Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind

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CHAPTER 4

Humoring the Sighted:
The Comic Embodiment of Blindness

We have already seen some examples of the cruel but supposedly humorous treatment to which blind characters could be subjected in literature and history. Rutebeuf’s satirical “Ordres de Paris” lampoons the blind residents of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts and raises incendiary anxieties about the effects that their disabled “excess” could have on the city. Villon’s bequest of his spectacles to the institution two centuries later is gentler, more personal social satire, but the motivation to satirize the hospice’s residents is different only in degree rather than kind. The bourgeois Parisian’s journal entry about the blind men competing for the pig, though not written in a humorous style, describes an incident that was obviously staged in order to amuse its spectators. For reasons delineated in chapter 2, it is not coincidental that all of these examples are Continental. Alongside these texts arose several others on the Continent that treated blindness as a cause for laughter; the writers of these works apparently had the express purpose of humiliating blind characters or placing them in degrading situations for comic ends. This chapter will present a roughly chronological discussion of “comic” representations of blind people in a variety of genres. Such satirical marking differs—markedly—from the relative absence of satire of blind characters in texts from Britain. But while these texts delight in cruelty to blind characters, they do the cultural work of representing blind people out in society, making their way through the world, inhumane though that world is. In other words, the characters at the margins of medieval society move to the center so that their position in that society can be evaluated and negotiated. This movement must necessarily be painful, since no marginalized group in history has been suddenly rescued from vilification in
order to be given more humane treatment; however, it is nevertheless a movement toward a version of the social model of disability for blind people because it acknowledges that they exist, even if through cruelty and satire.

In this chapter I will discuss ballads, fabliaux, farces, and a romance. Nearly all of these texts come from France, a predictable result of the fact that these genres are basically French in origin. Humor is an option for authors of ballads and romances but a generic requirement in fabliau and farce; however, the exploitation and degradation of blind characters for putatively humorous ends are not required in any of these genres. While it is not my intention to ignore generic distinctions (and I will highlight them when they are most significant), the deployment of stereotypes about blind people and related plot devices transcends genre, giving these disparate works of literature commonalities that deserve attention.

In thirteenth-century France at roughly the time that Louis founded the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts and the use of blinding as punishment was also current, a seminal text in the representation of blind people emerged from Tournai, then in France but now part of Belgium. It is tempting to assert that *Le Garçon et l’Aveugle* (The Boy and the Blind Man), which has been called the first farce in French, was so popular that the myriad negative characteristics of the blind that it deploys influenced subsequent writers to the degree that those traits later became stereotypes. However, scant manuscript evidence and the nonexistent medieval performance history of the play contradict such an assertion. A more likely possibility is that the playwright made use of a set of stereotypes of blind people that he knew his audience would recognize, recognition that is paramount in comic drama. The play’s humor, if it may be called that, grows out of several of the excesses associated with blindness and the punishment administered because of them.

The play opens with a blind man begging for alms and bemoaning the fact that he has no guide. He crosses paths with a boy, Jeannot, who agrees to guide him for a small daily wage; the blind man says that if he sings and Jeannot begs, they will earn “plenty of money and bread.” The boy replies,

je prierai Diex griés torment
envoit tous chaix k’au povre aveule
feront nes une bone seule,
car il l’aroient bien perdu. (47–50)"
[I will pray to God to send many misfortunes to those who, even once, give alms to a poor blind person, because that would be wasted money.]

The blind man overhears the boy, who claims to have said this only to trick rogues (“c’est pour ces vilains decevoir”).

The pair beg unsuccessfully, and when the boy complains, the blind man says:

Se je jamais pain ne rouvoie,
  joliement me meintenroi,
  tant ai je deniers assamblés. (104–6)

[If I ever stop asking for bread, I will still maintain myself nicely, having amassed so much money.]

The blind man promises Jeannot that he will share part of this wealth even if the day’s begging proves fruitless. Here is an example of the stereotype that blind beggars are stingy and greedy, making them, in effect, false mendicants unworthy of further Christian charity.²

When Jeannot promises to procure a woman for the blind man, he says that not only does he already have one, but that when he has sex with her (the verb used here, pourquler, has strongly obscene connotations), Jeannot can help by raising her legs so high that one could roll dice on the soles of her feet (135–40). This sexual banter, at which Jeannot claims offense, reflects a “grotesque excess” typical of marginalized others in medieval literature;³ in addition, it may have suggested the sin of sodomy to the play’s original audience, since the woman’s acrobatic posture in combination with the blind man’s obscenity could imply anal intercourse. If this is the playwright’s intention, then the character’s blindness is justified in terms of the divine punishment enacted upon the Sodomites.

Jeannot then claims that he needs to leave for a moment to piss; instead, he adopts a different voice, insults the blind man, and slaps him.

Truans, Diex vous doint mal estrine,
  quant si desordenement parlés!
  Mais chierement le comparrés:
    tenés pour çou! (147–50)

[Beggar, may God give you bad luck when you speak so improperly! But you will pay for it dearly: take that!]
The young valet scolds his victim with an economic metaphor that alludes to both the blind man’s sin and the punishment yet to come. In this voice we may well hear the anxieties of medieval society as a whole, castigating the blind man for his sexual and pecuniary excesses.

The pair arrive at the blind man’s house, where he complains of his lover’s absence. Jeannot offers to buy food and to repair the blind man’s torn robe; the man takes off his clothes and gives Jeannot his money. After a self-congratulatory aside, the boy tells the blind man to find another valet, for he is leaving. This he does in the final lines of the play.

Fi de vous! enne sui je au large?
Je n’aconte un estront a vous.
Vous estes fel et envious;
se n’estoit pour tes compagnions
vous arïés ja mil millons,
mais pour iaus serés deportés.
S’il ne vous siet, si me sivés! (259–65)

[Fie on you! Am I not out of your reach? You’re nothing but a turd to me. You’re a trickster and a jealous person: if it were not for your companions (like me), you would already be rich by millions, but you will pay for them. If you’re not satisfied, run after me!]

The play apparently ends with the silent, victimized blind man standing alone before the audience.

The brevity and simplicity of this play suggest that the playwright was not interested in exploring cruelly innovative ways of abusing blind people; rather, he shows conventional treatment of the blind and stereotypes relating to them in order for the audience to rekindle their disdain toward greedy sightless mendicants. (In the most recent edition of the play, the introduction calls it “a scene from daily life.”) But the scene has special meaning as drama that it would not have in another genre. In performance the blind man’s role makes him the isolated other, the object of the audience’s gaze who can neither acknowledge nor return it; thus he is rendered acutely powerless. At another level, the (presumably) sighted actor’s performance as a blind man instantiates the figure of the false mendicant that medieval society feared and hated; an effective performance would have confirmed the belief that blindness could be persuasively feigned. Jeannot, on the other hand, uses asides to build a sense of complicity with the audi-
ence as he elicits confessions from the blind man that prompt righteous anger. Jeannot then steals the blind man’s ill-got gains to spend himself, thus returning them to the economy of the community that has been victimized by greedy, unjustifiable mendicancy. The young valet ultimately represents the enforcer of poetic justice that here coincides with discipline, at least in the opinion of the playwright.

No records of specific performances of *Le Garçon et L’Aveugle* survive, but absence of such evidence is not at all surprising. However, the unique manuscript copy of the play demonstrates that it had a long performance history. Carol Symes has studied additions and emendations in the manuscript, BN fonds français 24366, that made it conform to changing textual conventions relating to performance practices over the course of two centuries. She delineates the scribal activity as follows.

Five main phases in transmission can be identified: the original transcription campaign, carried out sometime around 1270 (Scribe); an initial attempt at clarification, either by the same scribe working at a later time (with a better pen) or by a close contemporary (Hand A); a further attempt at clarification, effected sometime between the end of the thirteenth and middle of the fourteenth centuries (Hand B); and two periods of radical revision and censorship in the mid- to late fifteenth century, the heyday of the farce (Hands X and Y).

Symes also describes five explicits, only one of which she tentatively identifies as having been penned by one of the scribes above (Hand B). This evidence strongly suggests a lively, lengthy performance history for the play, and since it appears to have had some popularity, other medieval copies probably circulated but did not survive.

Symes also indicates the play’s possible didactic value for friars and others in the communication of doctrine; she cites Preacher Michel Minot’s favorite text, Matthew 15:14, “Leave them: for they are blind and leaders of the blind; for if a blind man offers to lead a blind man, they will fall into the pit together,” a verse that echoes the opening of the play, in which the boy saves the blind man from falling into a hole. I would add that the play also teaches the lesson of leaving the blind man in his marginal situation in society, which is exactly what the boy does at the end of the play. Furthermore, the possibility that the play was presented within some kind of religious framework would help to explain why closely analogous scenes of blind men and their guides punctuate some of the lengthy religious dramas discussed later.
In the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, Eustache Deschamps penned a satirical ballad in which the persona engages in dialogues with beggars with different disabilities ranging from lameness to St. Anthony’s fire. Significantly, the first of the beggars is a blind man.

Pour Dieu donnez maille ou denier  
A ce povre qui ne voit goutte!  
—Va t’en sans chandoille couchier  
D’ardoir ton lit es hors de doubtë.⁸

[For God’s sake give a (ring? buckle?) or a penny to this poor person who sees nothing!—Go to bed without a candle so you will not be afraid of setting your bed on fire.]

We have already seen the accusation that careless blind people cause fires in “Les Ordres de Paris,” the satire by Rutebeuf discussed in chapter 2; here the implication provides a slightly paranoid rebuff to the blind man that deflects his request for alms, a deflection that the persona applies to all the beggars in the final line of each stanza, “Attë encore jusqu’à demain” (“Wait until tomorrow again”). Ironically, the poem closes with the poet/persona begging from princes, who dismiss him with the same line.

