CHAPTER 3

“Blind” Jews and Blind Christians:
The Metaphorics of Marginalization

In his influential book *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and De-viance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, R. I. Moore studies the rise of antipathy in Christian Europe toward three groups of social outcasts: heretics, Jews, and lepers. He charts the ways in which the authority of not only the church but also royalty and communal organizations was exercised on these groups. He draws particularly close connections between heresy and its metaphorical representative, leprosy; several twelfth-century writers asserted that as leprosy destroyed the body, heresy destroyed the church. The similarity in treatment of heretics and lepers was striking: capital punishment for the heretic, and a symbolic death sentence for the leper, who stood in an open grave while a priest read over him a ritual of exile from the community.

However, Moore admits that generalizing about medieval Jews is more difficult.

It is impossible to strike a true balance of the general situation of European Jews in the twelfth century. In many ways they shared in the general prosperity and expansion of the period. . . . [They] often occupied positions of influence, and many of them accumulated great wealth, not only through local money-lending (which was not invariably lucrative) but as part of a banking and trading network which extended through Europe and the middle east.

This is a very different situation from those of the other two marginalized groups. Even though Jews in the later Middle Ages were repeatedly the victims of pogroms and were ultimately expelled from several European cities and countries, most medieval Christians, following genealogies of patristic
belief traceable from Augustine to Aquinas, understood that Jews had a place in the Christian world. Furthermore, numerous medieval papal bulls—some forbidding Christians to force Jews to convert and be baptized, others outlawing violence against Jews—show that the medieval church generally supported the presence of Jews in Europe and threatened excommunication of Christians who did not. Not only the forms of persecution of Jews but also their place in European society were different from those of heretics and lepers.

While a few medieval Christian writers viewed Judaism as a type of leprosy infecting the social body of Christ, another metaphor of illness—or more precisely, disability—was broadly applied to Jews in the Middle Ages. The metaphorical topos of the blindness of the Jews grew out of New Testament discourse and appeared with remarkable frequency in medieval writings of all genres. This chapter interrogates how the term for this disability was used as a derogatory metaphor that virtually reached the status of catachresis as defined by Naomi Schor in chapter 1. In medieval Europe, blindness was both fact and figurative language, and a number of texts show that stereotypes of the blind intersected with stereotypes of Jews; the social and textual strategies of accusation and exclusion were similar for both groups. Both Jews and blind people were overtly accused of greed, an accusation related to the usury practiced by Jews and begging practiced by blind people; in both instances, because money was not earned through physical labor, the concomitant accusation of sloth became widespread. Blind people and Jews in the Middle Ages were also believed to be disrupters of the social order, liars and lawbreakers accused of crimes from theft to murder. Most important, both groups were at least partly blamed for having chosen their marginalization, Jews by eschewing conversion and blind people through sinfulness or lack of faith.

A distinct undercurrent in the connection between Jews and the blind manifests itself in anxieties about the incomplete bodies of these “others.” Beyond the Christian vilification of the practice of circumcision as “the mark of physical loss that symbolized the spiritual loss of Jewish disbelief in Jesus,” some Christians believed that Jews, both male and female, menstruated or suffered from bloody fluxes. This belief in malfunctioning or incomplete genitalia mirrors Freud’s assertion that the anxiety of the sighted about the blind is a form of castration anxiety, the fear that one could become similarly “incomplete.” Blindness and Judaism thus become metonymically linked through the notion of an impotence that is deserved even if not actually self-inflicted. This connection is anticipated in the Old
Testament story of the Sodomites, where sexual inversion and the punishment of blindness are paramount (Genesis 19:1–11). The conjunction of blindness and issues of sexuality could certainly have informed medieval anxieties about Jews and the blind; medieval French drama associated sins of sexual excess with blind people.

As background to the argument that Jews and blind Christians suffered similar types of marginalization and punishment, I will read some representative biblical and patristic texts that made the anti-Judaic topos of the blindness of the Jews pervasive in Christian Europe. These texts were instrumental in the disciplinary strategies brought to bear upon Jews and blind people, the metaphorically and literally “blind,” in law and literature. Although this discussion draws upon a number of textual genres, medieval drama dominates because it most clearly demonstrates the marginalization of both the blind and Jews. As the most social of genres in the Middle Ages, one that brought together communities in its writers, performers, and audience, drama provided an ideal method of “performing” Judaism and blindness in order to represent the marginalized groups to sighted, non-Jewish audiences. In the presence of Jews and blind people on the streets of urban areas, medieval society perceived a threat; in drama, the mimetic representations of these “others” first enacted that threat and then negated it through the performance of conversion, atonement, and miraculous cure that resulted in assimilation.

**BIBLICAL AND PATRISTIC BACKGROUND**

The metaphorical topos of the blindness of the Jews, which signifies their unwillingness to “see” the divinity of Jesus, can be traced to the Pauline letters of the New Testament. This metaphor per se is not entirely consonant with Christian teaching: while some Jews who were Jesus’s contemporaries supposedly had the opportunity to “see” Jesus perform miracles, Christian faith was not meant to be based upon ocular proof. Since internalizing Jesus’s message was more important, emphasis on the deafness of the Jews might have been more logical—and that metaphor in fact features in some anti-Semitic texts. However, blindness dominates, perhaps because Paul, a Jew converted to Christianity after being blinded on the road to Damascus, chose this metaphor knowing that in the Jewish tradition, blind people were denied a number of rights and privileges accorded to the sighted. For example, blind men were forbidden to preach or to offer sacrifices. II Samuel 5:8 cites the proverb that neither the blind nor the lame may enter
the temple, and the Talmud places blindness among conditions that are tantamount to death itself: “Four types are considered like the dead: the poor, lepers, the blind, and those who have no children.”11 Thus, instead of focusing on deafness to God’s new word, Paul may have consciously employed a disability to characterize his nonbelieving contemporaries that Jewish writing frequently demeaned.

Paul emphasizes the metaphor of blindness both in his own words and in his readings of Old Testament prophets in Romans 11:7–11.

7. What then? That which Israel sought, he hath not obtained: but the election hath obtained it; and the rest have been blindered.

8. As it is written: God hath given them the spirit of insensibility; eyes that they should not see; and ears that they should not hear, until this present day. [Isaiah 6:9–10]

9. And David saith: Let their table be made a snare, and a trap, and a stumbling-block, and a recompense unto them.

10. Let their eyes be darkened, that they may not see: and bow down their back always. [Psalm 68:23]

Here Paul constructs the blindness of the Jews as divinely sanctioned, supposedly foretold by two of the Old Testament prophets who had foreseen Jesus’s divinity and believed in him before his birth. These citations add authority to Paul’s own assertions about Jewish blindness as he indicates the change of spiritual law that is to come. However, later in the chapter Paul states that “blindness in part has happened in Israel until the fulness of the Gentiles should come in,” implying that Christians should not feel superior to the Jews, who will be converted in time. In another of his letters Paul writes that the truth of the gospel is hidden from the spiritually lost, “in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of unbelievers, that the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God, should not shine unto them” (II Corinthians 4:4). Here Paul blames disbelief on “the god of this world,” presumably greedy materialism, an accusation leveled at Jews from early Christian times through the Middle Ages.

