

## CHAPTER 1

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# Crippling the Middle Ages, Medievalizing Disability Theory

In Paris in 1425, an anonymous bourgeois chronicler recorded the following “entertainment.”

Item, le darrenier dimenche du moys d’aoust fut fait ung esbatement de l’ostel nommé d’Arminac, en la rue Saint-Honoré, que on mist .IIII. aveugles, tous armez, en ung parc, chascun ung baston en sa main, et en ce lieu avoit ung fort pourcel, lequel ilz devoient avoir s’ilz le pouvoient tuer. Ainsi fut fait, et firent celle bataille si estrange, car ilz se donnerent tant de grans colz de ces bastons que de pis leur en fust, car, quant (le mieulx) cuidoient frapper le pourcel, ilz frappoient l’un sur l’autre, car, se ilz eussent esté armez pour vray, ilz s’eussent tué l’un l’autre. Item, le sabmedi vigille du dimenche devant dit, furent menez lesditz aveugles parmi Paris tous armez, une grant banniere devant, où il avoit ung pourcel pourtraict, et devant eulx ung homme jouant du bedon.<sup>1</sup>

*[Note, the last Sunday of the month of August there took place an amusement at the residence called d’Arminac in the Rue Saint Honoré, in which four blind people, all armed, each with a stick, were put in a park, and in that location there was a strong pig that they could have if they killed it. Thus it was done, and there was a very strange battle, because they gave themselves so many great blows with those sticks that it went worse for them, because when the stronger ones believed that they hit the pig, they hit each other, and if they had really been armed, they would have killed each other. Note, the Saturday evening before the aforementioned Sunday, the said blind people were led through Paris all armed, a large banner in front, where there was a pig portrayed, and in front of them a man playing a bass drum.]*

This event shocks modern readers with its calculated cruelty toward and humiliation of the four blind men, who are called upon to “perform” their blindness in a contest focused less on the killing of the pig than on the injuries that they will inflict on each other. And this was an expensive, carefully planned production, requiring not only a pig but a painted banner and a drum. The ritualistic procession, complete with percussion, evidently served as banns to advertise the next day’s competition and draw a crowd. Equally shocking, however, is the chronicler’s rather disengaged tone as he recounts the event. His strongest response to it is his implicit gratitude toward the sighted organizers for not giving the blind men more lethal weapons, because evidently he believes that the blind, being blind and not knowing any better, would have fought to the death.

Evidently such scenes had played themselves out in Europe before, because a visual representation of a nearly identical contest appears in the border of a fourteenth-century manuscript. Ms. Bodley 264, a product of Flanders, includes the Romance of Alexander, copied in 1339 and illuminated afterward by Jehan de Grise, who completed his work in 1344. Along with magnificent illuminations of the Alexander narrative, Jehan painted comic and genre scenes in many of the lower borders of the text pages. Among these are several of people with disabilities.<sup>2</sup> On the verso of folio 74 Jehan painted a two-part illumination (fig. 1): to the left, a boy leads four blind men in broad-brimmed hats, each man with one hand upon the shoulder of the person in front of him and the other hand bearing a club. The boy does not appear in the right-hand scene; instead, the blind men are gathered around a pig. One man, his club raised vertically, falls backward over the animal as another man hits him on the head with his club.<sup>3</sup> The appearance of this scene here takes on added significance when we consider it alongside analogous marginal illuminations. Several of the scenes present games that are still recognizable today such as checkers, chess, dicing, and blindman’s buff, as well as a number of public spectacles, including a cockfight, a puppet show, and jugglers. Jehan de Grise expected his contemporaries to be able to recognize these games, so it is likely that the pig-beating game was equally recognizable, and perhaps even as unremarkable.

Another public spectacle based on the performance of blindness also enjoyed some popularity in medieval France, though in the short play *Le Garçon et l’Aveugle* (The Boy and the Blind Man), the blindness was performed by an actor. Written in the mid-thirteenth century (and generally thought to be the oldest surviving farce in French), the play presents a blind man whom one critic has rightly called drunk, gluttonous, coarse, cynical,



Fig. 1. A medieval “entertainment”: the blind beating the blind. Oxford, Bodleian Library MS 264, *The Romance of Alexander*, Jehan de Grise, 1339–44, fol. 74v, lower marginal illustration. Reproduced by permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford University.

and debauched.<sup>4</sup> He is also a miser who has amassed a small fortune through his begging. The plot of the drama is simple: the blind man needs a guide, and he tries to persuade a boy to take the position. However, the boy, who states his dislike of blind people in an early aside, first disguises his voice in order to slap the blind man incognito and then later steals all of his money as well as his clothes. In short, the boy’s goal is to humiliate the blind man physically and to strip him of all of his possessions, presumably to the delight of an audience.

