as punishment were rescinded. The 1224 forest laws associated with the Magna Carta did away with the Norman custom of blinding poachers of royal deer, and in 1285, the Second Statutes of Westminster ruled that rape was to be punished by the execution of the rapist, whereas earlier, blinding and castration were evidently permissible (though unrecorded) in some boroughs. In the late 1280s, Andrew Horn wrote in The Mirror of Justices that “until the time of King Edward II, [rape] was punished by tearing out the eyes and loss of testicles, because of the appetite which entered through the eyes and the heat of fornication which came into the reins of the lechers.” In their History of English Law, Pollock and Maitland sketch a decline in mutilation as punishment for felons as it was replaced “very slowly” during the thirteenth century by the death penalty.

Such was not the case in France. Blinding as punishment was used by the French against subjects within the territories of the French king when
Simon de Montfort attempted to destroy the heretical Cathars in the so-called Albigensian Crusade. Interestingly, although most of de Montfort’s feudal estates were in the Ile de France region near Paris, in the previous generations the family’s estates straddled the border between that region and Normandy, so he may have known that the practice of blinding had Norman precedents. Or de Montfort could have learned of the practice from his enemies. According to the *Historia Albigensis*, de Montfort was not the first French nobleman to use blinding as punishment in the campaign against the Cathars; rather, it was a traitor against him named Giraud de Pépieux. In 1209 he and some of his knights turned against de Montfort for reasons that remain unclear, but to show their displeasure with their commander, they captured two of his knights who had been left to guard the settlement of Puisserguier and then blinded them and subjected them to other forms of mutilation. De Pépieux’s cruelty was on quite a small scale compared to that of de Montfort against the village of Bram, between Carcassonne and Castelnaudary. In 1210, de Montfort and his troops captured the village after a three-day siege and exacted a terrible toll on its defenders, according to chronicler Pierre de Vaux-de-Cernay, a supporter of de Montfort.

They put out the eyes of the defenders, over a hundred in number, and cut off their noses. One man was spared one eye so that, as a demonstration of our contempt for our enemies, he could lead the others to Cabaret. The Count [de Montfort] had this punishment carried out not because the mutilation gave him any pleasure but because his opponents had been the first to indulge in atrocities and, cruel executioners that they were, were given to butchering any of our men they might capture by dismembering them. . . . The Count never took delight in cruelty or in the torture of his enemies.

The chronicler here implies that the mutilation was a response to either Giraud de Pépieux’s actions or others undertaken by the Cathars against their orthodox enemies. Pierre’s carefully formulated justification for de Montfort’s cruelty gives added credence to this horrifying event, apparently the episode in which the largest number of people were blinded in all of the European Middle Ages. Although the Cathars’ heresy was a religious crime, it was handled by a rough-and-ready social justice that was meant to provide an example to those around them, and Simon’s flouting of Pope Innocent III’s orders about establishing control in the area shows that his concerns in the region were at least as political as they were religious.
In light of this history, perhaps it is no coincidence that Toulouse, the urban center closest to Cathar territory, was the site of production in 1296 of a remarkable manuscript that includes illustrations of tortures and punishments, including blinding. The text of Bibliothèque Nationale MS Lat 9187 is the *Coutumes de Toulouse*, a legal text probably written by local jurist Arnaud Arpadelle and approved by King Philippe le Hardi in 1283. Among representations of punishments ranging from public humiliation to amputation of limbs, ears, and genitals, one of the ink drawings in the lower margin of the manuscript shows an executioner thrusting a rod into the eye of the bound prisoner (fig. 2). The tortures and punishments in the margins do not correspond at all to the text of the *Coutumes*; it includes judicial guidelines and procedures relating to such issues as dowries and wills, but it does not mention specific crimes and appropriate punishments—and certainly not blinding. However, this punishment obviously remained in the public consciousness in the late thirteenth century, since either the artist or the commissioner of the manuscript chose to include it.

Juridical blinding continued in France through the fourteenth and into the second half of the fifteenth century. In 1334 the knight Guillermet Bertrand bore witness at Lyon that he had seen a criminal undergo blinding and the amputation of a foot. The chronicler Philippe de Vigneulles recounts a case in 1466 in Metz in which a foreigner, found guilty of blinding a priest, was sentenced to be blinded himself. Philippe describes the special platform built for the occasion so that the public could see the sentence carried out. Ten years later, Jean de Roye wrote in his journal of a case in which the Duke of Burgundy persuaded a Welshman to kidnap the dauphin Charles, who would later become Charles VIII. After the attempted kidnapping failed, the criminal was offered the choice of decapitation or blinding as his punishment, the latter having been proposed as an alternative by a provost in the king’s household. When the Welshman chose blinding, the provost himself carried out the punishment, and the blind man was then delivered to his wife. The last two incidents suggest a troubling connection between xenophobia and blinding as punishment: the “otherness” of being foreign is compounded by the “othering” of disabling mutilation.

No doubt there were other instances of blinding as punishment in France in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, but historical evidence of them is difficult to trace for several reasons. French customary law, which varied markedly from region to region, does not always survive in written records. According to the eminent historian of medieval French law André Gouron, even where records survive, there is evidence of significant dis-
crepancies between “coutumes” and “usages,” that is, what was written and what was practiced. (These discrepancies explain the absence of any connection between the text and the illuminations in the manuscript of the *Coutumes de Toulouse* mentioned previously: the text lists the customary laws while the illuminations probably show the punishments that were commonly practiced.) Furthermore, an act of mutilation such as blinding was not always ritualized in public ceremonies as executions were. Contrasting mutilation with public execution, Esther Cohen writes that marking and maiming “were carried out with very little ceremony or effect. . . . Nor were the mutilations embedded within any kind of symbolic ritual. There was no need, for the message was simple, explicit, and carried lifelong by the culprit.”

These practices seem to be exemplified in the secondhand reportage of the incident described by Guillermet Bertrand in 1344: he may have been one of only a few witnesses to the mutilation of the criminal, whereas a public execution would have attracted witnesses galore.