The biblically inscribed metaphor of blindness proliferated in anti-Semitic writings of the Middle Ages, especially among patristic writers such as Augustine. In The City of God, for example, Augustine asserts that the Jews’ rejection of Christianity blinds them to the nature of their own religion: “When they do not believe in our Scriptures, their own Scriptures, to which
they are blind when they read, are fulfilled in them.” In other words, the Jews’ inability to see the prophecies of the coming Messiah in their scriptures prevents them from reading their own holy books correctly, and thus Jews do not fully understand their own religion. Augustine’s interpretation of Jesus’s miraculous cure of the blind man in John 9 includes a complex conflation of the spiritual blindness of nonbelievers and an indictment of physically blind people. Initially Augustine interprets the blind man as the human race generally, “for this blindness happened through sin in the first man from whom we all have taken the origin not only of death, but also of wickedness.” In explicating Jesus’s assurance that the man’s blindness was due to neither his sins nor those of his parents, Augustine writes,

If no man is without sin, were the parents of this blind man without sin? Was he himself born blind even without original sin? Or had he while living added nothing? Can it be that because he had closed his eyes, his lusts were not at all awake? How great are the evils the blind commit! From what evil does the evil mind abstain, even with closed eyes? He could not see, but he knew how to think, and perhaps to lust for something which as a blind man he could not accomplish.

Here Augustine creates a confusing slippage from blindness as a condition resulting from original sin, to blind people as exemplary of postlapsarian sinfulness generally, to a castigation of the blind man in John 9 for sinful ambition inappropriate to a blind person. Although Augustine first interprets the literally blind man in the scriptural story metaphorically, ultimately the man’s sinfulness relates to his unwillingness to suffer blindness gladly. The exclamation in the middle of the passage, “How great are the evils that the blind commit!” is significantly ambiguous, referring to both metaphorically “blind” sinners and literally blind people.

One of the most interesting conjunctions of blindness and Judaism in patristic interpretation appears in the Venerable Bede’s reading of the book of Tobit or Tobias. In the narrative, an evil ruler will not allow the bodies of Jews to be buried during a period of persecution, but the righteous Tobit secretly undertakes the interments. Exhausted after burying a body, he falls asleep on the roof of his house, and swallows defecate in his eyes, blinding him. In his commentary Bede praises Tobit’s devout Judaism, as the scripture itself does, but the blinding causes the commentator to change his hermeneutic methodology to multivalent allegory.
Do not be surprised, reader, that sometimes, typologically speaking, men’s
good deeds have a bad meaning and their bad deeds a good meaning. . . . Tobit’s
being blinded, therefore, denotes that, as the Apostle says, blindness has come
upon a part of Israel. . . . Because of their swift flight, swallows are a figure of
pride and volatility of heart, since their uncleanness immediately blinds those
over whom it holds sway. For the one who recklessly enslaves his soul to the
volatility of licentiousness and pride, sleeps, as it were, lying down beneath a
swallows’ nest. Now this blindness got the better of the people of Israel espe-
cially as the coming of the Lord in the flesh was imminent, when they were both
being oppressed by the yoke of Roman slavery and transgressing the precepts of
divine law by very immoral living.15

The scriptural metaphor of the blindness of the Jews is too strong for Bede
to ignore, so he applies an allegory in malo (i.e., as a negative example) to a
character who is immoral in the commentator’s eyes only inasmuch as he is
a Jew. Thus Tobit can represent the good Jew of pre-Christian times, and
typologically he can prefigure the bad Jew who is blind to Jesus’s divinity
during the Christian era. Bede carefully justifies his indictment of Tobias
with both an allusion to Romans 11:25 (“Now this blindness got the better
of the people of Israel . . .”) and by historicizing the Jews’ sinfulness during
a period of “very immoral living” under Roman rule.

Bede continues the justification of his antithetical reading in the next
paragraph, which concludes the chapter.

Nor should it seem absurd that this Tobit, blind as he was and preaching God’s
word, is said to signify both reprobate and elect alike. For the patriarch Jacob too,
while wrestling with the angel, was both lamed and blessed, signifying, that is, by
his limping the unbelievers of his nation, and by his blessing the believers.16

By pairing Tobit’s impairment with that of Jacob, Bede effectively teaches
the lesson that no unbelieving Jew is fully able-bodied: as a representative of
his race, he is incomplete until he chooses to join the ranks of God’s more
recently chosen people.

The blind man instructs his son, whom Bede calls Tobias, to go to a far-
away land to collect a debt. As Tobias is about to depart, a beautiful young
man appears and offers to be the traveler’s guide; this is the archangel
Raphael in human form. In Bede’s reading these two figures together alle-
gorically represent Jesus: “By [the angel], quite appropriately, the divinity of
our Saviour is signified, just as his humanity is by Tobias.” Along the road a large fish attacks Tobias, but the disguised angel tells the young man how to kill it in order to preserve its gall, part of which will cure blindness. (Bede interprets the fish as “the ancient devourer of the human race, i.e., the devil,” whom Jesus slays.) After returning home, Tobias cures his father’s disability by applying the fish gall to his father’s eyes, causing “a white film like the skin of an egg” to peel away from them. Of this event Bede writes, “And the Jewish people on realizing the very bitter malice of the most wicked enemy will recover the light they have lost. The white film which had obstructed his eyes denotes the folly of self-indulgence.” In Bede’s allegory the miraculous cure for blindness coincides precisely with the cure of a faith “disabled” through sinfulness. Bede’s allegorical exegesis of the book of Tobit reached a wide clerical audience because of its inclusion in the popular Glossa Ordinaria, which exists in numerous manuscripts and early printings; the auctor is cited by name, and the double allegorization of the elder Tobit as both good and bad Jew is reproduced there.

In a version comprising over two thousand lines of Latin elegiac verse by Matthew of Vendôme, the Tobias became one of the most popular poems of the later Middle Ages, largely because it was adopted as a curricular text. It was one of the so-called Auctores octo collection that dominated European grammar-school education in the later Middle Ages and was printed fifty times before 1500. Although the poem cites Bede’s commentary on the Tobit (“Exponit Beda,” l. 53), Matthew does not provide a consistent allegorical reading of the story. However, he chooses the moment of the father’s blinding to invite his readers to allegorize, using the conventional metaphor of the nut and the shell (ll. 283–302), and some of those interpreters would have exploited the catachrestic relationship between blindness and Judaism. The story reached a less literate audience when staged as an episode in the monumental Procession of Lille, dramatic reenactments of seventy-two stories from the Bible and Roman history. Probably written in the second half of the fifteenth century, the play follows the biblical account of Tobit fairly closely except that it begins after the elder man is blinded, perhaps in order to preserve decorum in the production, since a dramatic representation of a bird defecating on a man would not have been conducive to an atmosphere of reverence.