Deschamps’ pointed, direct social satire of blind people is very different from the use of blindness in the English lyric “Beware (The Blynde Eteth Many a Flye)” by Deschamps’ younger contemporary, John Lydgate. This six-stanza rhyme royal poem provides a satirical warning to men about the wiles of women who deceive and entrap them in love. Lydgate concludes each stanza with a variant of the line, “But ever beware: the blynde eteth many a flie,” a proverb popular from the Middle Ages through the sixteenth century.⁹ This proverbial use of blindness connects the man who chooses not to see a woman’s duplicitous nature to a blind man; it is a world away from Deschamps’ voicing of a blind beggar, due to both the conventionality of the proverb and the distancing effect of the metaphor. While the proverb is degrading toward blind people, its application unites the sighted with the blind, implying that everyone has blind spots, some of which are born of a willful refusal to see the truth.

In The Scandal of Fabliau, R. Howard Bloch notes that in that genre, which focuses on the body, “the body itself is . . . never whole” but is fragmented.¹⁰ Bloch is largely concerned with both verbal and literal mutilation of bodies, but within that group are also disabled bodies, which in the me-
dieval imaginary represent a lack of wholeness, and we shall see that mutilation and disability are closely linked in some of these texts. One of the notable features of fabliaux and other comic texts is that disability and mutilation tend to reproduce themselves. In the texts examined later, blindness is never the sole disability to play a role in the plot: other disabilities and chronic illnesses flesh out the narratives.

Among the best known fabliaux involving blind characters is the thirteenth-century *Les Trois Aveugles de Compiègne* (*The Three Blind Men of Compiègne*) by the otherwise unknown poet Cortebarbe. This narrative centers on testing the characters’ faith in what cannot be seen, and such faith is called into question as the minstrel or performer of the poem frames it.

On tient le menestrel a sage
qui met en trover son usage
qe fere biaus dis e biaus contes
c’on dit devant dus, devant contes. 11

*A minstrel is held wise who uses his experience to write beautiful sayings and beautiful stories that are recited before dukes and before counts.*

The minstrel figure calls upon his readers or listeners to believe that he is writing this fabliau from his own experience, but ultimately the poem will question the reliability of believing what one is told.

The narrative begins with a clerk, riding on a fine palfrey and accompanied by a squire, who happens upon three poorly dressed blind beggars who are making their way to Senlis. He thinks that one of them can probably see; otherwise, how could they travel? Thus the plot of the fabliau is set in motion by the clerk’s anxiety about beggars feigning blindness. Interestingly, the clerk raises the issue of disability as he makes his resolution: “El cors me fiere goute / se je ne sai s’il voient goute.” [“May gout strike my body if I don’t find out whether they see a little,” 31–32]. At a superficial level the clerk plays off his vision against theirs: either he and they are sighted, or his vision of them is as impaired as theirs is. The clerk shows his familiarity with the conventional street cry of the blind (“qui ne voit goutte”), but he deploys it in a way that highlights commodification: the able-bodied man shows a joking willingness to bring gout on himself in exchange for finding out whether the blind men are able-bodied. Metaphorically he wagers his able-bodiedness against theirs.

When the blind men hear the clerk approaching, they ask for alms, and
he says he will give them a besant. Each of the blind men thinks that one of his companions has received the money, but actually the clerk has given them nothing. He withdraws to eavesdrop on the men, who decide to return to Compiègne to amuse themselves—and the clerk decides to follow them to see how they will end up (“e dist que adès les siurra / desi adont que il savra / lor fin,” 67–69). Cortebarbe thus creates a close identification between the clerk and the minstrel poet who introduces the fabliau: both are creators of narratives that must be played out until they reach closure. However, Cortebarbe has also cast doubt on the clerk’s cleverness, since he has not been able to recognize that the three men were actually blind. It is noteworthy that Cortebarbe does not return to the issue at all; there is no epiphanic moment at which the clerk realizes that the men cannot see, for such a realization would make the clerk look less clever. Cortebarbe seems unable to exercise full control over his subject matter just as the sighted clerk cannot fully comprehend and control the blind men; their independence is curious and bothersome to him.

When the blind men arrive at an inn, they ask to be served a splendid meal on their own in a painted room (81–85); the men’s desire for visual ostentation that they cannot themselves enjoy foreshadows the excesses of the feast to come. The innkeeper obliges, putting faith in the fact that they will be able to pay him. He even rationalizes that men dressed so poorly often have plenty of money (“Si fete gent ont deniers granz,” 89), thus showing his knowledge of the convention of the greedy beggar who has amassed a fortune like the character in *Le Garçon et L’Aveugle*. The blind men stay the night, as does the clerk, though his presence is still unknown to his victims. When the innkeeper asks for payment, a stichomythic dialogue takes place among the blind men as they begin to understand that none of them has the besant. The innkeeper then threatens them with violence. At this point the clerk comes forward.

Li clers, qui fu a biau harnas,
qui le conte forment amoit,
de ris en aise se pasmoit. (176–78)

*[The clerk, who was well versed (in trickery) and who loved the story greatly, split his sides laughing with pleasure.]*

So the clerk has seen the story of the blind men that he set in motion reach its end, and he intervenes, telling the innkeeper that he will be responsible
for the men’s bill. The blind men then leave, and they do not reappear in the fabliau. Again, there is a close similarity between the work of Cortebarbe and the work of the clerk: they use the blind men as vehicles for their plot, and when the characters are no longer needed, they are expunged, once again assuming their marginal position.

From this point forward, the tale is about money, but the motif of disability remains present. The ringing of the church bell for mass inspires the clerk to ask the innkeeper if he would allow the local priest to pay the blind men’s debt on the clerk’s behalf, to which the innkeeper readily agrees. The clerk has his horse prepared for a quick departure, and then he goes with his host to the church, where he whispers in the priest’s ear that the innkeeper lost his mind to a terrible illness the previous night (“une cruel maladie / li prist ersoir dedenz sa teste,” 244–45) and that the clergyman should read a gospel over him in order to cure him. In full hearing of the innkeeper, the priest responds that he will do “it” as soon as the mass is finished; assuming that the priest is talking about paying the money, the innkeeper says that he clears the clerk of his debt, and the clerk departs. After the mass, comedy ensues as the priest tries to force the innkeeper to kneel before him to hear the gospel, but the supposedly insane man becomes angry and repeatedly demands his money, until the priest must ask his parishioners to restrain him. While the priest is reading the gospel and sprinkling holy water over him, the innkeeper, angry and ashamed of having been duped, realizes that his best option is simply to return to his inn, and the priest interprets this change of behavior as the end of the man’s insanity.¹²

Cortebarbe introduces the moral in his own voice: many people are often unjustly put to shame. Although the poet’s creative project allies him with the clerk in the fabliau, the moral takes up the cause of the innkeeper. But Cortebarbe’s apparent sympathy for that character in the slippery, satirical genre of fabliau causes the reader to question the moral: is the innkeeper’s shame actually unjust? His initial step toward shaming himself occurs when he trusts three blind men to pay for a luxurious meal in spite of their impoverished appearance, trust based on his prejudicial belief that blind beggars often squirrel away fortunes. Of course he demonstrates his gullibility yet again when he trusts a clerk with no connections to the blind men to pay their bill, and even further when he believes that the parish priest will clear the debt, but the first link in his chain of mistakes is with the blind men.

Other common medieval attitudes toward disability are equally integral to the plot. As mentioned earlier, the fabliau is set in motion by the clerk’s
suspicion that the men cannot be blind and are begging under false pre-
tsenses. (Cortebarbe’s identification with the clerk as story-maker may be
most clearly represented in the fact that neither the poet nor the character
explicitly acknowledges that this suspicion is disproven; it is simply the cat-
alyst for setting the plot in motion, a clear example of narrative prosthesis.)
On the other hand, the clerk knows how to exploit the religious model of
disability to his advantage in at least two ways. First, he makes the innkeeper
comfortable with the notion that the priest will take responsibility for the
debt initially incurred by the blind men, as if it were normal for churchmen
to care for the disabled financially. The clerk then fabricates the story of the
innkeeper’s insanity for the priest, who sees it as his religious duty to use
scripture to effect a cure for the impairment.

Integral to the genre of fabliau is substitution: one lover for another, one
object for another, one sum of money for a very different one. In this fa-
bliau where the clerk’s first words set up an exchange of one impairment for
another, disability becomes the commodity of exchange in the plot. Here
the clerk’s flippant oath about falling victim to gout if one of the blind men
cannot see comically raises the possibility of substitution (and if this were a
romance, generic conventions might require that he be stricken with the
disease), but the actual substitution occurs when the clerk conjures up the
innkeeper’s insanity, which structures the second half of the plot as the
blind men’s impairment structured the first half. Of course the innkeeper’s
disability is a fabrication (also often integral to fabliaux), but its results are
real: the clerk gets away without paying for the blind men, and the towns-
people of Compiègne are likely to remain suspicious of the innkeeper’s san-
ity for some time.

Central to this discussion but not quite central to the fabliau are the
three blind men. Although these men embody some of the familiar stereo-
types associated with their disability, notably drunkenness and raucous-
ness, they are not among the most grotesquely excessive in medieval French
literature. However, ultimately they bring misrule to Compiègne in spite of
themselves because of their mistaken belief that the clerk has given them a
besant, whereby Cortebarbe implies that even when they seem to be in con-
trol, they will inevitably upset the social order somehow. The bipartite
structure of the fabliau, in which the blind men appear only in its first half,
has the effect of “[bringing them] from the periphery of concerns to the
center of the story to come,” to quote Mitchell and Snyder’s definition of the
structure of narrative prosthesis.13 Their utter absence from the second half
of the tale shows Cortebarbe “fixing” their deviance by remarginalizing
them, sending them back to the liminal, depopulated place where the clerk first saw them: the road from Compiègne to Senlis. Although the blind men have benefitted temporarily from the clerk’s tricks, their presence in the town is a problem, allowing no possibility of social integration.