An instance of blinding in which an aristocrat inflicts the punishment on people of lower rank appears in the tale of the outlaw Eustache the Monk, written between 1223 and 1284. This quasi romance is partly based on the life of a real historical figure, Eustache Busquet, who lived from about 1170 to 1217. Eustache’s nemesis is the Count of Boulogne, who has angered the monk by refusing to mete out justice to the murderer of Eustache’s father. Eustache takes revenge by destroying some of the count’s property, after which he is outlawed and goes into hiding in Hardelot Forest. At one point in the back-and-forth raids and attacks between the men, the count and his troops capture two of Eustache’s sergeants, and “their first reaction, in a fit of anger, was to put out the two men’s eyes” (76). Eustache swears to avenge the mutilation by cutting off a foot of each of four of the count’s retainers, revenge that he ultimately accomplishes. Eustache’s choice of a different form of mutilation for the count’s retainers may be the poet’s indication that blinding was the prerogative of the upper classes.

I have found two allusions to blinding as physical punishment in late Middle English literature, and both are unrealized threats. The late fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Patience*, probably written by the poet responsible for *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, artistically embellishes the biblical story of Jonah and the whale. After God tells him to go to Ninevah, the recalcitrant Jonah imagines being tortured by the Ninevites, who will “wrast out [his] yȝen” (tear out his eyes), though this never comes to pass. In “The Buffeting” in the Towneley Cycle of mystery plays, the Jewish high priest Caiaphas threatens to tear Jesus’s eyes out as part of his torture (“Nay,
Both the poet and the playwright raise the issue of blinding as a particularly exotic, foreign form of cruelty administered by the barbaric “other.”

INSTITUTIONS FOR THE BLIND

During the centuries when blinding was used as punishment, an equally important and probably not unrelated historical development was occurring in France: the foundation of hospices for the blind. And perhaps not coincidentally, some of them were founded by William the Conqueror. According to a medieval verse chronicle, William founded hospices either entirely or partially reserved for blind inhabitants in Cherbourg, Rouen, Bayeux, and Caen. In her research on these institutions, Brigitte Gauthier found conclusive evidence of the existence of only the Bayeux hospice and inconclusive evidence of the one at Rouen; she could find no proof that Caen or Cherbourg had eleventh-century hospices. Nevertheless, it is significant in the economies of sin and salvation that William the Conqueror, who may have already used blinding as punishment and who would later deploy it in England, was involved during his lifetime in both creating and aiding blind people.

In 1256, a watershed moment occurred in the history of blindness in Europe: Louis IX, better known today as Saint Louis, founded a residential hospice for the blind called the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts (literally, the Hospice of Fifteen Twenties, signifying the 300 residents whom it was meant to house). Associated with the National Center for Ophthalmology in Paris, this institution still survives today. For the residents the hospice offered basic care and some protection on the streets of Paris; for medieval Parisians the hospice became the subject of some social anxiety, partly associated with the stereotypes of blind people but partly relating to the hospice’s unique institutional identity as largely separate from the church, which had previously laid claim to the institutionalized care of the disabled.

The foundation of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts revised the discourse surrounding blindness by challenging the religious model and in some ways moving toward a social one; although the institution included a chapel under the control of at least one chaplain, and residents had license to beg at the doors of Parisian churches, the general raison d’être of the organization was not religious but social. It was not a hospital in which clerics took care of residents, but rather a community in which the blind and
their sighted relatives lived and worked together on every aspect of communal life, from agriculture to governance. And the archives of the institution from its first centuries do not suggest that it held before its residents either the implication that their blindness was punishment for sin or the false hope of miraculous cure (though a heroic but false legend that it was founded for blinded crusaders, to be discussed later, showed the institution’s subsequent need to raise the status of its original residents retrospectively since it could revise neither their disability nor its related stereotypes). In one sense the foundation of the Quinze-Vingts substituted one type of institution for another, but nevertheless it granted its blind residents greater autonomy and self-governance than they would have had in religious institutions. The irony of the direction that the hospice ultimately followed lies in its economic exploitation of the very institution against which it defined itself—the local church—and thus tensions arose between them that may have contributed to the need to “revise” the foundational history.

The late medieval revision of Louis IX’s motivation for founding the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts was facilitated by the fact that the ordinances of its foundation were lost, but descriptions of Louis’ charitable impulses toward the poor and disabled survive in chronicles. An episode showing Louis’ concern for the blind appears in the hagiographical biography by Guillaume de St. Pathus, who was also confessor of Louis’ wife, Marguerite de Provence. Guillaume writes of a meal to which the king invited the poor.

Et se il y avoit entre ces povres aucuns ou mal voianz, li benoiez rois li metoit le morsel de pain en la main a ses propres mains, ou il menoit la main du povre jusques a l’escuele. Et encore plus quant il y avoit un mal voiant ou non puisant et il avoit poissons devant lui, li benoiez rois prenoit le morsel du poisson et en treoit les arestes diligaument a ses propres mains, et le metoit en la saune, et lors le metoit en la bouche du malade.69

[And if there was any visually impaired person among these poor people, with his own hands the blessed king would put a morsel of bread into (the poor man’s) hand, or he would guide the hand of the poor man to the plate. And furthermore, when there was a visually impaired or weak person there and he had fish before him, the blessed king would take the piece of fish, carefully remove the bones from it with his own hands, dip it in the salt, and then put it in the mouth of the ill person.]
The quasi-eucharistic nature of this scene reinforces Louis’ holiness while highlighting a group in which he was particularly interested. In Guillaume’s sequel to Louis’ biography, *The Miracles of Saint Louis*, the writer describes four episodes in which the saint’s relics cure the blind, though here blindness is only one of a number of disabilities and illnesses cured by the king’s body.\(^{70}\)

In Guillaume’s authorized version of both the quick and the dead Louis’ interest in the blind, the biographer elides a different concern: control of the population of marginalized people in Paris.\(^{71}\) In 1254, only two years before the foundation of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, Louis IX expelled beggars from the city, ostensibly because of their perceived dishonesty and unruliness.\(^{72}\) While some of these exiles would have been blind, other beggars were perceived as a far greater social threat: those feigning disabilities, including blindness.\(^{73}\) Anxieties about able-bodied beggars tricking unwitting almsgivers would have contributed to Louis’ motivation to establish the hospice, whose residents wore institutional uniforms identifying them as fully licensed, genuinely disabled members of a royally sanctioned institution. And the sites of their mendicancy would have given them added legitimacy: the privilege of begging at churches both within and outside of Paris was first granted to the residents of Quinze-Vingts by Pope Clement IV in 1265 and then confirmed by three subsequent popes and the Council of Trent. From 1312, the privilege of licensed begging at Parisian churches belonged exclusively to the residents of Louis’ hospice, causing ongoing friction between the institutions.\(^{74}\) But along with the privileges granted to the residents of the Quinze-Vingts, the differentiation of officially licensed blind beggars from unlicensed ones exemplified new forms of discipline for the blind. Early twentieth-century sociologist Pierre Villey, in what remains one of the few books to examine the construction of blindness in the sighted world, describes the goal of early European hospitals for the blind: “le but est de réglementer la mendicité en répartissant les zones et en imposant une discipline” (“the goal is to regulate begging by dividing up zones and imposing discipline”).\(^{75}\)

**INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION AND DISCIPLINE AT THE HOSPICE DES QUINZE-VINGTS**

Although Louis IX’s original hospice functioned under defined rules of operation, the first generations of administrators left them undocumented. The almoner of the Quinze-Vingts from 1351 to 1355, Michel de Brache,
wrote during his administration that numerous statutes and ordinances had been observed since the foundation of the hospice, but they had never been written down or committed to reliable memory; furthermore, some rules had been added during the first century of the institution’s existence. So de Brache took it upon himself to transcribe the rules, codifying them so strictly that the reading of the ordinances became central to the induction ceremony for new residents. They were also carved into a large wooden plaque that hung in the pediment of the chapter house, a perpetual reminder to sighted residents and visitors of the discipline in the hospice.

As described by de Brache, most of the duties of administration were shared by the almoner, appointed by the king whose authority he represents, and the master of the Quinze-Vingts, also officially appointed by the king but nominated by the almoner. The almoner served as general director, setting rules, determining the daily schedule of the residents, serving as judge in disagreements among them, and meting out penalties for rule breakers. The master attended to some matters external to the hospice, such as commercial transactions and court cases, and also presided over the meeting of the chapter. Third in the chain of command was the minister, elected for life by the residents of the hospice (although his term of office was reduced to one year after 1493). The minister was responsible for receiving the alms collected by the residents and dispensing them for use within the community. All three of these men had to be sighted, and although the almoner could be a cleric, the master and minister needed to be married men, because their wives were also assigned specific duties. Also elected from and by the community were so-called jury members, who were to counsel residents; as was the case with the election of the minister, both male and female residents voted for the jury. In 1321 there were six jury members, though the number was reduced to four in 1362. Jury members earned a small stipend, and their spouses held a special status as well.

Once a week, all residents held ordinary chapter meetings chaired by the master: the group heard financial reports, fielded questions from residents, heard requests for admission, and judged such issues as engagement to marry and distribution of inheritances. General chapter meetings were held once a year to discuss larger issues of governance and finance.

As part of the daily schedule, residents were awakened by a ringing bell and were to begin their day with five Paternosters and five Ave Marias for the king, the almoner, and donors to the hospice; each day ended with the same series of prayers. (Although special privileges to the hospice were
granted by several popes, they are not named specifically in this list, a further indication of the basically secular nature of the institution.) De Brache exhorted residents not to miss the regular fasts of the church unless poor health prevented them. They were to attend masses in the chapel belonging to the Quinze-Vingts, services under the officiation of the hospice's chaplain. De Brache understood that mass would not be said more than once a day there.  

One of the important differences between the Quinze-Vingts and monastic institutions was the fact that residents of Louis' foundation were generally allowed to marry and have their families with them while in residence. However, it was easier for male residents to bring their wives than for female residents to bring their husbands: “[The blind man’s] wife will be a non-sister, and can be received quite soon after (his admission) and if she is worthy, as much for herself as in consideration of her husband, and to help him. But no sighted man will be given residency except by election, as it is said, unless it is by a very urgent command of the king or the well-informed almoner.”  

The suspicion of sighted men as residents grew out of the fear that they might victimize the blind residents, particularly through sexual violence toward blind women. De Brache forbids marriage between two blind residents or between two sighted residents. Young sighted widows were encouraged to marry blind male residents, but they were not expelled from the community if they refused. All marital engagements had to be announced to the master and minister or to the community as a whole; fiancés who failed to do so would be expelled from the community.  

The hospice drew funds from several different sources beyond gifts and bequests of nonmembers. A payment of half of a resident’s goods was exacted if he opted to move out of the hospice after living there for more than a year and a day. Residents whose stay had been shorter were to give “une petite portion” to the organization, with the exact amount to be determined by the almoner, the master, and the minister. However, the primary sources of revenue for the Quinze-Vingts were monies collected through begging and levies upon the estates of residents. The licensed beggars from the hospice were generally blind, each accompanied by a sighted resident; the pair would position themselves at church doors next to alms boxes, the contents of which were designated for the needs of the parish. All alms given to the hospice’s residents had to be turned over to the minister at the end of each day (though the archives show that residents occasionally tried to keep a portion for themselves, and one master was dismissed in 1521 for stealing hospice funds).  

Michel de Brache also devotes a good deal of en-
ergy to describing a complex system of division of inheritances between residents and the hospice. Residents with children who are older than fourteen or married must leave all of their goods to the hospice, unless the three chief administrators deem that the children are so poor that some of the inheritance should go to them. In the case of a childless couple, when one spouse dies the surviving spouse has full rights to all of the inheritance during the remainder of her or his life if the survivor remains in residence; if the survivor leaves, she or he must forfeit half of the inheritance.\(^87\)

In spite of the multilayered bureaucracy’s ability to take care of misconduct among the residents, de Brache’s rules define personal comportment in a strongly disciplinary tone: seventeen of them (numbers 55–71) begin with the words “Nul ne” (No one [may]), and they forbid villainous speech, talking back to administrators, drinking in excess, fornication, and leaving the enclosure without permission. As summarized by Brigitte Gauthier, “in accepting the regulation of the hospice, [the blind person] gave up part of his liberty to the community. All the acts of his life, even the most important, would be subordinated to the will of the community.”\(^88\) The clearest evidence that the impoverished blind people of Paris may have resented the strictures of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts lies in the fact that it rarely housed as many as 300 residents. While some may have been begging for lengthy periods outside of Paris, it seems significant that there were only 159 residents at the Quinze-Vingts in 1302,\(^89\) 99 boarders in 1502, and only 84 two years later.\(^90\)