The numbing conventionality of the metaphor of the blindness of the Jews is most evident in the Patrologia Latina. A proximity search of the database using the roots for “blind” and “Jew,” caec- and Judae-, within thirty
characters of each other reveals well over 600 instances of the pairing. (The search yields 698 examples, but a few are not related to the topic at hand, such as the name “Caecilius,” better known as the Latin poet Statius.) Interestingly, the vast majority of these passages do not develop the topos but simply use it as a rhetorical gesture; for patristic writers, the connection of the terms in the vilification of Jews was too natural to deserve special attention. To paraphrase Naomi Schor, the metaphor of the blindness of the Jews “strive[s] toward catachresis,” and its frequency in medieval religious discourse justifies Paul de Man’s lack of differentiation between trope and catachresis.

The trope of the blindness of the Jews shared the discursive space of anti-Semitic stereotypes with the representation of Jews as the unruly other, bringers of disorder who were as sinful in behavior as in religious belief; in a recent article, Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler have called this the “trope of grotesque excess,” mentioned in chapter 1. Among the earliest patristic writers to use this trope was the fourth-century saint John Chrysostom, who wrote that the synagogue is “a brothel and theater . . . a cave of pirates and the lair of wild beasts.” He adds, “Living for their belly, mouth forever gaping, the Jews behave no better than hogs and goats in their lewd grossness and the excesses of their gluttony.” Chrysostom’s pairing of the brothel and the theater highlights Jewish disorder, while the accusations of theft and animalistic behavior became conventions of anti-Semitic diatribes. Peter the Venerable’s Adversus Judaeorum applies the trope of excess to the theft of objects from Christian churches.

What [the thief] had stolen from holy churches he sells to synagogues of Satan. . . . Christ now, through the insensible vessels consecrated to him, suffers directly the Jewish insults, since, as I have often heard from truthful men . . . they direct such wickedness against those celestial vessels as is horrifying to think and detestable to say.

Here the accusation of theft is closely associated with the trope of excess, since the behavior of the Jews toward the sacred vessels is so unsavory as to defy description. Peter’s racist stereotypes closely anticipate the representation of Jews in the Croxton Play of the Sacrament, discussed later.

Given the connection between blind people and Jews in patristic literature, its appearance in later hagiographic and homiletic literature was inevitable. Two examples will suffice here. In one of the miracles of the Virgin at Rocamadour, the blindness of a Christian woman symbolically repre-
sents the blindness of the Jews so that the truth of her religion might be proven through a miraculous cure. A woman from Auvergne, blind for seven years, visits the shrine at Rocamadour with interests more worldly than religious: she is more focused on “the sort of sight that can be recovered and lost” than on the spiritual vision of Jesus eternally in heaven. Once in the church, she spends several days embodying the trope of grotesque excess: she must be “restrained by the brethren of the church because her spirit had become more fervent and her complaining was sometimes too shrill, and also because they found her voice irritating and excessively loud.”26 But one day at Lauds, during the Office of the Tenebrae, the lights in the church are extinguished, “an act which signifies the perfidy and blindness of the Jews, which persists to this day.” When the church is illuminated again as “a symbol of the Catholic faith which spreads its clear radiance everywhere,” her sight is restored. The miracle thus reenacts the prophecy in Isaiah 9:2 about the Jews who will convert to Christianity after Jesus’s coming: “The people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light: to them that dwelt in the region of the shadow of death, light is risen.”

Maurice de Sully, Bishop of Paris in the second half of the twelfth century, used another example of grotesque excess in a collection of vernacular homilies written between 1168 and 1175.27 One of these is based on Luke 18:35–43, the miraculous cure of a blind man at Jericho who will not stop crying for Christ to heal him, in spite of attempts by the disciples to silence him. For Maurice, the blind man’s excessive wailing represents insanity.

Li nonveans senefie les paiens, les juis, les faus crestiens, quar ausi com li nonveans a perdue la veue del cors, ausi ont li paien, li jui, li faus crestien perdue la veue das corages; e ausi com li nonveans foloie, tele ore est, hors de la voie qui le doit mener a son ostel, ausi foloient li paien, li jui, li fauls crestien hors de la voie qui les doit mener a la vie pardurable. Li paien e li jui foloient par lor mescreance, e li faus crestien, ja soit ço qu’il aient bone creance, il foloient par malvaise vie qu’il demainent.28

[The blind man signifies pagans, Jews, and false Christians, because just as the blind man has lost his bodily vision, so have the pagan, the Jew, and the false Christian lost their spiritual vision; and just as the blind man often goes foolishly off of the path that should lead him to his lodgings, so the pagan, the Jew, and the false Christian go foolishly off of the path that should lead them to eternal life. The pagan and the Jew commit folly with their misbelief, and
Maurice augments the conventional symbolic reading of blindness as a spiritual condition with insanity as another aspect of grotesque excess, and he literalizes the transgression of boundaries with the image of the blind and faithless leaving the correct path.

In the later Middle Ages, the trope of grotesque excess manifested itself against the Jews in numerous accusations of blood libel, the belief among Christians that Jews tortured and murdered Christian children. Some instances included the accusation that the Jews drank the blood of their victims. The first of these recorded in European history took place in Norwich in 1144, when the body of a boy was found on Good Friday. The rumor then spread that he had been crucified by Jews. Similar incidents occurred before the end of the twelfth century in Gloucester, Bury St. Edmunds, and Winchester. Accusations of blood libel resulted in the burning of 38 Jews at Blois in 1171, and 100 Jews at Bray-sur-Seine in 1191.

HISTORICAL MODES OF CONTROL AND PUNISHMENT

In France and England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Jews and the blind both benefited from specially defined status in relation to the throne but also suffered expulsion from cities and, ultimately in the case of Jews, both countries. The special status of Jews resulted directly from their value as moneylenders to the nobility and aristocracy, but because money-lending for interest contravened Christian law, Jewish usurers were reviled as well. Usury also gave its detractors the impression that Jews were not actually working but were instead engaged in luxurious idleness. Thomas Aquinas argued that it was the duty of royalty to stamp out usury in spite of its usefulness: “It would be better for [princes] to compel Jews to work for a living, as is done in parts of Italy, than to allow them to live in idleness and grow rich by usury.” Similar notions were voiced by Louis IX (Saint Louis), Edward I, and Archbishop of Canterbury John Pecham, along with the Alsatian abbot Geiler of Kaiserberg, who implies that usurers’ indolence makes them appear more important than Christians.

Are the Jews, then, better than Christians, that they will not work with their hands? Are they not subject to the decree of God—in the sweat of thy brow
shalt thou earn thy bread? Making money by usury is not working; it is flaying others while themselves remaining idle.\textsuperscript{31}

Significantly, Geiler conflates Jewish idleness with flaying, physical mutilation that could have reminded his readers of the blood libel myth.