Another fabliau, the second in the popular late medieval collection *Les Cents Nouvelles Nouvelles* (ca. 1462), raises several issues relating to disability, including blindness. The tale is set in London, a setting that is significant in relation to the tale’s subject matter, and takes place “not too long ago” (“n’a pas long temps”). There a bourgeois merchant lived with his wife and beautiful daughter, whom the couple prized above all else. Unfortunately the girl develops a serious case of hemorrhoids, and “because of the severity of her illness, [she] could do nothing but cry and sigh.” The distraught parents first ask the advice of a *matrone*, a woman skilled in medicine, and when her prescription of “one hundred thousand types of herbal medicines” proves ineffectual, they call in several doctors from the London area to examine the girl’s affliction, which has by now been going on “a long time.” Although they prescribe “clysters, powders, ointments, and all sorts of remedies,” the girl’s affliction remains intractable, and she is “more dead than alive.” In their desperate search for a cure, the family turns to an aged Franciscan friar who is blind in one eye. He makes a medicinal powder and returns to administer it while “eyeing her diseased parts, as if he could not contemplate them enough.” As he is about to apply the powder by blowing it through a tube,

La pouvre fille, si ne se peut elle contenir, voyant l’estrange fasson de regarder a tout ung oeil de nostre cordelier, que force de rire ne la surprint, qu’elle cuida longuement retenir. Mais si mal, helas! Luy advint, que ce ris a force retenu fut converty en ung sonnet dont le vent retourna si tres a point la pouldre que la pluspart il fist voler contre le visage et sur l’oeil de ce bon cordelier.

[The maid noticed the strange fashion in which the friar looked at her with his one good eye, and was overcome with laughter. She managed to contain her mirth for a while, but finally she had kept it pent up for so long that it was transformed into a crude sound whose wind scattered the powder with such force that most of it flew into the good Franciscan’s face and eye.]

Although the corrosive powder ultimately fails to cure the girl, it blinds the friar’s good eye, and he asks the merchant for recompense for his now total blindness. The merchant first agrees only to give the friar alms, but later he
increases the offer to the sum he would have paid had his daughter been cured. However, the blind man complains that now he can neither perform mass and other offices of the church nor study holy writings in order to preach. When the merchant refuses to offer more money, the friar takes his case to court.

"Dieu scet que pluseurs se rendirent au consistoire pour oyr ce nouvel proces, qui beaucoup pleut aux seigneurs du dit parlement, tant pour la nouvelleté du cas que pour les allegations et argumens des parties devant eulz debatans, qui non accoustumées mais plaisantes estoient.

[Lord knows that a great many people went to the court to hear this strange and curious trial, which amused the lords of the Parliament, both because of its novelty and because of the allegations and arguments which the parties debated; these were both unusual and amusing.]22

The case, left undecided in Parliament, is sent from one court to another. The girl is later cured, but not before the story of her hemorrhoids becomes widely known to the London public.

The tale’s treatment of blindness is in keeping with other French comic texts. First, it is not narratologically necessary for the friar to be blind in one eye, but the writer makes him so in order to allow him to enact his disability in a manner that strikes the sighted people around him as humorous: the way he uses his single eye causes the girl to laugh and to fart. Thus the writer affords the audience an opportunity to laugh along with the girl at the disability of visual impairment and to see it further degraded by flatulence at close range. And again, fabliau’s generic principle of substitution comes into play. The girl’s disability, caused by the length and severity of her supposedly embarrassing illness, is displaced by the friar’s intensified disability as he becomes fully blind. Retrospectively we can see that the writer is implying that the blinding is a punishment for the friar’s sexual curiosity; if he had not scrutinized the girl in such an attentive, sexually charged way, she would not have laughed or farted.23 Thus this tale at least partially deploys the narrative convention of blinding as punishment for sexual impropriety, which will be the subject of the next chapter; however, unlike the texts examined there, this sexual misdemeanor remains unexamined and undeveloped, an implication of voyeurism rather than a fully developed reason for condemning the friar.

Another aspect of the satire is clearly anticlerical, even though, as
Howard Bloch and others have pointed out, clerics in fabliaux are most often priests, not friars. The antifraternal bent of the tale’s anticlericalism is historically appropriate, given the friars’ reputation as practitioners of medicine, but according to medieval medical practice relating to hemorrhoids, the friar in the tale is a quack. John Arderne, a mid-fourteenth-century doctor and author of Treatises of Fistula in Ano, Haemorrhoids, and Clysters, writes at length on proper treatments for hemorrhoids, none of which are dry; when corrosives are used, they are applied in ointments. Arderne’s predecessor in medical writing, Lanfrank, castigates “lewed lechis” who attempt to treat hemorrhoids with corrosives alone. Indeed, had the friar in the tale used an ointment, his attempted cure would not have backfired due to a simple puff of wind. Although the writer does not call the friar’s medical abilities into question, the family’s appeal to him as their final hope indicates that he was not high in the London medical hierarchy.

The one-eyed friar in the first part of the tale is satirized for his disability, his inappropriate sexual curiosity, and his quackery, but the satire of the fully blind friar after the “accident” calls into play the stereotype of the greedy blind man constantly begging for money. This may also have added to the general antifraternal tone of the tale, since friars were to offer their medical services free of charge, but here he is demanding not only payment but recompense. This convention of the greedy blind man receives no closure in the tale, which leaves the friar traveling from court to court, begging for the money that he believes he deserves. The lack of closure in itself implies the repeated, potentially comic performance of the blind man’s disability, since he must go to each venue, prove his disability, tell yet again the humiliating story of how he was fully blinded, and plead for money that he will never receive. Inasmuch as a court of law is always theatrical, the blind friar becomes an actor who performs on demand whenever he can find an appropriate audience. And the friar’s repetition of the story intradiegetically reflects the writer’s desire that the fabliau itself be told repeatedly.

BÉRINUS AND THE TALE OF BERYN

A lengthy fourteenth-century French prose romance called Bérinus offers a variety of interesting treatments of blindness in contrast to its fifteenth-century English translation, The Tale of Beryn, which for many years was attributed to Chaucer. Contiguous episodes of Bérinus show that the writer understands how vision has been commodified in French culture, including the use of blinding as punishment. The Beryn author, however, includes
only one of the episodes in his translation, which he recasts as satire of a very English kind of legal system.

Reaching more than six hundred printed pages in its modern edition, Bérinus is far too long and complex to discuss in its entirety. We will focus only on the adventures of the title characters on the island of Blandie, an episode that takes place in the first quarter of the romance. Bérinus, son of a wealthy Roman during the reign of Philip Augustus, has wasted his youth in gambling and neglected his dying mother. His father marries an evil woman who wants her stepson out of their household, so Bérinus decides to renounce his heritage and become a merchant if his father buys him five ships. His first commercial voyage takes him to the isle of Blandie (a name related to the verb blandir, “to flatter”), where he loses an ill-considered wager that will require him to drink all the water in the sea. The winner takes Bérinus and his men before the local authorities, but not before other Blandiens try to take further advantage of the apparently wealthy foreigner.

Three citizens in particular cause trouble for Bérinus: a man who plants his own knife on Bérinus and then accuses him of having used it to murder the man’s father, a woman who claims that her child was fathered by Bérinus, and a blind man who says that Bérinus has stolen his eyes and refuses to return them.

L’aveugle l’emmena, par l’aide de la gent qui y seurvinrent, par devant le seneschal, et la se plaigny de Bérinus, et dist devant tous qu’il lui avoit mauvaisement ses yeulx crevez et emblez; pour quoy il requeroit au juge que il lui en feist droit et raison.28

[The blind man led him before the seneschal, with the help of the people who guarded him, and there he accused Bérinus and said in front of everyone that he had horribly destroyed and stolen his eyes, for which he required a judge who would give him right and reason.]

On their way to court Bérinus and his men encounter a fellow Roman named Gieffroy, who offers his help to them. Gieffroy explains that the ruler of the island, Isope, is an aged man who has been blind for sixty years, but nevertheless he rules peacefully and well; ultimately he will judge the accusations brought by the three Blandiens.29 Bérinus and his men then cut Gieffroy’s hair raggedly so that he appears to be a fool, and they go before the judge Hannibal to confront the accusers. There the blind man embellishes his story of Bérinus’s supposed crime.
“Seigneur, je me plaing de Bérinus qui cy est, qui mes yeulx m’a tolus et emblez. Il avint en un jour, qui passez est, que nous fusmes compagnon ensemble d’un chatel et d’un avoir; si cheï que il s’en ala en une besongne et me laissa ses yeulx pour les miens. Or est ainsi que je les vueil ravoir, car j’en ay mestier.”

[“My lord, I accuse Bérinus who is here, who took and stole my eyes. It happened on a day in the past that we were companions in possessions and fortune; it befell that he went away for work and left me his eyes for my own. Thus now I want to have them back, because I need them.”]

The blind man contextualizes the loss of his eyes in the world of commerce, building his tale on the fact that Bérinus is a merchant who needs his companion’s eyes in order to do what a merchant does. The blind man’s formal accusation takes a different tone from its earlier instantiation, in which he simply accused Bérinus of blinding him; here the disabling takes on the fanciful aura of romance, or perhaps a fabliau-like interest in substitution, with the possibility of the exchange of eyes being undone. The change in the blind man’s story also draws attention to it, as it becomes the only accusation of the three that is not humanly possible.

Playing the fool, Gieffroy argues against the three accusers on behalf of Bérinus, saying of the blind man’s accusation,

“Sachiez, sire seneschal, que de tout ce il dit verité, mais, puis qu’il vuelt ses yeulx ravoir, il est bien raison que messire rait les siens. Si vous prye que vous facies rendre a mon seigneur ses yeulx, car il s’en aidera trop mieulx que d’uns estranges.”