**THE QUINZE-VINGTS VERSUS LOCAL AND REGIONAL CLERGY**

While popes in faraway Rome could afford to be generous to the Quinze-Vingts, first in cooperation with and then in memory of the crusader king Louis IX, the papal indulgences and privileges granted to the hospice evidently rankled clerics in Paris. When the Quinze-Vingts was founded, the Bishop of Paris agreed that the curate of the parish of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois would officiate at mass in the institution. However, at the request of Philippe V in 1320, Pope John XXII officially granted the institution the right to have its own chaplain serve as curate of a parish comprising the institution alone; the chaplain was more answerable to the almoner—the king’s representative, and not always a cleric—than to the Bishop of Paris. In 1387 Pope Clement VII compensated the Chapter of Saint-Germain-l’Auxerrois with three pounds for the removal of the Quinze-Vingts from their administrative control. However, the curate of Saint-Germain-l’Aux-
errois found the sum insufficient, and after a trial, in 1399 Parliament judged that the parish should be compensated eighteen pounds per year.\textsuperscript{91} In a sense the clerical isolation of the hospice from its parish further secularized the Quinze-Vingts by removing it (and its revenues) from the hierarchy of the Parisian church; in tandem with the nascent idea of a social model of disability, the institution thus threatened the church in two important ways.

Two incidents documented in the archives of the Quinze-Vingts serve to show how tensions between Parisian church officials and the institution flared in the first half of the fifteenth century, forcing the throne to intervene on behalf of the institution. On December 13, 1414, the abbot of Saint Germain des Prés called before him representatives of the Bishop of Paris to explain why they had imprisoned one of the chaplains of the Quinze-Vingts who resided in the abbey. (Aside from the head chaplain, others were employed to recite masses for the souls of benefactors.)\textsuperscript{92} This caused the Bishop of Paris to send a summons for a representative of the Quinze-Vingts to appear before the pope.\textsuperscript{93} In January 1415 the abbot of St. Germain, perhaps cognizant of the special privileges that the papacy generally granted the hospice, agreed to turn the entire affair over to the papal court.\textsuperscript{94} In the same month, King Charles VI sent patent letters to one of his highest officials ordering him to protect the Quinze-Vingts from the bishop and to prevent any further annoyances from him.\textsuperscript{95} Later in the month a session of Parliament ordered that the imprisoned chaplain be sent to la Conciergerie, a prison in Paris;\textsuperscript{96} this document suggests that the chaplain may have been guilty of wrongdoing, but nevertheless the decision removed him from the power of the bishop. Only in June 1415 did three official representatives of the Quinze-Vingts visit Rome in response to the bishop’s summons;\textsuperscript{97} the tardiness of their trip suggests that they did not feel unduly pressed to respond to the bishop, once the immediate cause of the conflict was no longer at issue. There are no records of the final decision in the case.

In early 1445 letters patent from Charles VII to the Bishop of Paris state that church officers had arrested a chaplain of the Quinze-Vingts; the king appointed arbitrators who would report to an officer of Parliament.\textsuperscript{98} The Quinze-Vingts’ archives include nothing more about that event, but in July 1445 the bishop’s men again imprisoned a member of the hospice, this time one of the brothers. Charles sent patent letters reiterating the privileges of the residents of the hospice.\textsuperscript{99} An officer of the king reported on the inci-
dent on July 2, 1445, and on August 23, the king ordered the brother released from the bishop’s control. Significantly, this letter exists in the archives in two contemporaneous copies.

The documents preserved in the archives describe only the most litigious altercations between the Parisian church and the Quinze-Vingts, nearly all of which were initiated by the bishop. Guillaumet and Bailliart describe the ongoing tensions as follows: “Episcopal petitions were difficult to deliver for bishops desiring to have themselves paid. Of the seventy trials between bishops and the Quinze-Vingts, the latter always ended up winning.” The last trial that the historians mention, dating from 1553, resulted in the bishop of Saintes paying back the 300 pounds that he had demanded for delivering petitions for alms for the Quinze-Vingts within his diocese, again an example of parish funding skimmed off by the hospice. The fact that Saintes is more than 400 kilometers from Paris shows the distance that the hospice’s power reached.

The altercations between French bishops and the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts must have been familiar to priests in the parishes of Paris and beyond. Therefore, more tensions are likely to have played themselves out in individual churches where the blind begged, especially since the position of the beggars next to the parish alms box necessarily created competition between the church as dispenser of charity and the apparently self-interested blind people. Furthermore, devout laypeople and receivers of alms might have questioned why royally protected blind people needed to compete with the church, whose alms were not reserved only for the blind but were distributed more widely among all poor people.

A LEGEND AND ITS LONGEVITY: THE QUINZE-VINGTS AND THE CRUSADERS

In the late Middle Ages, a legend arose to give definition not only to Louis’ motivation for founding the hospice but also to the number in its name, which represents nothing more than a system of counting by twenties, widely used in Old French and exemplified in the modern language by the term for eighty, “quatre vingts.” A version of the legend first appears in written form in a letter from Pope Sixtus IV, dated October 7, 1483. The letter describes Jean d’Aigle (Johannis de Aquila), master of the Quinze-Vingts, presenting a petition on behalf of the hospice and provides this rather sketchy synopsis of the legendary incident.
Sanctus Ludovicus etiam Francorum rex, postquam cum magna militum et armigerorum multudine ad partes infidelium, ut ab eorum manibus, adjuvante Altissimo, Terram Sanctam eripere posset, se transtulerat, et inimici crucis Christo multos ex eisdem militibus captivos detinuerant, et eos diversorum tormentorum generibus afflinerant, ac a tricentis ex militibus hujusmodi oculos eruerant, et totaliter exceceaverant.  

[After Louis, saint and king of France, conveyed himself with a great multitude of soldiers and arms-bearers to lands of the in-fidels in order to rescue the Holy Land from their hands, with the help of the Most High, the enemies of the Cross of Christ detained many captives from those soldiers and afflicted them with types of diverse tortures, and they tore out the eyes of three hundred of those soldiers and totally blinded them.]

According to the letter Louis returned to France and erected the hospice (which Sixtus wrongly says is named for him) in order to receive three hundred blind people of both sexes. This abbreviated form of the legend was reproduced in a papal bull granting indulgences to donors to the hospice, written by Alexander VI in 1500 and sent to all the bishops and prelates of France in order to obtain authorization for begging in all dioceses. Thus it was read in all the parishes of the country, and le Grand notes that if the indulgences were renewed annually, the legend would have received further repetition.  

