Stumbling Blocks Before the Blind

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The material presented within these covers has shown that blindness as an impairment was more socially marked, both positively and negatively, in France than in England. The impairment also seems to have been more remarked on the east side of the Channel, a logical result of its multiplicity of meanings. It is tempting to credit Louis IX with the cultural attention devoted to blindness in France after the foundation of the Hospice des Quinze-Vingts in the 1250s, but obviously other cultural forces were at work, not all of them so positive. And of course the survival of the hospice depended on the continuing interest of later monarchs in its mission.1 The social importance of this ongoing royal patronage cannot be underestimated in the institution’s longevity. Alongside this remarkable institution we must consider the less salubrious aspects of the treatment of the blind in France as evidenced by the pig-beating game, the cruelly satirical drama and poetry, and the general suspicion of people whose inability to work forced them to beg for a living.

Blindness seems to have captured the political and artistic interests of the people of medieval England far less than it did among the French. It is difficult to analyze a relative absence such as this one. Obviously there was no royal foundation such as the Quinze-Vingts to create interest in the special nature of blindness, but social concern for the poor and impaired was not dictated purely by royalty. Although the end of the use of blinding as punishment in the thirteenth century would have obviated the possibility of viewing blind people as criminals, that is surely not a sufficient cause for the differences between these countries. And regarding satirical drama and poetry, England simply produced a smaller quantity of humorous literature
than France, so the relative paucity of texts that cruelly target blind characters must be understood in that literary-historical context.

Uniting the two countries was the ambivalence in Christian teachings about blindness and other disabilities, which validated some rather negative attitudes toward people with disabilities while also resulting in the creation of systems of charity that must have kept many people with disabilities alive. Whether blindness was a sign of God’s love, as for Gilles le Muisit, or his wrath, as for John Audelay, remained a central theological question throughout the Middle Ages, one that medieval people must have constantly asked—and it is still asked in some religious sects today.

The increasing attention to blind people in France during the period discussed in this book was not always favorable; the relative lack of attention to blind people as a marked group in England might have represented disinterest or neutrality. But the unfortunate aspects of the French treatment of the blind may have been as important as the social ameliorations in increasing their visibility as a unique minority, and the visibility of the blind that we can trace to medieval France has remained a constant in French culture, resulting in later attempts to educate and create reading systems for the blind. Indeed, France has been responsible for some of the most important developments in education for the blind; beyond the remarkable accomplishments of Louis Braille, the work of philosophers such as Diderot and reformers such as Valentin Haüy significantly improved the lives of blind people. England, as often as not, has followed France’s example in this area.²

So if the place of the blind in medieval French society was not always an easy one, they at least began to have a particular place. In other words, they became more visible than their English counterparts, and that visibility was apparently a necessary step toward reform.