[“Know, sir seneschal, that all he says is true, but since he wants to have his eyes back, it is right that my lord have his back. I pray that you have my lord’s eyes given back to him, because he will be aided much more by them than by strange ones.”]

Again the romance deploys a fabliau-like doubling of disability: both the blind man and Bérinus have been harmed by the exchange. The blind man then withdraws his claim, but Gieffroy will not let the case drop; he adds, “‘se vous avez les yeulz monseigneur perduz, si voulons nous que vous nous en faciés amende, car messire avoir trop plus chier les siens que les vostres.’” [“If you have lost my lord’s eyes, then we want you to pay a fine to us for them, because my lord held his own eyes much more dear than
yours.”] The seneschal takes money from the blind man, and afterward, Gieffroy also effectively argues against the other two false accusers.

Gieffroy’s defense further commodifies the sense of sight by claiming that Bérinus deserves the return of his rightful property—his own eyes—and if no such return can be made, a fine is due to the offended party. So the physically impossible exchange of eyes, which has a certain leaden humor in itself, is replaced by a financial exchange, which would have struck a medieval audience as humorously ironic inasmuch as blind people were generally the recipients of money rather than givers. The humor is augmented by the fact that the blind man is caught out by Gieffroy, who, as far as the Blandiens know, is a fool.

The ruler Isope, who has heard of Gieffroy’s legal triumph, sends gift-bearing messengers to invite the victorious Romans to his court. In order to reach it, they must cross mysterious and potentially dangerous terrain of the type that is familiar in romance. Among the most frightening obstacles is a bridge, guarded by scorpions and dragons, that crosses a raging river. In order to explain the history of the river, the Bérinus writer interrupts the travel of the Romans to recount the lengthy tale of the evil king Agriano of Gamel, a kingdom near Blandie.

When Agriano ascends to the throne, he expels all women from Gamel, thus incurring the wrath of several of his knights who unite against him and swear to join the women in exile. The leader of this group, Grianor, so enrages the king that he orders the knight’s nose cut off. The exiles settle on the island of Blandie and elect a leader, Mirame. Agriano decides to conquer the rebels’ island, and when he has taken control of it, he cuts off the nose and puts out one eye of each citizen; the text states that men, women, mothers, sisters, and everyone suffered the same fate. After living under Agriano’s tyranny for fourteen years, Mirame incites the Blandiens to challenge Agriano, whose forces have been depleted because of their inability to reproduce. Agriano sends forty knights with his response to the challenge, and Mirame orders them punished with multiple mutilations: each knight loses his nose, his lower lip, his ears, and both eyes, though one knight is spared one of his eyes in order to lead the others back to Gamel. The detail of the one-eyed knight is probably indebted to the narrative of Simon de Montfort’s mutilation of the heretics of Bram, when one hundred prisoners were blinded and had their noses cut off, but one man was left with one eye so that he could see to guide them home; however, the writer of Bérinus may have had a more general knowledge of the kinds of mutilation to which French rulers sometimes resorted.
The Blandiens ultimately conquer Agriano, and Mirame then orders the digging of a ditch six thousand feet deep, so deep that a stone tossed into it will not reach the bottom in half a day. There the evil tyrant and his highest barons are imprisoned for ten years, until God sends a violent subterranean flood to fill the ditch and drown them. The flooded ditch becomes the river that Bérinus and his men have to cross in order to reach Isope.

The narrative of Agriano and the Blandiens provides a military variant on the idea of the commodification of sight as it appears in the episode of Bérinus’s blind accuser. The accusation alludes to the biblical proverb of “an eye for an eye” with the cycle of escalating mutilation that Agriano sets in motion playing out the proverb in a way that is both literal and deeply disturbing. The initial commodifier of sight in the foundational legend of Blandie is also, significantly, a homosexual; the narrator states that in Agriano’s kingdom men lived with each other sinfully against nature, and three of the four complete manuscripts of Bérinus label Agriano’s men “sodomites.” Agriano’s mutilation of the Blandiens exemplifies his tyranny, but Mirame’s blinding and mutilation of Agriano’s forty knights becomes a sociopolitical reenactment of the blinding of the Sodomites that the narrative attempts to justify. In this light, Mirame’s mutilation of the knights accomplishes the same work as Simon de Montfort’s mutilation of the sinful Cathars, who lived in closed communities and were also accused of being sodomites.

The Bérinus writer’s final use of blindness in this section of the romance is a metatextual one that questions the very use of blindness as a symbol in fiction. When Gieffroy first encounters Bérinus and the Romans, he describes the ruler of Blandie, Isope, as “un viel homme ancien ... a L X  a n s passez que par viellesse ne voit goute” [an old ancient man ... [who] for sixty years past because of his old age, sees nothing at all]. However, when Bérinus, Gieffroy, and the others reach Isope’s palace after their long journey, they encounter an Isope who is old and frail but also fully sighted. He looks over the richly attired men, and when he has scrutinized them well (“Quant li roy. . . les ot bien regardez”), he treats them generously because, as he says, “vrayement onques mais je ne vy gent qui si me pleüssent, et si en ay moult veü en ce pais” [truly I have never seen people who please me so much, and I have seen many in this country]. Indeed, Bérinus’s looks so delight Isope that he offers the Roman his daughter in marriage. It is as if the Bérinus writer is working self-consciously to dispel Gieffroy’s mistaken description of Isope by including multiple references to Isope’s sight in a few short lines.
In a narrative that has already commodified vision, Isope’s disappearing disability highlights the fact that his condition is the choice of the creator of the narrative, whether that creator is Gieffroy intradiegetically, or the romancer extradiegetically. The creation of fictions is also important to Isope himself, whose name would have been known to French readers as the supposed father of fables, Aesop. A legendary biography of Aesop that had limited circulation in the Middle Ages described him as disabled, though not blind: he was both hunchbacked and a dwarf. And although the legendary life does not make Aesop a king, he manages to ascend from the rank of a slave to the position of an important diplomat from Athens. The Bérinus Isope also came to Blandie as a poor man who ingratiated himself to the king enough to marry his daughter and ascend to the throne, according to Gieffroy.

While we cannot retrieve the branch of Aesopic biography to which the Bérinus writer may have alluded, we can nevertheless see within the romance that Isope’s disappearing blindness exemplifies a moment of either Homerus dormiens (which will not help us understand the romance better) or narrative prosthesis, whereby the putative disability is “fixed” and normalized. Gieffroy, as a trickster figure, may be lying to Bérinus and his men about Isope’s blindness so that the men will put greater faith in Gieffroy as their first line of defense. His success will guarantee him a reward that he is anxious to win: passage on their ships back to Rome. The “fable” of Isope thus shows that Gieffroy is as tricky in his relations with the Romans as he is with the Blandiens.

But Gieffroy’s praise of Isope as just is undermined as the Romans make their way into Isope’s court. One of the last romance “wonders” that they pass is a gruesome tree filled with a thousand heads of people who, according to Gieffroy, have been falsely accused but have lost their legal cases. (But Gieffroy also says that Isope executes any accusers who are found to be false, so the truth about whose heads adorn the tree remains unclear.) So what Bérinus knows about Isope is itself a changing commodity, the result of narratives spun for him by Gieffroy, who is bargaining for his return home. Bérinus exchanges one “fact” for another as he learns that the ruler is not blind but sighted. Ultimately Isope’s disappearing blindness narratively reverses the irreversible blindness of Bérinus’s blind accuser when Isope’s sight is figuratively “restored” to him, but the results in both instances are the same: Bérinus receives vindication and reward.

The Bérinus writer uses social and historical constructions of blindness—the blind beggar as greedy liar, punitive blinding, and sight as a commodity in several forms—that would have been familiar to his French au-
dience. The author/translator of *The Tale of Beryn* drew his material from the episode of the three false accusers, but he chose to ignore the rest of the issues raised in the French text, perhaps because they did not have the same kind of cultural resonance for his English readers. The foundational legend of Agriano is not mentioned at all. Geoffrey, the anglicized version of Giefroy, becomes satirically emblematic of feigned disability, not only mental disability when playing the fool as in *Bérinus*, but also such physical disabilities as lameness and paralysis.

Before we turn to Geoffrey’s satirical treatment of the legal system, we should look at the figure of Isope as he is presented here. The *Beryn* author translates Gieffroy’s description of the aged, blind king quite closely: he is “so grow in yeris, that sixty yeer ago / He sawe nat for age,” and he executes false accusers. But in this kingdom there is no horrifying tree filled with heads, and also this Isope is truly blind, because nothing in the text indicates otherwise. At the end of *Beryn*, when the title character goes to Isope’s court, the emphasis is on Isope listening, with no implication that he can see (ll. 3989, 3998, 4007). Thus the *Beryn* poet did not allow medieval readers to revise their thinking about the nameless city that Isope rules: it is a place of weakness and uncertainty because its ruler is truly blind, and try as he might, he cannot stop its residents from their habitual lying.

In the Middle English work, the blind man catches up with Beryn in the street and takes him before the steward Evander, to whom he makes his complaint.

> “Ye know wele that oft tyme I have to yew i-pleynyd,  
> How I was be-trayd and how I was i-peynyd,  
> And how a man somtyme and I our yen did chaunge:  
> This is the same persone, though that he make it straunge . . .  
> Sith ye of hym be sesed, however so ye tave,  
> Let hym never pas til I myne eyen have.”

A few lines later the narrator states that the blind man hopes to get money directly from Beryn or imprison him until the money can be delivered. The other false accusers then appear, as in *Bérinus*, and after they make their accusation, Beryn bemoans his fate until Geoffrey appears.

Geoffrey in *Beryn* is even more of a trickster than his French predecessor.