Le Grand raised the possibility that d’Aigle, the first knight to serve as minister of the Quinze-Vingts, may have invented the legend in order to ennoble the foundation of the hospice; however, le Grand believed that d’Aigle’s other charitable work, which was unaccompanied by stories of martial sacrifice, argues against this hypothesis. But regardless of d’Aigle’s motivation, the story clearly resulted in a glorification of the institution’s history that came to be commonly accepted as truth. For the purposes of this study, the legend is also interesting because it retrieves a largely French and Norman form of punishment but distances it by having it deployed by a barbarous heathen ruler. And the legend also shows that blinding as punishment was still alive in the imagination of the French, in whose country a punitive blinding had taken place as recently as seventeen years before d’Aigle’s petition.  

The legend received its first literary treatment in 1499 in Pierre Desrey’s Généalogie de Godefroy de Bouillon, a self-styled chronicle that also partakes of motifs from chansons de geste and romance; because it has not appeared...
in a modern edition, I will reproduce the story at length here. Louis, who has been captured by the Sultan of Babylon, has sent to France for his ransom. Although the sultan has not allowed the emissaries sufficient time to reach such a distant country, he is nevertheless angered by a delay in the arrival of the money.

Par faute de payer au terme qui luy estoit assigne: dist le soudan au roy saint loys: que pour chacun iour quil seroit deffaillant de la en avant: quil feroit crever les deux yeulx a vingt de ses chevaliers estant en prison auecques luy. Et tellement fist le dict souldan par la crudelite que lespace de quinze iours durant fist chacun iour crever les yeulx a XX chevaliers: quilz furent durant les dictz quinze jours: quinze vingts chevaliers: mais au chef de quinze jours luy survint aultre chose comme il sera dict. Porquo il cessa de sa crudelite. Et quant le bon roy sainct loys veit la pitie de ses poures chevaliers ainsi privez de lumiere corpor[e]lle: il fut moult dolent: combien que toujours louoit dieu en son adver-site. Mais il luy estoit advis quilz estoient cheuz en cest occident par sa faute et coulepe: par quo il voua et promist a dieu denfaire satisfacion se son plaisir estoit de luy donner espace de vie. Et pour ceste cause fist il fonder lostel et hospital des quinze vingts aveuglez de Paris quant il fut retourne en france.106

[For lack of payment in the term that had been given to him, the sultan said to the holy king Louis that for every day that he defaulted from then on, he would put out the two eyes of twenty of his knights in prison with him. And thus did the said sultan in his cruelty, so that over the space of fifteen days, he had the eyes of twenty knights put out every day, and there were during the said fifteen days three hundred [fifteen twenties] knights. But at the end of fifteen days something else happened to him as it is said, because of which he ceased his cruelty. And when the good holy king Louis saw the woe of his poor knights thus deprived of corporal light, he was very sad—so much so that he constantly praised God in his adversity. But he was advised that this accident had befallen them because of his fault and blame, for which he vowed and promised to God to do satisfaction for this if it were His pleasure to give him time in his life. And for this reason he caused the hostel and hospice of the Quinze-Vingts to be founded when he had returned to France.]

Desrey goes on to describe the pardons and indulgences granted to the institution by popes, and he concludes by stating that the institution is a daily reminder of the three hundred knights blinded “to sustain the honor of God and the holy Catholic faith.”
In his *Fleur des Antiquitez* (1532), Gilles Corrozet does not include the elements of the ransom and the two-week delay, but his account states that the Quinze-Vingts was founded “to feed and house three hundred knights that [Louis] brought back from overseas, whose eyes had been put out by the Saracens” [pour nourir et loger trois cens chevaliers qu’il ramena d’oul-tre-mer, ausquelz les Sarrazins avoient crevé les yeux].\(^\text{107}\) Whether indebted to Desrey’s account or another source, Corrozet’s version eschews the lower-class “milites” of the papal bull in favor of higher-class “chevaliers.”

Paintings relating to Louis in the chapel of the hospice attest to the complicity of the administration of the Quinze-Vingts in perpetuating the legend of the crusaders. When the hospice was moved from the rue Saint-Honoré to its current location in the rue Charenton, the paintings were cleaned and restored by a certain Le Brun, who left a description of the works in a document dated August 4, 1780, and housed in the archives of the hospice.\(^\text{108}\)

Quatre tableaux de Person, représentant saint Louis qui rachète des prisonniers; le sacre de saint Louis; saint Louis recevant la couronne d’épine de l’Empereur Baudoin; représentant Soliman qui fait crever les yeux aux Captifs.\(^\text{109}\)

*[Four paintings by Person, representing Saint Louis who buys back the prisoners; the coronation of Saint Louis; Saint Louis receiving the crown of thorns from Emperor Baudoin; (a painting) representing Suleiman who had the eyes of the captives put out.]*

Also in the archives, an undated description of the paintings lists the same subjects;\(^\text{110}\) this document was written by one Poincelot, who was probably Le Brun’s workman in charge of the project, according to one historian.\(^\text{111}\)

For sighted visitors to the Quinze-Vingts, the paintings would have reinforced the validity of the legend, and the blind residents attending mass in the chapel would have learned of them from their sighted counterparts or from the sermons of the clerics assigned to the hospice, who would certainly have mentioned the hospice’s sainted founder from time to time.

Le Grand cites historians who repeated the legend of the blinded crusaders from the sixteenth century to the nineteenth; the story became a part of institutional history.\(^\text{112}\) Its longevity is attested by Abbot J. H. R. Prompsault, chaplain of the Quinze-Vingts from 1829 to 1855 and author of *Les Quinze-Vingts: notes et documents recueillis par feu l’abbé J. H. R. Prompsault*. As late as the 1860s he asserted that in spite of the protests of some histori-
ans, the Quinze-Vingts was founded in honor of three hundred blinded crusaders, though not as a residence for them.\textsuperscript{113}

There are numerous reasons why the legend of the blinded crusaders cannot be true. In relation to the historical record of the sixth crusade, an incident of these proportions would not have escaped the attention of the French chronicler and eyewitness Geoffroy of Joinville, whose description of Louis’ captivity is quite detailed.\textsuperscript{114} None of the early documents housed in the archives of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts mentions crusaders, but several use the phrase “pauvres aveugles” [poor blind people].\textsuperscript{115} And most convincingly, papal bulls allowing the residents of the Quinze-Vingts to beg are among the earliest extant documents in the archives; however, it seems very unlikely that a large group of knights would have engaged in this activity.