Usury was also believed to drain the coffers of countries where Jews lived, leaving kings in precarious positions. Thus, when Archbishop of Canterbury John Pecham demanded in 1285 that Edward I bring a halt to Jewish usury, the king replied that although he disapproved of the practice on spiritual grounds, he did not know what to do.\textsuperscript{32} Even a century after Jews were expelled from England, Geoffrey Chaucer assumed that the readers of his “Prioress’s Tale” would understand that a Jewish ghetto in Asia might be “sustained by a lord of that contree / For foul usure and lucre of vileynye.”\textsuperscript{33}

Aside from the economic convenience of Jews as moneylenders, popes and other powerful Christians argued for special protection of Jews as a people important to Christianity, so long as their social power was limited. Thomas Aquinas drew upon traditions of civil government to describe Jews as “bondsmen of princes,” “serfs of the royal chamber,” and “our effective property”; although the paternalistic nature of the king’s relationship to Jews imbues these disempowering metaphors, nevertheless they resulted in a “status [that] bound Jews and rulers together, potentially guaranteeing the former’s physical security.”\textsuperscript{34} This protection effectively limited Jews’ freedom of movement, particularly in France. So while Jewish moneylenders’ utility in the economy was paramount, their status required obedience to special political strictures of the societies in which they operated.

The economic utility of blind people in medieval Europe sprang from a very different cause: as Stiker has asserted, they were useful as objects of charity that could win donors eternal life.\textsuperscript{35} However, the blind were least threatening when that charity took place through institutionally approved channels, and blind people who attempted to lead even a limited life outside domestic or religious confines were, like the Jews, the object of distrust, ridicule, and physical violence, partly because of social anxieties involving mendicants feigning disabilities. The passage from Augustine quoted here suggests as much: the blind should not be ambitious for more than they can accomplish. Humility is paramount, and striving for more than one’s impairment allows is prideful.

Paternalism played a role in both the charity extended to the blind by the church and the royal protection of blind people in medieval England
and France, which entailed the granting of royal licenses to beg and the endowment of special institutions. The most famous and influential of these, the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts and its imitators, are examined in chapter 2. The creation of an enclosed space for the protection of the blind may appear to imitate the cloistering of a religious community, but the goal of these institutions to discipline and control their residents made the sites more similar in nature to walled Jewish ghettos, meant to segregate certain members of the population. Also similar to the treatment of Jews, the protection offered by these institutions meant more effective control of the movement of blind people. In England such control was legal rather than institutional: edicts in 1388, 1405, and 1509 forbade beggars to leave their place of birth or current residence, and after 1388 any beggar hoping to travel in England was required to have a pass from the county justice of the peace.

Increasingly institutionalized attempts to differentiate worthy mendicants from frauds—or in this study, truly blind people from false, sighted beggars—resulted in another similarity between that group and Jews: the wearing of special badges. Michel Mollat mentions that beggars in a number of cities had to wear badges as insignias of their official status. The same was true for residents of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts, who after 1312 were required by Philippe IV to wear a yellow fleur-de-lys sewn or pinned to the chest area of their uniform, identifying them as residents of a royal establishment. The color yellow would have visually linked these badges to those worn by Jews; Michel Pastoreau has stated that by the fourteenth century, in the public eye yellow had become “the color of bile, lies, prostitutes, Jews, and criminals.”

The most important codification of Jewish sartorial distinction occurred during the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, when Canon 68 of the conciliar decrees stated that Jews had to be identifiable “through the character of their dress.” It was Louis IX, founder of the Quinze-Vingts, who first forced French Jews to wear yellow badges in a decree of 1269; those who did not would lose their outer garment to their denouncers. Although the color, shape, and size of badge were not consistent across Europe, the impulse to demarcate both blind people and Jews, even when such demarcation was meant to communicate a relatively privileged status, demonstrates the need to identify and categorize the other. The most severely disciplinary demarcation of lawbreaking beggars, including the blind, took place directly on the body: in the second half of the fourteenth century, beggars found on English roads outside regulated territories without a highway pass were branded with a hot iron.
use Goffman’s terminology, these are all stigmas (and the branding exactly reproduces the stigma forced on Greek slaves); their stigmatic implications vary in degree but not so much in kind, depending on time and place.

Yet another perceived similarity between Jews and blind Christians lay in accusations that both accumulated inordinate wealth without working. Thomas of Chobham, a student in Paris in the late twelfth century and sub-dean of Salisbury in the early thirteenth, may have used his experiences on both sides of the Channel when he addressed this issue in his *Summa de arte praedicandi*, which he had completed by 1228. Among other warnings to priests about the evils of beggars in church, Thomas wrote that they “often acquire alms of money in a large quantity, nor do they use the collected silver, but they save it with great avarice constantly until death.” In a collection of exempla for sermons, the thirteen-century Dominican Etienne de Bourbon recounts a tale told against the sin of avarice by Nicholas de Flavin, archbishop of Besançon, about a blind man who accumulates a great deal of money by begging and then engaging in usury. When alone he enjoys counting his money, until one day he hears a voice that says it is useless for him to rejoice in his ill-got gains because they belong to a worker in a nearby city. In despair, preferring to lose the money instead of allowing anyone else to have it, he hollows out a tree trunk, hides the money in it, and pushes it into a river. Fishermen pull the log from the water, and a worker in a nearby town who buys it for one of his projects finds the money inside. The exemplum associates the blind man with the conventionally Jewish sin of usury, and then the tale returns the money to a segment of society where it rightfully belongs, a worker who is rewarded for his industry by finding the money in the honestly purchased raw material of his work.

The final punishment of the medieval Jews of both France and England was expulsion. Kenneth Stow has drawn a connection between the two kingdoms as the only European ones unified enough to manage the wholesale removal of Jews: “[Such] a scenario was possible only in England and to some extent France. No other medieval kingdoms or governmental units were so politically unified in the thirteenth century . . . or so civilly self-aware.” Stow’s slight qualification of France’s political unity is based on the French royalty’s inconsistency in its policy toward Jews. Although Philippe IV first decreed the expulsion of Jews in 1306, they were recalled by Louis X in 1315, expelled again by Philippe VI in 1322, partially recalled by John II in 1359 (who was most interested in a small group of bankers), and then finally banished by Charles VI in 1394. In England, Edward I’s edict was firmer and more permanent: he expelled the Jews from his kingdom in
1290, after having drained them of their money to the point that they were useless to him as lenders; they were not officially readmitted until the Interregnum in the seventeenth century. The expulsion of the Jews from England corresponds with the moment at which the Jews’ economic utility had been exhausted.

While the blind in medieval Europe were never singled out for expulsion, they suffered this fate in particular cities that expelled groups of beggars including the blind. Unlicensed beggars were expelled from London in 1359, and their livelihood was effectively destroyed when those who gave illicit alms were threatened with imprisonment. In France, Louis IX expelled beggars from Paris in 1254, an action that may explain his desire to create a royally sanctioned group of blind mendicants at the Quinze-Vingts the following decade. In the fifteenth century Charles VII again expelled beggars from Paris; the decree specifically mentions the simulation of corporeal infirmities as one of the reasons.