> And when that Beryn in this wise had i-made his mone,  
> A crepill he saw comyng with grete spede and hast,
Oppon a stilt under his kne bound wonder fast,
And a crouch under his armes, with hondes al forskramed.53

Fearing that he is about to be falsely accused again, Beryn runs away, but the lame man is faster and knows the roads better. When the cripple catches Beryn, he is so intent on escaping that he sheds the mantle and the sleeve on which the man is pulling. Beryn finally agrees to listen to the man. Geoffrey, who is 100 years old, says he has lived in this city for many years and has grown accustomed to the false nature of its citizens; in order to live more easily among them, he has feigned disabilities for the past twelve years, but he shows Beryn that he is able-bodied.

He cast asyde [the stilt and the crutch] both and lepe oppon an huche,
And adown ageynes, and walked too and fro,
Up and down within the shipp, and shewed his hondes tho,
Strecching forth his fyngers in sight over al aboute,
Without knot or knor or eny signe of goute,
And clyghte hem efft ageyns right disfeterly,
Som to ride eche other and som aweyward wry.54

Geoffrey’s feigned disability in *Beryn* provides an interesting variation upon Isole’s disappearing disability in *Bérinus*. Within the narrative, it builds Beryn’s confidence in Geoffrey as a man who has learned important survival strategies in a foreign city, but more importantly, the narrative “cure” of Geoffrey rather than Isole gives Geoffrey the added power that went to the ruler in the French romance.

Throwing off the feigned physical disabilities also adds a dimension to Geoffrey’s disguise when he assumes the role of badly coiffed fool in order to defend Beryn before a judge: he is both physically and tonsorially transformed.55 Unlike Gieffroy in the French text, Geoffrey augments his foolishness by telling the seneschal Hannibal nonsensical stories of how he gave birth to the entire crowd surrounding them and by engaging in witty stichomyth.56 As is generally the case with literary fools, Geoffrey places himself at the ambiguous boundary between having a mental illness, a condition that his unkempt hair suggests, and playing a jester, which his jokes imply. Nevertheless, Hannibal and the other citizens think Geoffrey is a “fole of kynde,”57 genuinely mentally disabled; they are as duped by this feigned mental disability as they have been for the previous twelve years by the feigned physical ones. The English Geoffrey is also far more performa-
tive as a fool than the French Gieffroy: he warms up the crowd with his wit before the arrival of the false accusers, and they repeatedly “laughed at him hertlich.”

The blind man states that he and Beryn have been “partineres / Of wynnyng and of lesing” until Beryn runs away with the man’s eyes that he had lent in order to allow Beryn “To se the tregitours pley, and hir sotilté.” According to the Middle English Dictionary, “tregitours” applies to a range of entertainers that includes sleight-of-hand artists, jugglers, illusionists, and magicians. Whereas the French Bérinus ostensibly took the blind man’s eyes in order to do business, here Beryn is accused of taking them in order to see a show based on illusion (which, in effect, is what Geoffrey’s performance amounts to). The blind man then trots out a supposed proverb that is humorously ambiguous in this context: “Ful trewe is that byword, “a man to servesabill / Ledeth offt Beyard from his own stabill.”” Bowers translates “to servesabill” as “too accommodating,” in which case the proverb states that a man who leads Bayard, a conventional medieval name for a horse, from his own stable for someone else’s use is too accommodating, just as the blind man maintains that he has given too much of himself in order to accommodate Beryn. However, in many of Bayard’s proverbial appearances, including those in the works of Chaucer that the Beryn poet probably knew, the horse is blind, implying a reversal of roles, with Bayard representing the blind man. Rowland quotes one of Skeat’s Early English Proverbs (no. 288), “as bold as blind Bayard,” and she points out that it implies “foolhardiness and presumption,” characteristics that suit the lying blind man far more closely than the victimized Beryn. In this reading of the proverb, Beryn’s presence has drawn the foolhardy, presumptuous blind man out with the possibility of extorting money from the innocent foreigner.

Geoffrey’s first counterargument serves to separate the blind man’s working partnership with Beryn from the reason that Beryn supposedly now has the blind man’s eyes.

“Yf thow haddest thyn eyen, thow woldest no counsell hele.
I knowe wele by thy fisnamy thy kynd were to stele.
And eke it is thy profit and thyne ese als
To be blynd as thowe art, for nowe whereso thow go,
Thow hast thy lyvlode whils thow art alyve,
And yf thow myghtest see, thow shuldest never thrive.”
This is a relatively rare instance of the deployment of the largely French stereotype of the greedy, dishonest blind beggar in Middle English literature, but its presence here is doubtless due to the French source text. Geoffrey’s response also isolates the blind man from Beryn by implying that the blind man does not need to be Beryn’s business partner when his blindness is his livelihood, an observation similar to the one made by the blind characters in the St. Martin plays discussed later.

In his defense of Beryn, Geoffrey amplifies the accusation that Beryn exchanged eyes with the blind man in order to see a show of “tregetours.” Geoffrey first paints a picture of a relationship between the two men that is both professional and personal, and then he tells of an entertainer of unsurpassed reputation who visited their area; no one “set of hymselff the store of a boton” if he had not managed to see this magician’s remarkable performance. Beryn and the soon-to-be blind man make a covenant to travel to see the show, but after some traveling the latter “fil adown to erth, o foot ne myght he go,” because of his age, feebleness, and the summer heat. According to Geoffrey, Beryn is concerned about his companion’s well-being, offering to take him home and then return later when he is feeling better. The companion, however, has another idea.

“Beryn, ye shull wend thider without eny let,
And have myne eyen with yewe that they the pley mowe se,
And I woll have yeurs tyll ye com aye.”
Thus was hir covenaut made, as I to yewe report,
For ese of this Blynd and most for his comfort.

Geoffrey says that both “the hole science of al surgery” and “sotill enchauntours and eke nygramancers” were needed to effect the swap, but when it had taken place, Beryn took his companion’s eyes to see the “al the pley.” While he is away, the other man loses Beryn’s eyes, and therefore, Beryn does not return the ones that he has borrowed. At this point the Beryn poet returns to his source text: Geoffrey adds that the borrowed eyes are less useful to Beryn than his own would be, because he would see better with the original ones.

Although the writer of Beryn chooses to retain the mercantile associations between Beryn and his companion, he modifies the narrative in order to make sight less of a commodity, and therefore the blind man becomes more culpable for his disability. The man is literally playing with his sight
rather than lending it to his business partner for their mutual work. The reason for switching eyes could hardly be more frivolous, even if the entertainer’s show is the hottest ticket in town, and although Beryn is willing to sacrifice the theatrical spectacle in a moment of crisis, the other man is not. The men switch eyes not in order to conduct business but because Beryn is doing a favor for his companion, and thus the eyes become property on loan to the advantage of the lender, rather than commodities exchanged for mutual advantage. Geoffrey’s elaborately constructed fiction shows how remarkably “servesabill” Beryn has been to the blind man. One of the poet’s cleverest variations on his source reinforces the idea that sight transcends possession of eyes: somehow the blind man’s sight remains his own, no matter where his eyes are, because he will see the spectacle vicariously through them. It is as if Beryn were using the other man’s eyeballs to film the show for later viewing. These carefully considered differences between Beryn and Bérinus highlight important discrepancies in attitudes toward sight and blindness in England and France.

After Geoffrey’s remarkable defense of Beryn, the blind man concedes defeat and withdraws his accusation, but Geoffrey is not satisfied: the blind man must leave monetary sureties to await the court’s verdict on Beryn’s lost eyes. The narrator adds that this expense did not hurt the blind man much, “For though he blynd were, yet had he good plenté—/ And more wold have wonne thurh his iniquité!” 69 Again the blind man is characterized as dishonest and greedy. Ultimately the blind man and the other false accusers must pay a fine to Beryn and submit their “body, good, and catell” to him, thereby doubling his wealth. 70 So Geoffrey’s feigned disability leads to poetic justice for Beryn, but it also becomes a lesson to readers about misplaced belief in people who appear to be impaired. The seneschal Hannibal and the other citizens talk of how duplicitous the Romans are for arraying their spokesman as a fool. 71 However, the citizens’ reaction to the fool shows that they are conditioned to respond with derisory laughter that keeps them from looking at him seriously, for he is actually a man they already know.

As is generally true of French texts, Bérinus exemplifies the social model of disability in relation to blindness, deploying this model in striking and disturbing ways. Disability, disabling, and commodification of the body are closely linked in both the story of the blind man and the Sodom-like story of Agriano. Within the fiction of the romance, these are very real disabilities and disablings, and even the overlay of romance that allows the blind man to fabricate his outlandish accusation does little to leaven the seriousness
with which disability is treated. In the societies ruled by Agriano and Mirame, disability and disabiling become pervasive, and even the story of how the blind man became blind has a strong social dimension: he was working with his partner, playing his part as a productive member of society.

*The Tale of Beryn* presents an unusual hybrid of French and English literary culture and legal history. The *Beryn* poet follows his source text in presenting a fully blind man who claims to have exchanged his eyes with the title character, and thus a degree of commodification of vision is necessarily involved. On the other hand, the issue of blindness—and issues of disability more generally—are not caused by or given particularly stigmatic meaning in society but rest more on individual choice. In this staunchly unreligious text, the religious model of disability in any strict sense is absent, but the text certainly gives negative examples that can be read in a Christian context. Of course the blind man is a liar, like his French counterpart, but more important are the additions to the English translation in his ill-considered lie. He has chosen his blindness in a way that calls to mind the earlier point about the religious model of disability blaming the disabled person: he is certainly culpable for losing his vision in pursuit of frivolous “tregitours” instead of earning his livelihood with his business partner, the more socially justifiable reason for his French counterpart’s blindness. The poet reinforces the selfishness of the blind man’s motivation by having Geoffrey fabricate the idea that somehow the blind man will be able to see the show when Beryn returns his eyes: it is a self-serving choice. Geoffrey also builds on the blind man’s self-incrimination by explaining that the exchange of eyeballs was accomplished by surgery and necromancy, two suspicious and perhaps sinful human activities. The story of the blind man’s choice of disability is parodically imitated by Geoffrey’s choice of a changing menu of feigned disabilities, though in playing the fool he lies in the service of truth and for the good of others, whereas the blind man lies only to serve himself.