The longevity of the legend shows that it was ideally suited to nearly every party interested in the Quinze-Vingts in the fifteenth century and later. Its dissemination can largely be credited to the popes, whose willingness to repeat the legend must have grown from its inclusion of the crusades in the foundational history of the Quinze-Vingts. Although Louis was the military leader of the crusaders, they were soldiers of the Cross, serving the Pope and the Church Militant; in the papal bulls the infidels are described not as Louis’ enemies but as enemies of the Cross. Thus if the generosity of successive popes to the institution needed justification (perhaps before bishops and parish priests), the legend offered it.

In relation to Louis’ original intentions for the hospice, the legend functions ambivalently. While it undergirds the foundation with religion, it remains relatively true to Louis’ negation of the religious model of disability. The crusaders’ blindness was clearly not due to their sinfulness—indeed, they were doing God’s work—but rather due to the sinful sultan, an agent of heathenism. And the tale obviates not only the need for but the possibility of miraculous cure: the crusaders’ blindness would have been a badge of Christian martyrdom that promised a greater reward in the afterlife than mere sight during their earthly life. The social attitudes toward subsequent generations of residents of the Quinze-Vingts, the metonymic replacements of the crusaders, would have been at least partially structured by the narrative: they were good, deserving blind people, inheritors of largesse initially earned by crusading martyrs. On the other hand, the legend contravenes Louis’ vision by erasing female residents from the institution’s early history, replacing them with not simply men but disabled veterans, a category that throughout history has brought about outpourings of public sympathy and support.\textsuperscript{116} This gendering of the putative foundational
group probably accorded with what Parisians and French people saw of residents in later centuries—that is, more men than women, especially since blind married women were not consistently welcome in the Quinze-Vingts if they had sighted husbands.

For the residents and administrators of the Quinze-Vingts, the legend displaced an aspect of the social model of disability—that impairment is simply a fact of life that requires no elaboration or justification—with a narrative that recasts disability as personal tragedy for each crusader. However, the story of group sacrifice in time of holy war demands a social response: the crusaders’ blindness (and that of the later residents of the Quinze-Vingts) becomes a social responsibility, and inasmuch as any alms given to individual blind residents went to the collective of the hospice, only social responses were possible.

Guillaumat and Bailliart see the legend as valuable primarily for the residents of the hospice: the story is “an instrument of propaganda—today we would say a publicity coup—to increase the yield of begging.” However, they do not describe why the story should have this effect. While the legend “ennobles” the first generation of Quinze-Vingts residents, it concomitantly erases the history of impoverished disabled people from the foundation of the Quinze-Vingts by transforming the residents from a potentially unruly minority to privileged but maimed nobility. Instead of creating social discipline, the institution commemorates martial sacrifice and, in Corrozet’s version, rewards it directly. People familiar with the hospice’s unique self-government would presumably have understood it to have resulted from the high status of the original residents. Thus the legend exemplifies Mitchell and Snyder’s idea of narrative prosthesis; the legend is a “textual prosthesis [that] alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view,” replacing the banality of poor blind residents with the romance of brave crusaders.

Inasmuch as the Crusades represented colonizing forays into Palestine, the narrative of the crusaders justified the project in light of the savagery of the Sultan of Babylon. It is noteworthy that the first secular publication of the legend took place at the beginning of the age of French expansion. During that period and the centuries when the legend was repeated, it gave the implicit message that the ruler would care for those who undertook the work of colonization. The legend’s link between nobility and France’s martial prowess was exploited as late as the eighteenth century by aristocrats led by a Monsieur Duvernay who wanted to establish a military school for five hundred young nobles. Marquis René-Louis d’Argenson, Minister of For-
eign Affairs under Louis XV, wrote in his journal entry for January 12, 1751, of how the tale was deployed in order to justify military education based on class.

On parle aussi d’y appliquer la fondation des Quinze-Vingts, disant que Saint Louis ne l’avoit faite que pour des gentilshommes aveuglés par les Sarrasins pendant la croisade, et qu’on l’a très-mal appliquée à des pauvres aveugles roturiers.119

[They also talk about applying there the foundation of the Quinze-Vingts, saying that Saint Louis had done it only for the gentlemen blinded by the Saracens during the crusade, and that it was very poorly applied to poor blind commoners.]

For d’Argenson’s contemporaries the supposed motivation for founding the Quinze-Vingts had to be rescued from its current debased redaction in order to serve as a model for future aristocratic institutions. D’Argenson’s passing mention of the legend suggests that it was known to Parisians with no ostensible connection to the hospice.

This brief history shows some of the ways that Louis IX’s innovative foundation, l’Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, made itself appear less innovative, and thus a less clear challenge to the religious model of disability. The codification of de Brache’s rules within a century of the foundation imposed a discipline within the institution that was carried by the residents into Paris and farther afield in France; if the rules of the institution were in some ways surprisingly liberal, the residents nevertheless generally showed themselves to be fully disciplined subjects, a fact doubtless appreciated by donors. And Louis’ reasons for founding the institution also acquired the veneer of religiosity through a legend with remarkable staying power. The tale aligns the institution more closely with the church, making a gesture toward giving the church discursive control over the meaning of blindness yet again. Thus an institution serving a particular set of social needs gains power by acquiring both social and religious significance well beyond its original history.120

Louis’ hospice effected a significant rupture in the social construction of blindness: the royal protection of blind people must have improved their lives in certain ways, but it also created a higher public profile for them that apparently led to envy and contempt. We have already seen evidence of the tensions between the institutions and the church, but secular suspicion of
the institution also arose. In a poem by Rutebeuf the residents of the Quinze-Vingts became the objects of scorn within a few years of the institution’s foundation, well before Louis’ death.

Li roi a mis en un repaire  
(Més je ne sai pas por quoi faire)  
Trois cens aveugles route a route.  
Parmi Paris en va trois paire;  
Tote jor ne finent de braire:  
“Aus trois cens qui ne voient goute!”  
Li uns sache, li autres bouté,  
Si se donent mainte çacoute,  
Qu’il n’i a nul qui lor esclaire.  
Si feus i prent, ce n’est pas doute,  
L’ordre sera brulée toute,  
S’avra li rois plus a refaire.¹²¹

[The king has assembled in a residence (although I don’t know what for) three hundred blind people, troop after troop. Across Paris they go three by three; all day long they do not stop braying, “Give to the three hundred who don’t see anything.” One pulls, another pushes, they often give each other jolts because there is no one to guide them. If the fire took it, there is no doubt that the house of their order would be entirely burnt down, and the king will again have more to do.]