The parallel marginalization of Jews and the blind outlined previously suggests that the presence of both groups in Christian society was at best simply tolerated (so long as appropriate strictures were observed) but not infrequently punished.

**PERFORMING “BLIND” JEWS AND BLIND SINNERS IN RELIGIOUS DRAMA**

Medieval drama is particularly fruitful terrain for exploring stereotypes of Jews and blind people, since drama is the most social of medieval art forms, bringing together a playwright (often a cleric), actors, and audience. The mimetic force of drama allows for the enactment of marginalization and punishment visibly upon the bodies of the actors.

The force of anti-Semitic social stereotypes is exemplified in the Benediktbeuern Christmas Play, which takes us out of France and England but shows a conventional European representation of a Jew as grotesquely excessive. The play opens with Isaiah prophesying the birth of Jesus and using the metaphor of blindness (“Let Judaea rejoice, and, now blind, let her flee from the threshold of error”). Also on stage are a group of Jews, led by a figure called Archisynagogus whose role is to argue against the prophets. Before his first speech, the following stage directions appear.

Let Archisynagogus with his Jews, having heard the prophecies, make an excessive clamor; and, shoving forward his comrade, agitating his head and his entire
body and striking the ground with his foot, and imitating with his sceptre the mannerisms of a Jew in all ways.\

The playwright implies that the uproar should be drawn from the Christian actor’s understanding of Jewish stereotypes, which include those associated with grotesque excess: noise, frenetic movement, and violent physical activity. In performance the sound and the fury of Archisynagogus would have contrasted strikingly with the ordered, formal declamations of the prophets.

Similar freneticism characterizes the Jews who torture the stolen eucharistic bread in the fifteenth-century English Croxton Play of the Sacrament. Jonathas, the leader of the Jews who defines his character in terms of his wealth, wants to test the bread because of the unnatural Christian belief that has resulted in the anti-Semitic “conceyte” (which we might choose to call a catachresis) of the blindness of Jonathas’s race:

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\begin{align*}
\text{Pe beleve of thes Cristen men ys false, as I wene;} \\
\text{For pe beleue on a cake—me thynk yt ys onkynd.} \\
\text{And all they seye how pe prest dothe yt bynd,} \\
\text{And by pe myght of hys word make yt fressh and blode—} \\
\text{And thus be a conceyte pe wolde make vs blynd. (198–203)}
\end{align*}
\]

The playwright’s mention of blindness here foreshadows the importance of vision in the play: what the Jews see will convince them of the divinity of Jesus and reinforce the beliefs of the audience. Before the torture begins, Jonathas repeats the anti-Judaic trope but gives greater agency to the eucharistic bread: it is “this bred that make us thus blind” (388). Then he and his colleagues, Jason, Jasdon, Masphat, and Malchus, stab the Host, causing it to bleed, and in fear they plan to throw it in boiling oil. However, the bread adheres to Jonathas’s hand, at which point the playwright includes the stage direction “Her he renneth wood [mad], with pe Ost in hys hond.” (l. 503). The Jews try to remove the bread by nailing it to a post. Jasdon says to the others, “Lifte up hys armys, felawe[s], on hey, Whill I drive in thes nailes” (l. 509); aside from assuring that the audience will see the Host’s miraculous power because of its height, this line implies a mock “elevatio,” with Jonathas and the Jews all raising the bread together. Further madness ensues after the Jews pull at Jonathas to free him, but his hand detaches and remains stuck to the Host, thus exemplifying through somatic disability his “incompleteness” without Christianity.\(^5\) When a mountebank attempts
but fails to cure Jonathas, the Jews “bett away þe leche [physician] and hys man” (l. 653). The violence and insanity caused by the miracle undermine the logical intelligence of Jonathas’s critique of Christianity, thus directing the audience to the belief that Christianity can be understood only through faith, not reason; the mysteries of the Eucharist are indeed “onykyn” (un-natural) in one sense, but the miracle of transubstantiation (under attack from Lollards during the century when the play was written) was a foundation of medieval Christianity. Furthermore, the miraculous appearance of Jesus bursting forth from an oven disciplines not only the Jews but the sinful Christian who has stolen the Eucharist for them. They all undertake penance for their sins, and the play ends with both the restoration of order and an ambiguous assimilation of the Jews into Christian society.

The trope of grotesque excess also informs a legend dramatized in a pageant included in an early fifteenth-century list of the York Cycle called the “Portacio corporis Mariae,” more popularly known as the “Play of Fergus,” one of the episodes associated with the apocryphal life of the Virgin Mary. As pallbearers carry Mary’s coffin, the Jew Fergus (whose Gaelic name substitutes one “other” for another) attempts to push it off their shoulders as an act of disrespect. His hands adhere to the coffin and are pulled from his arms, a miracle that causes him to convert and therefore be restored to physical wholeness. Fergus’s blasphemy and the slapstick comedy of the play evidently excited the citizens of York to such a degree that they caused mayhem around the pageant: in 1431, the cycle records criticize the play partly because it was not from authorized scripture but also because it caused the audience to laugh and become violent (“magis risum et clamorem causabant quam devociōnem, et quandoque lites, contenciones et pugne inde proveniebant in populo”). Among an audience who had never had contact with Jews, the mimetic representation must have carried all the more authority in its characterization of Fergus as a creator of disorder. And the play’s effect of inciting violence may have suggested to the audience that the very presence of Jews in society necessarily resulted in such disorder, spilling from the Jew himself to those around him. The Play of Fergus was evidently suppressed, disappearing entirely from the cycle by the late fifteenth century. Interestingly, this legend lives on in the lower border of a stained glass window in York Minster, where it is enacted by monkeys, one of which dangles by his stubby arms from the side of a draped coffin.

A late fourteenth-century French play of the Assumption of the Virgin includes not only a Fergus figure, here called Ysachar, but also Jewish ac-
complices who are struck blind as they try to disrupt the funeral. Because the blinded Jews have been unable to see Ysachar’s pushing of and sticking to the coffin, he describes the event to them in a passage full of praise of the Virgin. He states that his hands were dried out, discolored (“seiches,” “des-colorees”), and attached so strongly to the coffin that he could not remove them. The apostle Peter prays for the Virgin’s intercession, Ysachar is released, and he converts. He then tells his friends:

Mes amys que voy en ce lieu
Estre aveugles par ceste emprinse
Se ceste palme est sur vous mise
En confessant la foy de crist
Et recevant le sainct esperit
Vous seres enluminez brief.61

[My friends in this place whom I see to be blinded by this affair, if this palm is placed on you while you confess faith in Christ and receive the holy spirit, you will be quickly enlightened.]

The corporeal locus of Ysachar’s disability has become so thoroughly blessed that it has acquired the power to make the works of God manifest, to paraphrase John 9.