**Religious Drama**

Also deploying multiple disabilities while centering on a blind character is a comic episode of a religious play, *Le mystère de la vie et hystoire de monseigneur saint Martin*, which was probably performed in 1441 in Tours, where Martin had been archbishop. (This episode, which appears in abbreviated form in the popular *Golden Legend*, was also popular in homiletic literature, as shown in chapter 6.) In a scene set two weeks after St. Martin’s
death, the blind man Jolestru and the lame man Haustebet have heard of the great miracles that the saint’s body can perform; however, they want to avoid being cured because they would lose their status as beggars. The blind man says:

Helas! nous serions varletz,
Et maintenant nous sommes maistres.
Il n’y a bourgeois ne prebestres
Qui ne nous donne maintenant.
Nous amassons trop plus argent
Sans peines et sans travailler.
Donc pas n’aurions un denier
Si ce n’estoit en labourant.
Houer, bescher en desertant
C’est droictement la vis Martin.\textsuperscript{73}

[Alas, we would be apprentices, but now we are masters. There isn’t a burger or a priest who doesn’t give to us now. We earn a great deal more money without trouble and without labor. Then we wouldn’t have a penny if it weren’t by laboring. Hoeing and digging to clear land, that’s exactly the life of Martin.]

Then in an arrangement that is conventional in medieval literature concerning characters with these two disabilities, the lame man persuades his blind companion to carry him on his back, allowing them to work in tandem to stay well away from the powerful relics. At this moment the procession of St. Martin approaches, and Haustebet goads Jolestru to run quickly; the blind man is soon exhausted, causing his lame rider to accuse Jolestru of trying to stay near the procession in order to gain his sight. The blind man denies this accusation energetically, but in the end, they are caught by the procession and miraculously cured. Jolestru is disconsolate at the turn of events, but Haustebet consoles him and persuades him to follow Martin’s relics in order to thank God.

In this dramatic episode, the actors perform the otherness of both disabled people and Jews. These characters resemble the Jews in the Croxton \textit{Play of the Sacrament} in not only their innate belief in the power of the holy body central to the drama (inasmuch as the sacramental bread is the body of Christ) but also their ultimately futile refusal to allow that body to exercise power over them. The staging of the scene in which the blind man
carries his lame companion provides a visually comic performance of two “incomplete” men becoming one; their disabilities are akin to the incompleteness enacted upon Jonathas and Fergus in the English plays. For fictional Jews and disabled characters, succumbing to the power of the sacred object results in the miraculous erasure of their dominant traits: the Jews lose their Judaism, and the disabled characters lose their disabilities. That loss is effected by divine intercession that occurs in spite of the characters’ sinful natures: the Jews’ apostasy and the disabled characters’ laziness are driven out. While the episode shares some similarities with the versions of the Longinus story in which his cure is undeserved, here the significance of the cure is very different. It effectively punishes the disabled men, an act of divine discipline that requires their reintegration into the society of laborers. Interestingly, the author of the St. Martin play allows Jolestru a nostalgia for his blindness, a sign that the outward change in him has not entirely cleansed his spiritual sinfulness: he remains an unwilling convert. This final detail of characterization, then, straightforwardly exemplifies Mitchell and Snyder’s notion that “[the ruse of prosthesis [in this case, a miraculous cure] fails in its primary objective: to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence.” Jolestru’s nostalgia also allows the audience to assume that blindness taints the soul to such an extent that it cannot gratefully accept a divine gift, a spiritual state that is akin to despair. At the end of this play, then, blindness retains its status as a catachresis representing a sinful moral and spiritual state.

An analogous drama, La moralité de l’aveugle et le boiteux, was written by André de la Vigne at the end of the fifteenth century; it was performed at Seurre in Burgundy on October 10, 11, and 12, 1496. De la Vigne earned enough renown as a poet to have been named orateur of Charles VIII and secretary to Queen Anne of Brittany. Because his play is not part of a longer work celebrating St. Martin, the playwright can take the time (and the tone) to deploy and elaborate upon several aspects of grotesque excess. The drama opens with the two characters bemoaning their lot in life. Like his counterpart in Le Garçon et l’Aveugle, the blind man here has been misled by an evil guide who has robbed him and left him in an unprofitable location for begging; his only helpful former guide, Giblet, has died. The blind man agrees that he will carry the lame man but complains of his weight. He insists that his companion defecate before they go further (yet more of the grotesque excess associated with marginal characters), and while doing so, the lame man tells of a saint who has died recently whose body performs miracles. Like the characters in the preceding play, these two
agree that they do not want to be cured of their disabilities because they would then be required to work. In order to avoid the saint, the blind man wants to go to the tavern, but the pair are caught by the procession and suddenly cured. De la Vigne then reverses the roles from the earlier drama: while the lame man curses his bad luck, the blind man is grateful for the unexpected blessing.

J’estoye bien fol, je suis certain,  
D’ainsi fuyr la bonne voye,  
Tenant le chemin incertain,  
Lequel par foleur pris j’avoye.  
Hellas! le grant bien ne sçavoye,  
Que c’estoit de veoir clерement. . . .  
Se j’ay esté vers toi mutin,  
Pardon requiers de ce meffait!77

[I was mad, I am sure, to have fled the proper path, holding to an uncertain route that I had taken in madness. Alas, I didn’t know what a great good it was to see clearly. . . . If I was rebellious toward you (Saint Martin), I ask pardon for my misdeed.]

The blind man’s grateful declaration is filled with diction of the repentant apostate; like the Jew that inhabited the medieval Christian imagination, this blind man always seems to have known that grace was available, but his rebellious spirit kept him from it. The tone here is reminiscent of the brief speeches of the cured Jacob and Levi in The Assumption of the Virgin, inasmuch as all three characters not only praise God for performing the miracle but also imply regret for not having embraced God’s grace earlier. After the miracle, the formerly blind man swears future usefulness to his society. The other man, however, promises to maintain the appearance of impairment through the use of potions and lard on his legs, allowing himself to continue begging. De la Vigne thus teaches not only Christian morality but social awareness: viewers should not only believe God can work miracles but also beware of able-bodied beggars acting disabled.

A visual representation of the blind man carrying the lame man as they are about to confront Saint Martin survives in an embroidered roundel from a Burgundian altar frontal of about 1425, now housed at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York (fig. 3). The roundel is divided down the middle by the corner of a building that hides the saint from the approaching
men, who are on the left, the side of sinfulness. The representation of the blind man here is significant in relation to his and analogous characters’ desire to remain blind in order not to have to work: he is noticeably portly, and by medieval physical standards he might even be considered obese. The artist here is exploiting the convention traceable through much comic literature that blind beggars are capable of amassing enough wealth to keep themselves better fed than the average worker.

The lengthiest dramatic treatment focusing on a blind character appears in *Le Mystère de la Résurrection* from Angers in 1456. This three-day
extravaganza stretches to nearly 20,000 lines, roughly 1,400 of which are devoted to episodes in which a blind man finds a guide, is abused by him, sings and sells songs, and ultimately receives a gift of charity from his community that symbolizes the new law inaugurated by Jesus’s death and resurrection. The prologue to the second day’s performance outlines the ostensible purpose of these comic interludes.

Aussi y sont, par intervalles,
D’aucuns esbatemens et galles
D’un aveugle et de son varlet,
Que gueres ne servent au fait,
Si ce n’est pour vous resjouir
Et vos esperis rafreschir. (5460–65)\textsuperscript{78}

[Also for some diversion and amusement, there are at intervals a blind man and his valet that hardly serve the action, if not in order to give you joy and refresh your spirits.]

The playwright is disingenuous here in claiming that the episodes merely entertain, because they are interwoven with and comment upon the miracles and mysteries of Jesus’s life and resurrection. And within the three-day production they chart an irregular course that leaves behind the religious model of disability and moves toward a moment of social modeling that is clearly meant to serve as a lesson in charity for the audience. In that irregularity is a great deal of tension between the playwright’s need to accommodate Jesus’s cure of blind people and Christian charity with his desire to deploy the stereotypes of the blind that had become conventional by the mid-fifteenth century, perhaps most strongly in drama.

The blind man first comes on stage just after the Jews involved in the crucifixion, including Annas and Caiaphas, have used Joseph of Arimathea’s respectful entombment of Jesus’s body to convict and imprison him for being a disciple.\textsuperscript{79} The transition from the misguided Jews to the disabled man could have been read by the audience as having a symbolic dimension due to the connection of their figurative and literal blindness. The blind man here is named Galleboys, as we learn eighty lines after he first appears; however, other characters in the play rarely call him by his name, and in the manuscripts his prompts are simply “Cecus,” showing the degree to which his disability is his identity. He has become blind because of sickness
and old age, and he needs a guide to help him find food and lodging. A candidate named Saudret appears and expresses interest in the job, though he immediately wants to know what his salary will be. Although he is evidently young (the blind man calls him both “mon enfant” et “mon filz” within thirty lines of his entrance), he has unique work experience:

J’ay servy de varlet grant pose
L’omme qui fut aveugle né
Que Jhesus a enluminé
Le saint et glorieux Prophet.
Vostre chose sera bien faicte
Se je m’en mesle, je me vant.  

[I served as valet for a long time for the man born blind to whom Jesus gave light, the holy and glorious prophet. Your affairs will be well handled if I am involved, I dare say.]