By raising the specter of a conflagration that could move beyond the hospice, Rutebeuf would certainly have kindled the anxieties of his Parisian readers.

It is noteworthy that the 1425 “amusement” involving four blind men and a pig that opens chapter 1 took place in the rue St. Honoré, the location of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts. This coincidence suggests that the location of the event was chosen precisely because of this proximity, and perhaps the participants were themselves residents of the hospice. Even if they were not, word of the event and its calculated endangerment and degradation of the blind men must have reached the hospice nearby.

Like Rutebeuf, François Villon also turned his barbed quill on the residents of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts in his Testament (ca. 1461), basing his satire partly on the anxiety about feigning beggars.
Item, je donne aux XV. Vings
—Qu’autant vauldroit nommer Troyes Cens—
De Paris, non pas de Provins,
Car a eulx tenu je me sens;
Ilz auront, et je m’y consens,
Sans les estuiu mes grans lunectes,
Pour mectre a part, aux Innocens,
Les gens de bien des deshonnestes.123

[Item, I give the Fifteen Score
(Three Hundred, one might say as well)
Of Paris, and not of Provins
(For it’s to them I feel obliged) . . .
They’ll have, with my fullest consent,
Without the case, my spectacles,
To sort out, at the Innocents,
Good people from dishonest ones.]124

The satirical force of Villon’s will to leave his glasses to the residents of the hospice is augmented by the “seeing” that he wants them to do. His desire that they use the spectacles to differentiate between good and dishonest people is partly a continuation of what Villon himself has done as a social critic, but the phrase also alludes to how Villon’s eyes and those of the society around him scrutinized the residents of the Quinze-Vingt and other blind people to determine whether they were “good” (i.e., truly blind) or dishonestly feigning blindness. Villon compounds the satire further by naming the group whom the blind people should inspect, the people “at the [Cemetery of the] Innocents.” In his edition of *Le Testament* Champion points out that the residents of the Quinze-Vingt had the right to beg in this important cemetery,125 but the next stanzas of the poem reflect on the inevitability of death for the rich and the poor, suggesting that the blind people can see nothing valuable among the graves; in other words, when attempting to distinguish between honest and dishonest people, we are all blind. (And Villon then adds that in the charnel house, where all the skulls look the same, he cannot tell the difference between lords and servants.) But the complexities of the stanza should not distract us from the fact that Villon is very literally associating blind people with dead people.

The effects of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingt, both positive and nega-
tive, were palpable across France. For example, in the stanza from Villon’s _Testament_ quoted here, the poet states that he is not leaving his spectacles to the Quinze-Vingts residents in Provins, where, according to Champion, the prior of Saint-Aioul gave the residents of the hospice a house and garden in 1413, probably as a residential base from which to do their begging in the area. More important, the institution also inspired the foundation of other “aveugleries” modeled on the same principles. L’Hospice des Six-Vingts opened in Chartres in 1291, under the royal protection of Philippe le Bel, and its ties to the Quinze-Vingts were further strengthened when Michel de Brache visited in 1356 and imposed the regulations of his hospice on what he perceived to be a poorly run sister institution. Although the residents of the Six-Vingts wore badges designed and placed differently from those worn by residents of the older institution (a crescent moon in addition to the fleur-de-lys), the badge nevertheless signified their royal protection. And the residents of the hospice in Chartres also shared the Quinze-Vingts’ papal dispensations to beg all over France (except in Paris, where only four residents of the Six-Vingts were allowed at any one time). In spite of its royal favor, the Hospice des Six-Vingts was built, significantly, outside the walls of Chartres, and when the Navarrians attacked the town in 1356, the citizens of Chartres dismantled the building in order to rebuild their fortifications. It took the intervention of the king, Jean le Bon, to persuade the townspeople to rebuild the hospice, this time within the city walls. The unlucky institution was destroyed yet again by the English in 1432 and later rebuilt. The original location of the hospice, its initial destruction at the hands of the Chartrians, and their reluctance to rebuild it all seem to indicate the low regard for the institution and its residents.

Similar institutions with less strong connections to the Quinze-Vingts also appeared around northern France. In Tournai (now Belgium), a hospice for the blind was built in 1351, and it, too, adopted the regulations of the Quinze-Vingts, though it lacked full royal patronage. However, the regulations were augmented by a rule that shows the degree to which the administrators feared false mendicants: “Note, each time a blind person is taken in, he must swear that because of lack of sight (faute de clarté), he cannot make a living in the future.” Hospices for the blind were also founded in Meaux in 1351, Caen by 1364, Rouen in 1478, and Orléans by the end of the century. Gauthier has noted that all of these institutions are in the north of France, and the southernmost foundation for the blind, Orléans, is also one of the last before 1500. She did not note, however, that the north is also the origin of most of the satirical literature about the blind. Even if we
take into account the relative concentration of wealth and power (along with the possibility of increased literary patronage) in the north, the geographical correspondence is striking.

In short, regardless of the discipline that the residents of hospices for the blind had to undergo while in the confines of their institutions, the begging rights that they were given, along with the right to wear a badge of royal protection in some cases, made them appear privileged outside the institutions. And therefore, what we might in modern parlance call a backlash occurred, beginning even before the death of Louis IX, and this backlash played itself out in a number of the plays and other texts that will be discussed in later chapters. So Louis’ foundation had one meaning within its walls but quite another on the streets of Paris and beyond.

But what of England and its institutions for the blind? Evidently there were none devoted solely to people with that impairment. Nicholas Orme and Margaret Webster’s detailed and comprehensive 1995 book The English Hospital, 1070–1570 erroneously states that St Mary within Cripplegate, also called Elsingspital in honor of its founder William Elsing, was a hospital for the blind. However, Elsing’s charter of 1331 stipulated that the institution give preference to blind or paralyzed priests; any remaining space in the hospital could be given to blind beggars. So although Elsing clearly had an interest in the blind, his generosity was first and foremost directed toward disabled priests, presumably because they could not perform the mass. In contrast to the Quinze-Vingt, this hospital, which was always under church control and was administered by Austin canons after 1340, had a relatively short history plagued with financial problems, even before Elsing’s death; it spawned no imitators and was closed in 1536. Orme and Webster also call the hospital of the Papey an institution specifically for the blind, but they go on to add that it “ministered to the clergy in general [and] also took in some who were blind as well as the lame and impotent”; thus it resembled Elsingspital in its primary clientele. These hospitals strongly reinforce the religious model not only because they were under church control but also because they were actually ministering primarily to priests, who were likely to believe in some form of the religious model of disability.