Ysachar’s four friends disagree about undergoing the miraculous cure, a division representing not only the Jewish community during Jesus’s life but also the “sheep” and the “goats” into which humanity will be divided on Judgment Day. Ruben and Joseph scold Ysachar for turning away from his faith, and Joseph adds that he would rather be blind for a thousand years than believe in Jesus. So at this point the audience sees not simply Jews choosing to remain Jews, but blind people choosing to remain blind, with both states of being based on the rejection of Christianity and its miracles. And the text also reinforces the notion that vision is a commodity: while the miracle of a cure would belong to God, the choice to remain blind is a human one.

On the other hand, Jacob and Levi agree to convert if Ysachar can restore their sight. After a lengthy speech affirming why they should believe in the Virgin, Ysachar lays his hands on the men’s eyes and they are cured. Significantly, their grateful responses allude to much more than their brief impairment.
Here the Jews see not only Mary’s miraculous grace but also, retrospectively, the error of their ways before their conversion, when they did not know how impaired their vision was.

The most blatant instantiation of Jewish grotesque excess—and the one most closely associated with the origins of anti-Semitism—occurs in the English cycle plays presenting the buffeting and crucifixion of Jesus. In the Chester and *Ludus Conventriae* cycles the soldiers who put Jesus on the cross are straightforwardly labeled Jews.62 In the *Ludus Coventriae*, after three Jews have finished nailing Jesus to the cross, a stage direction states: “Here xule Þei leve of and dawnrcyn a-bowte Þe cros shortly.”63 After the Jews have crucified the thieves, they “cast dyce for his clothis and fytyn and stryvyn.”64 The playwright has embellished the crucifers’ characters with physical grotesquerie and slapstick violence reinforcing the cosmic upheaval that they have engineered in the crucifixion. Although the crucifers in the York *Crucifixion* are not called Jews, the fact that they swear by Mahound (Muhammad) paradoxically signifies their Judaism, for swearing by the name of the Jewish (i.e., pre-Christian) god would have been blasphemous for the actors involved in the production.65 The same type of swearing takes place among the crucifers in the Towneley plays, in which Caiaphas encourages extreme physicality by promising to bless the torturer who beats Jesus the hardest.66 Here the stereotype of Jewish greed intersects with that of disordered excess.

At the intersection of Judaism and blindness in medieval literature and drama are two minor biblical figures who are portrayed quite differently in England and France: Lamech and Longinus. Medieval scriptural commentary asserted that Lamech was descended from Cain and also murdered him, based on Genesis 4:23–24.

23. And Lamech said to his wives Ada and Sella: Hear my voice, ye wives of Lamech, hearken to my speech: for I have slain a man to the wounding of myself, and a stripling to my own bruising.
24. Sevenfold vengeance shall be taken for Cain: but for Lamech seventy times sevenfold.

Genesis 4 states clearly that Lamech was a bigamist, a sin that figures in some drama. Nowhere does the Bible mention that Lamech was blind; rather, that tradition grew first out of Jewish scriptural commentary and was then disseminated in the Glossa ordinaria.67 Also according to these texts, after killing Abel, Cain was cursed to wander the earth eternally until someone killed him, bringing both Cain’s sin and God’s wrath upon the killer.

In England the Lamech story received its lengthiest dramatic treatment in the Ludus Coventriae and the Cornish Gwreans an Bys (Creation of the World). The former version is structured as a fifty-line episode that interrupts the play of Noah. Lamech says that he has gone blind because of his age, and his impairment has also affected his mental health: “Blyndenes doth make me of wytt for to rave / Whantynge of eye syght.”68 He claims to have been a superior archer when he was sighted, and he calls on his guide, a boy, to share in reviving this talent by helping him find and shoot a beast. The boy sees movement in a bush, helps Lamech to aim, and they shoot. Cain emerges and says that the arrow has slain him, whereupon he dies. The boy identifies the dead man as Cain, and Lamech is so angry that he beats the boy to death with his bow; this murder represents bruising of the “stripling” in the verse from Genesis. Lamech then bemoans the fact that his punishment will be seven times as severe as Cain’s for slaying Abel (a variation on the scriptural number). The blind man leaves, and Noah takes the stage again. This is a relatively neutral version of the Lamech legend that constructs the blind man as rather weak and confused. The playwright does not mention Lamech’s bigamy at all; rather, his misdirected evil in killing the cursed Cain becomes yet another reason for the flood.

The version of the Lamech story that made its way into the Ludus Coventriae is strikingly represented in the earlier Holkham Bible (ca. 1327–40) and the Egerton Genesis (1350–75), manuscripts in which biblical narratives recounted episodically in Anglo-Norman are richly illuminated.69 Neither text makes mention of Lamech’s bigamy, but both identify the boy who accompanies Lamech as a servant70 (a detail that diverges from the French version discussed later), and both represent Lamech’s fatal beating of the boy on the same page as the first scene(s) of the Noah story, significantly juxtaposing the moment of blind violence and the salvific cleansing to follow. As is the case in most pictorial representations of blind
people in the Middle Ages, the closed eyes of the figures of Lamech show their impairment.

The Cornish Gwreans an Bys, which may have been written as late as the early sixteenth century, devotes about 280 lines to the Lamech episode. In his opening soliloquy this Lamech claims to be a bad man and hopes to be proven worse than Cain. One aspect of his sinfulness is his bigamy, and he also claims to have other young women available to him. Then he tells the audience that he is blind. While Lamech’s character is obviously meant to be repugnant to the audience, his pride in his sins remains oddly detached from the murder of Cain which follows; instead, by ordering his material as he does, the playwright associates Lamech’s sins with his blindness. After Lamech and his servant agree to go hunting together, Cain emerges and delivers a soliloquy that mentions the curse that will fall upon anyone who dares to kill him. The shooting then takes place, but the dying Cain has the strength to engage in a hundred-line dialogue explaining to Lamech what he has done and why God will curse him. After Cain dies, Lamech turns on his servant, accuses him of responsibility for the murder, and beats him to death. Two devils then come from hell to claim Cain’s soul.

The Lamech of the Cornish play clearly exemplifies the stereotype of sexual excess sometimes associated with the blind, but the playwright has not integrated the evil that the blind man claims for himself into the episode of the murder. Instead, as in the Ludus Coventriae, this Lamech is portrayed as weak and uncertain when he is with his servant. This rather undeveloped character remains one-dimensionally emblematic of blindness: the episode’s real focus is his role in biblical history. Blindness is integral to that role but is not explored in any larger context, in contrast to an analogous episode in a French play.

The French version of the Lamech story, which appears in the fifteenth-century Le Mistère du Viel Testament, is much lengthier (almost 500 lines) and more detailed than either of the episodes from England, and the playwright is more intent than his counterparts on creating an evil, grotesquely excessive blind man. This Lamech first appears on stage as sighted, saying that he enjoys looking at the children he has by his two wives; he then gives a twenty-line speech praising bigamy, partly due to the fact that a man can have his pleasure with two women.