We learn later that Saudret’s insistence on knowing his salary is due to his previous master’s unwillingness to pay him after the miraculous cure (“il ne me prisa plus rien / Ne me paya” (5044–45); “he didn’t appreciate me at all or pay me”). Thus Saudret is more complicated (and perhaps more awkwardly characterized) than the boy in Le Garçon et L’Aveugle. He believes in Jesus’s divinity, as he should after having seen the miracle involving his previous master, and yet he bears a grudge against the blind because of his earlier treatment. The playwright engages creatively with biblical history here by alluding to the miraculous cure in John 9, but he does not construct a formerly blind man whose miraculous cure causes him to turn from the stereotype of avarice associated with his disability. (This paradox faintly echoes the cured but spiritually unchanged characters in versions of the blind man and the lame man discussed previously.)

In their second scene on the first day of Le Mystère, the blind man puts on airs by insisting that Saudret call him “Monseigneur mon maistre” (4756), a request that the boy greets with derision, though he finally agrees to use “maistre.” The blind man suggests that they sing a song to make money, to which the valet responds:

Je ne vis oncques avenir
Qu’a mon autre maistre on donnast
Or pour sermon qu’il sermonnast
Ne pour hault crier, ne pour braire.
Mais je suis bien content de faire.\textsuperscript{81}

[I never saw it happen that anyone gave gold to my other master for a sermon that he preached nor for crying loudly or braying. But I am very happy to do it.]

The playwright here uses the guide to highlight the trope of grotesquely excessive noise associated with blind beggars, even one who preached and was destined for miraculous cure.

The characters’ song, which stretches to twelve eight-line stanzas, hyperbolically extols the inestimable patience, industry, and other virtues of married women who take care of drunken husbands, crying babies, and domestic trials and tribulations (4827–4947). Pierre Servet, editor of the Angers \textit{Résurrection}, has written about this song and the one sung by the pair later (to be discussed below) that they are part of the didactic message of the play; he goes so far as to say that this one is “closely connected to a sermon” representing women not as they are but “as they ought to be.”\textsuperscript{82} Aside from the fact that Galleboys and Saudret have no position of authority from which to deliver such a “sermon,” Servet studiously ignores the last two lines of the song that serve as the punch line to the overextended joke: after describing at exaggerated length the virtues of women, the pair sings, “Mariez vous grans et petis / Si verrez se c’est faulte!” (4945–46; “Get married, great and small, and you will see if this is false!”). Furthermore, when the song has concluded, the blind man says he can’t imagine any woman who wouldn’t want to have a copy of the song—at the cost of a nice loan to the singers, without any interest (4947–52). The song is simply a means of making money that uses outlandish idealization of women to flatter them into buying.

The song’s homiletic value is further compromised by the character who asks for one hundred copies of it: the Jews’ messenger, evidently a Christian but also a drunk who is introduced swigging from a bottle earlier (3915–49).\textsuperscript{83} He pays ten deniers per copy in advance and tells the pair that they should make their way to Jesus’s sepulchre to seek a miraculous cure for Galleboy’s blindness; the messenger cites the precedent of the man born blind, Saudret’s former master (4961–78, 5003–16). After some disagreement, the blind man pays Saudret some of the money, and they go to the sepulchre, which is guarded by heavily armed men capable of murder
In what is apparently a ruse manufactured by Saudret to humiliate his companion, the boy works the blind man into paroxysms of fear, urging him to flee while claiming to be unable to see whether the guards are pursuing them (5124–58). Galleboys is so frightened and so utterly dependent on Saudret that he calls the boy “mon seigneur et mon amy” (“my lord and my friend,” 5153), effectively deflating his own attempts at titular self-aggrandizement earlier. When this scene was staged, the actor playing the blind man would no doubt have run helter-skelter around the playing area, broadly performing his blindness for the boy’s—and the audience’s—entertainment. And as Galleboys runs, he falls victim to runs of another kind, according to Saudret.

Ha! Fy! Je ne sens que püour!
Chié avez! A Dieu! Las! Fy!
Fy, de par le grant gibet, fy!
Se n’est que merde que de vous!
Vrayement, s’ilz viennent après nous,
Ilz vous trouveront a la trace!84

[Oh! Fie! I smell only stench! You have shat! Oh God! Alas! Fie! Fie, on the part of the great gallows, fie! It’s nothing but shit from you! Truly, if they come after us, they will find you by the scent!]

Here the grotesque excess descends into the realm of the fully Rabelaisian.85 The blind man has missed his opportunity for miraculous cure through a combination of his gullibility and his cowardice, whereby he has both literally and symbolically befouled himself.

On the second day of the Angers Résurrection, the only scene involving Galleboys and Saudret is performed after almost 9,000 lines of drama, at the end of what must have been a lengthy day. The previous scene, Jesus speaking to the souls of the matriarchs and patriarchs recently freed from Limbo, creates a serious context that makes the blind man’s entry all the more comic. In individual speeches fifty-three freed souls praise Jesus for saving them, and of those, at least twenty-four call him “monseigneur” or a close variant such as “mon chier seigneur” (13205–14044 passim). Then, soon after the blind man’s entrance, he insists as he did the previous day that Saudret ought to call him “monseigneur” (14095–96). The demand is comic not only in its futile repetition of the previous day’s inappropriate request but also because of its juxtaposition with the high seriousness of the

Humoring the Sighted
previous scene in which the honorific has been used repeatedly and appropriately to address Jesus. Saudret insults the blind man roundly, calling him, among other things, a dog turd (14105); they again agree that “maistre” will suffice. However, when Galleboys then says that he will be unable to pay Saudret in the future, the boy counters that Galleboys is reputed to be rich (14217–18), and the insults continue (“Stinking louse filled with lousiness!” 14221–22). Putting on the airs that he has claimed for himself earlier, Galleboys calls upon the blood of his lineage and challenges Saudret to a duel (14223–26); however, the blind man’s choice of dueling game, “Broche [en] Cul” (“Stick in the Arse,” 14254), further gives the lie to his claim of elevated birth. The descriptions of the preparations for this game and the players’ postures, both here and in La Farce du Goguelu where it features prominently, suggest that each player’s hand and feet are tied together, and then he bends over to have his hands tied close to his feet, leaving him standing but very nearly “hog-tied.” The player is then given a stick with which to hit his opponent’s arse.

The tying of the opponents requires a third person to participate, and Saudret claims to find someone to do the task very quickly, though actually he only changes his voice in order to fool Galleboys. Here we see another example of the highly theatrical motif of the guide taking on a false voice as a disguise in order to inflict violence on the blind man, as Jeannot does before he slaps the blind man in Le Garçon et L’Aveugle. Of course the nonexistent character, who is labeled Fictus in both manuscripts, claims to have tied Saudret properly for the game “as surely as [he sees Galleboys]” (Tantost a vous je voys,” 14327), but the boy remains free. Fictus ties the blind man tightly, to the point that the victim claims to be too painfully bent over (“Je suis trop mallement courbé!” 14378). And in yet another recourse to the scatological, the blind man claims to be so badly bent out of shape that he needs to defecate, so he calls upon Fictus to be ready to untie him (14399–402). However, the unbound Saudret makes quick work of the game: he trips Galleboys and beats him so thoroughly that the blind man asks him to stop in a speech in which he calls his servant “monseigneur, mon maistre” (14444). The two negotiate about Saudret’s wages with the boy now in the position of power, for, as the blind man acknowledges near the end of the scene, he has been humiliated and recognizes his mistake (“s’est il humilié / Et connoit assez son desfault,” 14527–28).

Saudret maintains the ruse of the ever-present Fictus even after he has won his way with Galleboys, and the first scene on the third day of the Ré-surrection opens with Saudret insisting that Fictus be paid for his efforts—
money that the boy himself obviously keeps. Thanking Galleboys for the payment, Fictus says he is leaving. Given the fact that Fictus appears in this scene only to disappear fewer than 100 lines later, one might ask why the playwright did not dispatch the nonexistent character at the end of the blind man’s last scene on the previous day. The answer, I think, lies in the character’s parting words in response to Galleboys asking his name.

J’ay nom Chose Sainte  
Qui suys en Jherusalem painte.  
La mercy de Dieu qui tout ‹st,  
Vous ne trouverez si petit  
Qui ne vous dye ou je demeure. (15257–61)

[I have the name of Holy Thing, and I am from Jerusalem. By the mercy of God who made everything, you won’t find anyone too small to tell you where I live.]

This odd parting comment makes sense only in the context of the previous scene, in which Jesus appears to his apostles, gives them a lance representing justice and the keys of heaven, and then disappears. He begins his lengthy sermon by scolding Thomas for believing in him only when he could see his body, adding that those who believe in him through faith in what they hear but without seeing him will be blessed in the present and future (14768–86). At the end of his explanation of the mystical gifts, Jesus disappears (“Icy endroit Jhesus s’en aille par dessoubz terre soubdainement” [15119]; “Here Jesus suddenly goes from the place underneath the earth”), and the apostles speak of him, with Thomas the last to do so. The doubter castigates himself for not having believed the reports of the resurrection until he saw the risen Jesus (15153–61), the apostles leave the stage, and Galleboys enters with Saudret—and Fictus.

Fictus’s strange parting comment that he is holy and comes from Jerusalem parodically connect him to Jesus, and at that moment he disappears from the stage, as Jesus has done. Jesus leaves behind the doubting Thomas, whose faith in him has been weak and who has relied on ocular proof instead. Fictus leaves behind the believing Galleboys, who praises him and wishes him a good journey (15254, 15262). The blind man’s faith in the character’s existence has been complete, without the possibility of ocular proof. As a foil for Thomas, Galleboys shows that by necessity he must put his faith in what he cannot see; he is ready for belief, but he does not yet
believe the story of Jesus’s sacrifice and resurrection. And so the blind man remains in ignorance.