An institution with a similar mission of caring for those too disabled to continue working was founded by Edward I in London in 1341, when he granted a “messuage with appurtenances” worth twenty pounds annually to those members of the guild of goldsmiths who were “blind, wearied, and infirm.” The Wardens’ Account for May of that year states that the goldsmiths asked the king for assistance for “the many men of that mistery
blinded by the fire and the smoke of quicksilver, and some worn out by manual work and oppressed and debilitated with various infirmities,” and the king granted their request in September. This institution, if we may call it that (medieval documentation does not), resembles the Elsingspital and the hospital of the Papey in its goal of serving those blinded and impaired in other ways while working, and therefore none of these foundations represents for England the reimagining of disability and the sharp focus on blindness represented by the Quinze-Vingts in France.

So let us try to tie this information together by asking the question that led me to start researching these issues. Why is the literature of France so cruel to blind characters, and why is the literature of England so much more benign? While the religious model of blindness is similar in the two countries, their social models are radically different. In French and Norman culture the more frequent use of blinding as punishment had some influence, as would the privileges afforded members of royal hospices. These practices and institutions in France resulted in attitudes that to some extent commodified human sight and often resulted in inhumane satire against the blind in French secular literature. The commodification of sight represents a disturbing inversion of the social model of disability defined in chapter 1, which states that disability should not “belong” to an individual but to a society. Blinding as punishment very concretely demonstrates that in medieval society, a person’s sight did not entirely belong to him either; rather, it—and the power that it represented—could be taken by anyone legally or physically powerful enough to take it. In the Middle Ages such forms of power were sociopolitical constructs that changed over time, evidently more slowly in France than in England. Sight’s status as a commodity in France is evident in fictitious texts as well as history. The Quinze-Vingts’ foundational legend of the noble French crusaders blinded at the hands of the infidels recasts the practice of blinding as a kind of usury, cruel and unusual interest that accrued daily for a debt left unpaid for too long. And at least one fourteenth-century French author felt comfortable enough with the idea of sight as commodity that he used it for comic purposes: in the romance of Bérinus, to be discussed in chapter 4, a blind man accuses the sighted Bérinus of having exchanged eyes with him and refusing to return them.

In England, where blinding as punishment was rare except at the hands of colonizers and where there were no hospices solely for the blind, blindness existed as a relatively unmarked disability, and therefore the blind were not generally singled out for ridicule in art and literature. So the basic dif-
ference in the construction of blindness in these two countries is that in France, where the blind were more socially visible due to highly visible practices and institutions, the social model of disability gained ascendancy in the later Middle Ages, whereas in England, where the blind were in a sense less visible, the religious model generally held sway. Later chapters will show how this distinction plays out in literature, history, the visual arts, and even medical discourse.

I would like to close this chapter by contrasting French fact and English fiction. A deeply disturbing historical incident that took place in Paris will serve as a concluding synthesis of some of the major topics of this chapter as they relate to France. Several chronicles state that in 1449, a trial took place to judge two men and a woman who had kidnapped children in order to blind and mutilate them and send them into the streets as beggars. The trio of criminals were found guilty and condemned to be hanged, a sentence that attracted a great deal of public attention because it was supposedly the first hanging of a woman in France. The bourgeois Parisian whose journal includes the story of the blind men competing for the pig noted the event, as did Jean Chartier, the chronicler for King Charles VII. But perhaps the most reliable version survives in the records of Parliament. Jehan Baril, formerly a butcher, was accused of a number of crimes, including murder and putting out the eyes of a victim. He was known to feign disability, falling to the ground in the road or in the midst of a group of churchgoers. His accomplice, Etienne Tierrier, had spent his life begging, though he was evidently healthy and able to earn a living. He had kidnapped two children, blinded one (with pins when the child was two years old, according to the king’s chronicler), and cut off the feet of the other in order to make beggars of them. Although Tierrier was married, he lived with a married woman other than his wife, and she was the accomplice who went to the gallows with him.

Here is a terrible convergence of blinding, begging (both feigned and all too real), and the commodification of sight. While it would be an overstatement to say that such heartless treatment of children could occur only in a country in which mutilation was used as punishment, the likelihood of exacting this awful toll seems greater when the government is also using it. The feigning beggar and his friends knew that the legitimacy of actual disabled children would bring in more money, and they were not hesitant to manufacture the disabilities. The fact that none of the historical records mentions the fate of the blinded and lame children speaks volumes about medieval attitudes toward people with disabilities.
The Englishman William Langland, whose writing and revision of *Piers Plowman* took place in the second half of the fourteenth century and thus earlier than the heinous crimes in Paris, knew of the possibility of mutilating children in order to make them more lucrative as beggars, though his source for this knowledge is unclear. In all three versions of his text (Passus VIII in the A-text, Passus VII in the B-text, and Passus IX in the C-text), the narrator Will discusses the issue of beggars who feign disabilities to receive charity versus people with genuine impairments who are truly deserving of alms. In these sections Will specifically mentions blind people and other impaired people as worthy of charity for doing penance and suffering in purgatory on earth (A.VIII.82–88, B.VII.99–106, C.IX.175–86). He also castigates sinful poor people who breed bastards and mutilate them in order to prompt pity later from almsgivers.

\[
\text{[Thei] wedde [no] womman þat [þei] wiþ deele}
\text{But as wilde bestes with “wehee” worþen vppe and werchen,}
\text{And bryngen forþ barnes þat bastardes men calleþ.}
\text{Or [his] bak or [his] boon [þei] brekeþ in his youþe}
\text{And goon [and] faiþen with [hire] fauntes for eueremoore after.}
\]
\text{(B.VII.91–95)\textsuperscript{149}}

In a passage in which he considers both blindness and mutilation in close proximity, Langland makes no connection between the two. He can acknowledge the terrible possibility of inflicting physical impairment upon children, but blinding as a form of mutilation does not occur to him (in spite of the fact that the word would have alliterated nicely in the line about breaking bones).

So blinding was a historical fact in late medieval France, but it seemed largely beyond the ken of the people of England at the same time—and even beyond the imagination of a poet as creative as Langland.