Quant il a ses plaisirs passez
Avecques l’une, sans mesprendre
Mais qu’il n’ait les espritz lassez
Avecques l’autre les peult prendre.\textsuperscript{73}

[When he has finished his pleasure with one, without doing any wrong, unless he has fatigued his spirits, he can take his pleasure with the other one.]

Lamech’s self-proclaimed sexual energy makes him resemble a fabliau character, as does his wives’ discussion of his inadequacies, sexual and otherwise. Ada says that his time has passed, and Sella replies:

Il ne peult desja plus aller;
Nature en luy se depart toute;
Tantost il ne verra plus goutte.\textsuperscript{74}

[Already he can’t go any farther; Nature has completely departed from him; soon he will not see anything at all.]

Claiming to be repulsed, Sella later asks whether he thinks he can service (“fournir”) two women at the same time, to which Ada replies that he can hardly handle one. They agree that it is their children in whom they take comfort. In this dialogue the playwright structurally implies the passage of time during which Lamech is going blind, and he also reiterates the sexual excesses of which Lamech is guilty while simultaneously challenging his masculinity. The structure of episode to this point also resembles the situation of the Sodomites, whose sexual sin leads to the divine punishment of blindness.

When Lamech reenters, he complains of his blindness, and he and his wives agree that his son by Sella, Tubal Cain, will serve as his guide.\textsuperscript{75} At this point Cain appears, praying desperately to the devils in hell to allow him to die;\textsuperscript{76} this prayer implicitly constructs Lamech as a devil, since he will be the one to send Cain to hell. After Lamech and Tubal Cain make their way through the fields and Lamech asks for help with his bow, Cain interrupts with another plea that devils take him to hell. As in the other version, Lamech, aided by the boy, shoots Cain, whose dying words again link his murderer to devils.

Dyables! Qui esse qui m’a frappé?
C’est fait de moy; je vois mourir.
Dyables, Dyables, je suys happé;
Venez tost mon ame querir.77

[Devils! Who is it who struck me? It’s done for me; I’m going to die. Devils, devils, I am caught. Come soon to fetch my soul.]

Tubal Cain identifies the dead man as Cain, and Lamech explodes with rage, calling the boy a traitor and the son of a whore (“filz de putain”); this insult again alludes to the sinful nature of Lamech’s marriages. He beats his son to death with his bow, and thus, unlike the Lamechs of the plays from England, the French character thus adds filicide to his list of sins. The playwright goes on to show Lamech returning home to the anger of his wives. When Ada hears what her husband has done, she cries, “Vous, aveugle, mastin infait, / Le confessés vous ainsi franc?”78 [You, blind man, stinking dog, do you confess it so frankly?]. She later calls him an adulterer and a rabid dog “filled with the devil” (“remply du Dyable”), thus making explicit Lamech’s diabolical connections to which Cain alluded earlier. Sella reemphasizes his disability, calling him a blind murderer.79

The Lamech episode of Le Mistére du Viel Testament deploys the stereotype of sexual excess associated with blind people, and then with Lamech’s return to his family, it allows for a social response to the murder that, in the plays from England, has only religious meaning. The man is both blind and a murderer, attributes that are closely connected in the wives’ final speeches, and his criminality has earthly effects as well as metaphysical ones. The French Lamech must suffer first the wrath of his family and then the vengeance of God, while the English and Cornish Lamechs fear only God because they do not return to society (and the Middle English Lamech says that he will flee and hide).80 The French playwright’s choice to place the blind man in human society allows the audience to watch sighted characters rebuking and insulting a blind one—and of course the response to the murder is justifiable, but part of that response is vilification of Lamech’s disability. So the French Lamech, a blind man, exemplifies sin, and the family’s cruel treatment of him is exemplary inasmuch as it is directed at both a sinner and a blind man. Audiences in England were given no such exemplary behavior to follow.

Another figure who tends to be treated differently in the drama of France and England is Longinus, the blind centurion who pierces the side of the crucified Christ with his spear; blood and water pour forth, and the holy effluence cures Longinus of his disability and converts him to Christianity
simultaneously. Although the Bible suggests that he was a Roman, many medieval texts either identify him as a Jew or state that the Jews employed him. For example, in MS Egerton 2658, a fifteenth-century prose version of the Passion, Longinus is “an euyl proude man” who “toke litel hede of our lady talkynge;” he shoves his spear hard into Jesus’s side, “as þese cruel jewys sette him to [d]o.”

Trinity College Cambridge MS B. 5.42, a fifteenth-century Life of the Virgin and of Christ, associates him more closely with Jews in a grammatically fragmented description: “But a knyʒt amonges [the Iewis] that hete longius A proude man and A wykid at that time but aftur he was convuertid.” In Langland’s Piers Plowman, Longinus is not only Jewish (“þis blynde Iew Longeus”) but allegorically their chivalric champion who comes “to Iusten wip Jesus.” However, Langland’s Longinus seems to bear Jesus no ill will: he was “maad” (made) to joust with him because all of the other Jews “were vnhardy, þat houed [þer] or stode, / To touchen hym or to tasten hym or taken hym doun of roode.” Furthermore, in his speech of tearful repentance, he claims not to have known what he was doing: “‘Ayein my wille it was, lord, to wownde yow so soore. ’ / He sighed and seide, ‘soore it me aþynkeþ.’” Both Langland’s text and Egerton 2658 suggest that as a blind man Longinus was not fully aware or in control of what he did, a tradition that also informs English drama. This lack of awareness provides a good example for viewers of the religious model of disability. If Longinus is ignorant of what he is doing and therefore not fully culpable, he deserves his miraculous cure more than he would otherwise, and his ignorance also makes his bitter contrition more believable.

The tradition of Longinus in extant medieval drama divides across the English Channel. In Britain he receives little attention in extant plays. In the Ludus Coventriae, the most fully developed episode, one of Pilate’s soldiers takes charge of Longinus, who places his trust in the man, saying “I trost ʒe be my frend / lede me forth sere. Oure sabath ʒou save.” Although the last sentence here seems to imply that Longinus is a Jew, his miraculous cure turns him strongly against his people; he says that he knows the Jews are responsible for Jesus’s death and “þe jewys of myn ignorans dede me rave.”

The blind Longinus in the York Cycle is completely silent; the miracle not only restores his sight but gives him a voice. Regardless of the religion imputed to Longinus, which would have been visible to the audience through costuming, both of these plays suggest a weak man sinning against Jesus unknowingly. (It would have been interesting to see whether an entire play could have sustained this kind of characterization: a play in the 1503 register of the lost Hereford Cycle was devoted to “Longys with his Knyghtes.”)
If, as the title implies, the blind man was actually somehow the leader of the centurions, then he may have been characterized as more actively, consciously evil.)