The blind man and his valet then decide to sing another song: this one, even longer than the first at sixteen stanzas with a chorus, is a paean to the joys and troubles associated with wine, a conventional subject for a blind man given the stereotype of drunkenness (15280–443). Afterward, the same messenger of the Jews who bought the earlier song appears and asks for a hundred copies of this one, which Galleboys agrees to sell for ten deniers each. Then, as if to reinforce the truth of the song, Galleboys insists that they go to a tavern to drink, and, according to the stage direction, it is the station representing the hostel where the pilgrims at Emmaus met the risen Christ (15493). Again the playwright reinforces the notion that the blind man barely misses the opportunity of Christian belief.

Later on the third day of the performance, the pair reappears on stage complaining of hunger and lack of money (suggested that some time has passed since the messenger paid them for their song). The blind man begins to beg for money or food, and a shopkeeper (“Apoticaire”) invites them to eat a meal at his place “pour Dieu” (16527); his tone seems genuinely respectful of the impoverished duo. This shopkeeper appeared on the first day of the play just after the second scene involving the boy and the blind man: he is the merchant who sells perfumes and ointments to the Maries who are going to visit Jesus’s tomb, whom he praises for bargaining less than any other of his customers (5291–96). Though Galleboys again puts on airs by asking for a better grade of bread than the shopkeeper has provided (16545–554), he and Saudret tuck into their meal happily, closing their final scene. Here, then, to round out the episodes involving the blind man, is a scene in which the new law of charity preached by Jesus is enacted on behalf of the blind man.

The playwright constructs Galleboys from his first appearance as a foil to the man born blind whom Jesus has earlier cured, and Saudret’s firsthand experience of that miracle invites viewers to consider the contrast between this fictional character and the earlier biblical figure. The blind man never claims belief in Christ, in spite of the attempt to be cured at his sepulchre. Indeed, Galleboys’ fear of the soldiers at the tomb shows that he has no faith that Christ will protect him, and his defecation immediately afterward symbolizes the way that such disbelief befoils him spiritually. The fact that he does not try again for a miraculous cure reinforces this lack of belief, and the playwright structures the departure of Fictus in the first scene on the third day to emphasize Galleboy’s misplaced faith. The play-
wright implies that the blind man remains a nonbeliever, which may well mean that he is a Jew (which could have been communicated to the audience through costuming as much as text). If so, then his literal blindness must also be symbolic in the context of this very religious play, and his disbelief becomes the underlying reason for his humiliation. If on the one hand the shopkeeper’s gift of charity at the end shows that giving alms to the blind is exemplary, in another sense the audience is left questioning whether this blind man is fully worthy to receive them. Just as powerfully exemplary—and far more theatrically satisfying—are the instances of degradation and humiliation that the blind man has suffered at the hands of Saudret and others.

Let us leave French religious drama with a point that is perhaps obvious but worth a passing mention: blind characters are not satirized in extant medieval biblical drama from England. This is not to say that English drama is devoid of satire and attendant types of humor. The battle between Noah and his wife in the Chester and Wakefield plays, based on stereotypes of gender and age, is broadly satirical, as are the class and gender issues raised in the well-known Wakefield *Second Shepherds’ Play*. Perhaps satirically presented blind characters found their way into French religious drama because they had become stock figures in secular drama such as *Le Garçon et L’Aveugle*; thus French playwrights could seek recognizable comic relief from outside the Bible, whereas English playwrights, who may not have had such secular models, found humor in fleshing out biblical characters.

**FIFTEENTH-CENTURY FARCE**

A very slight fifteenth-century farce that reaches only 127 lines, “Un Aveugle et son Varlet et une Tripière,” is perhaps the most blatant text of its genre in the use of narrative prosthesis: the blind man is used simply as the catalyst for bringing together the sexually suggestive guide and the earthy tripe-seller. Opening the play bragging that he is “un gentil mignon / Et un bon petit garson” [“a fine beggar and a good little boy”], the guide is in the process of taking bottles of wine to his blind master, who is overjoyed to have them. The pair conventionally bemoan their lack of money, and the guide (in lines that are missing from the manuscript) suggests that they go to the tripe-seller to beg for food. The blind man has earlier said he is also deaf, though he is able to engage in dialogue, but the guide says that they will fail in their efforts if the man speaks. When the guide explains to the tripe-seller that his master can neither see nor hear, she replies that she has
no doubt that the man can see well (67–68). However, when she offers him some liver, he replies by nonsensically telling her how drunk he was on the day after St. Martin’s Day (74–76). After another absurd exchange with the tripe-seller, the blind man is silent, and he remains so for the rest of the play as the guide and the tripe-seller engage in sexually charged double entendres. Thus the blind man’s role in the play is merely to raise suspicions about whether he is impaired and to exemplify the stereotype of drunkenness associated with the disability. Tangentially he gives his guide an excuse to beg from the tripe-seller for flesh of different kinds. When he has fulfilled these functions in the plot, he becomes marginal to the action.

The anonymous *Farce du Goguelu* will serve well to conclude this section on drama, not only because it is probably the latest of the French plays discussed here, having been written in the 1490s, but also because it deploys several dramatic devices involving blind people that we have seen in earlier plays: a sighted character disguising his voice to inflict violence on the blind character, the playing of *broche en cul*, and the blind man befouling himself.

The farce, which features a blind man, his chambermaid, and the valet Goguelu, begins with the three actors, presumably not yet in character, singing a begging song accompanied by the valet’s vielle. The actor playing the blind man immediately brings misrule and grotesque excess to the stage: he asks the audience where his chambermaid is, and when no one answers, he beats a member of the audience with his stick. (The reason that this blind man has a chambermaid remains unexplained in the text and would no doubt have raised questions for the audience about the source of his money, since he later shows himself to be a beggar.) The chambermaid enters and asks whether he hasn’t cried out for her enough already (35), suggesting noisy misrule in the performance. She claims to have a glass of wine for him but pisses into the glass instead; although he hears her urinating and identifies what she is doing, she persuades him that the sound is coming from the wine cask, and he drinks the urine. Furious, he insults her obscenely and beats her repeatedly (45–70).

Goguelu enters, makes the blind man agree to hire him as his valet in case the angry chambermaid should quit, and proceeds to ally himself with her against their ill-natured master. She proposes that they persuade him to play *broche en cul* (318) in the same way that it was played in the Angers Ré-surrection: only the blind man will actually be bound, but she will not. When the blind man is tied up, Goguelu pretends to distance himself from the game, and the chambermaid says she sees a sergeant approaching who looks like an executioner (463–65). She runs away, and Goguelu, “fignant
voix” (disguising his voice), accuses the blind man of being the brigand with a thousand ducats, presumably a thief. The valet then beats the blind man, counting the blows as his victim begs for mercy. He even threatens to hang the blind man (514). When the valet finally withdraws to speak to the chambermaid, she says that their victim has received “bonne discipline” (525), a line that Jody Enders reads in terms of the uses of violence in the play: “That phrase exploits the multiple connotations of the term discipline: the master has been disciplined, he has ‘learned his lesson,’ he has been taught well, he has gotten a good beating, and he has felt the good whip.”

I would add that it is equally important to this play that a blind man is being disciplined for embodying the misrule and excess that is conventionally associated with characters of his type.

The result of this discipline is that the blind man, calling for the help of the Virgin Mary, admits, “D’ahan je chie sus et jus / Tout partout, devant et derrière” (“For my suffering I have shat above and below, all over everywhere, in front and behind” [528–29]). The chambermaid reappears to tell him to go wash himself in the river. The blind man scolds his companions for leaving him in danger, to which the chambermaid replies that if he wants to retain their services, he needs to speak to them differently (540–55). Counseling good cheer, Goguelu picks up his vielle again, and the trio sing about a beautiful eighteen-year-old girl who can only be wooed by men with money (577–606). The song restores harmony among them, and the play closes as they agree to go from house to house singing in order to earn cash.

This chapter’s discussion of medieval comic literature involving blind characters is bracketed by two short, self-contained plays, the thirteenth-century Le Garçon et L’Aveugle and the fifteenth-century Le Farce du Goguelu, that have a great deal in common. In both plays the blind men attempt to control their servants, but the servants exploit their masters’ impairment in order to humiliate and inflict violence on them. However, the differences in the endings of the farces may be significant in terms of the evolution of a social model of disability during the two centuries that separate them. At the end of the earlier play the blind man, robbed of his clothes and his money, is alone, powerless, and silenced; the playwright does not even allow him a formalized complaint of the type that might be expected in this situation. At the end of Goguelu, although the blind man has been humiliated and threatened with similar desertion, Goguelu and the chambermaid invite him to travel with them, singing and begging; the power dynamic has
shifted inasmuch as his former servants now seem to be more like companions, but nevertheless they agree to make their way through the world with him. The social vision here parallels that in the blind man’s final scene in the Angers Résurrection, in which his guide remains with him and the shopkeeper’s charity provides them a place in society, marginal and temporary though it may be. In both of the fifteenth-century plays the blind man learns that he remains part of society only by the sufferance of the sighted, who may occasionally feel called upon to remind him of his “place” by humiliating him—but in comparison to the utter isolation of the blind man in Le Garçon et L’Aveugle, such a situation may represent progress, if we dare call it that.

Scholars of medieval English literature will be aware by this point of an important omission from this chapter dealing with humor and blindness: one of The Canterbury Tales’ best fabliaux, “The Merchant’s Tale,” in which the main character goes blind and is miraculously cured. In terms of genre and basic subject matter, the tale might appear to belong here, but in comparison to the texts discussed earlier in which blind characters are subjected to physical abuse and cruelty because of their blindness, it does not. Chaucer makes January blind and subjects him to relentless satire, but the poet sets himself apart from his French contemporaries in that he does not satirize the impairment of blindness. As a blind character January does not perform his disability in a degrading manner, he does not embody most aspects of grotesque excess, and other characters do not take advantage of his impairment to subject him to physical violence. These differences, which imply a great deal about Chaucer’s deployment of disability, make “The Merchant’s Tale” more appropriate to the subject of the next chapter, the subject of which is blinding as punishment for sexual transgression.