The French tradition of Longinus in drama presents him as straightforwardly malevolent and fully aware of the task that he is undertaking. In the thirteenth-century Résurrection du Sauveur, the soldiers appeal to Longinus by promising him payment in order to stab the body of the crucified Jesus. The character happily agrees to go with the soldiers because he needs money; his begging, though frequent, brings in little. Thus he willfully engages in sinful abuse of Jesus’s body and also evokes the stereotype of the ever-needly mendicant.

Arnoul Gréban’s Mystère de la Passion (ca. 1452), a four-day extravaganza stretching to over 27,000 lines, survives in nine full or partial manuscripts and was produced in several cities at least fourteen times before the end of the century, including three times in Paris before 1473. Gréban’s Longinus is deeply antagonistic toward Jesus: when the soldiers invite him to come with them to hasten Jesus’s death, he responds:

Des longtemps ay eu desir
de faire a Jhesus desplaisir,
et se vous me donnez licence
encore luy feray je offence,
comment qu’il en doye advenir.91

[For a long time I’ve had the desire to do harm to Jesus,
and if you give me permission, I will wound him again,
no matter what the consequences are.]92

Later Longinus adds that though Jesus never harmed him, he is glad he will die, and the blind man also wishes he had arrived before Jesus’s death, presumably in order to abuse him in his last moments as other Jews have done.93

Because Gréban has created a Longinus who in no way deserves a miraculous cure, the playwright must structure the miracle very differently. As the divine effluence runs down the spear, Longinus says that dead men cannot bleed, and a centurion nearby explains that this liquid is itself a miracle showing that Jesus is the true son of God. Longinus then asks for Jesus’s mercy and says:
La chere et precieuse goute
prendray et mettray sur mes yeux,
esperant qu’il m’en soit de mieulx
et que ma veue se ravoye.

[I will take and put on my eyes the dear and precious drop, hoping that it makes me better and that my sight is restored.]94

Of course the miracle occurs, and Longinus praises Jesus.

The Longinus episode in Gréban’s play differs markedly from those elsewhere. Here Longinus first enacts some of the conventional sins and excesses of blindness, but he must understand and repent of his sins before the miracle happens. Only then is the miraculous cure open to him. Gréban betrays some of the same discomfort as English writers with the fact that a miracle could cure a nonbelieving blind man, since such an event would challenge Christians who adhered to the religious model of disability that required them to submit to religious discipline in order to qualify for divine cure. However, the ways in which the writers deal with the issue differ greatly—and tellingly. It is as if the French playwright thinks of Longinus first and foremost as a blind man, whereas his English counterparts thinks of him largely as a character trapped in the dark sightlessness of ignorance, both physical and metaphysical. Gréban’s structuring of Longinus’s spiritual awakening allows the playwright to satisfy his audience first with the theatricality of a conventional blind character but then with an actively penitent sinner whose repentance earns him his cure.

Jean Michel’s Mystère de la Passion, performed in Antwerp in 1486, features a Longinus episode very similarly to Gréban’s, but Michel furthers the social aspects of the miracle. Again Longinus wants to inflict injury on Jesus but arrives after his death. With the help of a soldier named Brayart (perhaps related to the word brailler, “to bray, to cry”), Longinus stabs Jesus with the lance, and the effluence pours forth, evidently in greater volume than in most passion plays. Thirteen spectators—soldiers, Jews, and the nameless centurion—marvel at the great abundance of blood (“de sanc en grand habondance”; 29001), and each of nine Jews speaks of his newfound faith or of his sorrow at having played a part in Jesus’s death. After more than fifty lines of such exclamations, Longinus speaks again, begging the savior’s pardon for the mutilation. Longinus anticipates the miracle in language fraught with religious symbolism.
Mais, sire, alas, par ta pitié,
prens de ce pecheur pacience
et enlumine la clarté
de ma tenebreuse ignorance,
car, en icelle confidence,
one tres precieuse goute
de sanc qui de ton costé goute
humblement mectray sur mes yeulx,
[esperant qu’i m’en soit de mieulx
et que plus clerement te voye. (29052–61)

[But lord, alas, through your pity have patience with this sinner, and
illuminate the brightness of my dark ignorance, for, with confidence in this, I
will humbly put on my eyes a very precious drop of the blood that drips from
your side, hoping that it makes me better and that I will see you more
clearly.]

Michel’s Longinus uses his restored sight to engage in an act of affective piety by focusing on and asking forgiveness for the terrible wound that he has made in Jesus’s side, and he contrasts giving the wound with the gifts of light and grace that he has received in exchange. Only the Roman soldiers remain unconverted by the experience. The theatricality of the group of Jews converting around the crucified body of Christ would have been impressive, but the numerous voices praising Jesus also serve to teach Longinus the error of his ways with greater intensity than the sole centurion in Gréban’s play. Longinus as a member of this large group provides an interesting example of the religious model: when he is blind, he is among Jews, and when he is sighted, he is among Christians.

Dufournet asserts that stories such as this one “produce confusion between the symbol and the signified: what was a metaphor for sin . . . becomes the sin, the consequence of sin, and the blind person is made the figure of the sinner.” What Dufournet reads as the convergence of the symbol and the signified, Naomi Schor would read as catachresis. But regardless of terminology, unlike the Lamech episode, all versions of the Longinus story allay social anxieties with his reintegration into sighted and Christian society. This progression would have been visible in performance, first with Longinus’s gaze directed toward the body of Jesus as the source of the miracle, and then, during his monologue of grateful praise, in his ability to return the gaze of the audience, establishing a rapport with them.
The absence of Jews from England and, later, France adds a dimension to the dramatic performance of Judaism in these plays. Inasmuch as the New Law of Christianity defined itself in opposition to the Old Law of Judaism, medieval Christian society needed to “remember” Jews more than any other marginalized race. The final social marginalization represented by expulsion could not erase Jews from Christian history, and therefore, in a complex dynamic enacted in the drama, they could be benignly represented by Christians even as the representation of them was vilified (as was most noteworthy in the Fergus play in the York Cycle). The plays demonstrate the pressing need for the enactment of conversion of lapsed sinners and their reintegration into the Christian community, and playwrights chose the blind not only because the cured blind man demonstrates his incorporation into the community of the audience by returning their gaze but also because his blindness has a conventional metaphoric dimension, reminding the audience of the absent Jewish other, waiting like Tobit for the scales to fall miraculously from his eyes.

Moore’s *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* examines the rhetorical dimensions of anti-Semitism represented in the important metaphor of leprosy, but leprosy did not dominate the anti-Semitic discourse of the later Middle Ages. This examination of the metaphor of blindness in a few of its permutations has demonstrated, I hope, that the language of persecution drew on a long-established tradition and exploited it in peculiarly medieval ways. However, inasmuch as a metaphor is both sign and signified, blind people were implicated by this language, and although they were not persecuted as systematically or as harshly as medieval Jews, the association could not have helped their lot. A persecuting society is partly built upon the rhetorical figures that it privileges, and in the Middle Ages the complex constructions of blindness as disability and trope of disability resulted in unfortunately similar types of marginalization for two very different groups of people.