This play will be discussed in some detail in chapter 4, but I have sketched its content here for two reasons. First, it seems to have drawn upon previously existing stereotypes of blind people, particularly drunken gluttony and avarice, because they appear as vices of the blind in other literature. Second, like the pig-beating game, it was performed repeatedly over a period of time, because even though it exists in only one manuscript, that manuscript has undergone considerable scribal emendation to make it easier to use as a script for performance. Carol Symes has identified at least four hands other than the original scribe’s, and she dates their emendations from the thirteenth to the mid- to late fifteenth century.<sup>5</sup> These scribal modifications, which cover a period of about two centuries, provide clear evidence of the play’s ongoing popularity, and therefore it is highly likely that the play existed in other copies as well (and at only 265 lines, it would have been easy to copy). The performance of the blind man’s humiliation at the hands of the boy obviously had a lengthy performance history.

This book examines cultural constructions of blindness in England and France in the later Middle Ages, constructions that gave rise to responses ranging from Christian charity to violent humiliation of the type represented by the pig-beating game and *Le Garçon et l'Aveugle*. Because historical texts describing how blind people lived are relatively rare, other types of representation—religious, literary, and artistic—will flesh out our understanding of history. Indeed, the question that gave rise to this study was basically a literary one: why was French medieval literature cruel toward and satirical about blind characters while English literature was much less so? I will examine the cultural forces that gave varied meanings to blindness in these two countries, both for blind people and for the societies in which they lived. The enormous differences between France's multivalent engagement with the disability and England's relatively benign neglect of it provide a remarkable variety of responses to the impairment. Furthermore, some of the English constructions of blindness are historically related to that country's intertwined but vexed historical connections to Normandy and France.

This work owes its nascence at least in part to the field of disability studies, which grew out of the political struggle for civil rights for people with disabilities that began in the 1960s. Like gay activists' adoption and ironic reinvention of the term *queer* as a sign of power, the term *cripple*, shortened to *crip*, has been adopted by people with disabilities (and those engaged in disability studies) to represent the inversion of earlier disempowerment as they engage in both political and scholarly activism. Thus the first half of the title of this chapter indicates my intention to look at the Middle Ages through the lens of disability theory, particularly as it relates to blindness, while the second half of the title acknowledges that I cannot do so without adapting that theory, which in the humanities has been overwhelmingly "presentist" in its focus. Because the civil rights movement for people with disabilities is ongoing, it is to some degree justifiable that disability studies has tended to focus on the present and relatively recent history. Even so, some scholars in the humanities have seen the value of extending the range of disability-related scholarship beyond the last two centuries.<sup>6</sup>

In *Why I Burned My Book and Other Essays on Disability*, historian and activist Paul Longmore encourages the study of disability history by posing a list of significant questions.

As one would expect, many disabled activists have been asking about experiences of disability in earlier times. How did societies in previous eras regard and

treat people with disabilities? What values underlay cultural constructions of disabled people's identities? What factors shaped their social careers? How did people with various disabilities view themselves? In what ways did disabled people embrace or resist reigning definitions of their identities? How did they attempt to influence or alter sociocultural beliefs and societal practices in order to manage their social identities and social careers? Were there communities and cultures of disability in the past? What are the connections between those many pasts and our present?<sup>7</sup>

Helpful though these questions are to historians of modern disability, they present insuperable problems to scholars working in premodern periods. This study attempts to answer Longmore's first two questions in relation to blind people, and it will provide some information in response to the third. Sadly, almost no historical evidence exists to answer his questions about how blind people in the Middle Ages viewed not only themselves but also the beliefs and practices that determined their place in society. The only voices of blind writers whom I have found who mention their disability in the Middle Ages are John Audelay in England, who alludes to his impairment but provides little information about his lived experience as a blind man, and Gilles le Muisit in France, whose poetry includes encomia to the miraculous cure of cataract surgery that causes him to look back on his blindness with even greater loathing. Jean l'Aveugle (John the Blind) of Luxemburg is one of a very few blind people to appear in the annals of medieval history in these two countries, and although chroniclers wrote of him, he apparently left no writing of his own about his blindness.

Integral to my discussion of blindness in the Middle Ages is the distinction often made in disability studies between impairment and disability: impairment is the particular physical condition (in the case of my work, visual impairment), while disability is constituted by the restrictive social and political practices that construct the environment of a person with an impairment. Among some disability theorists this distinction has been criticized. Some scholars believe it is too essentialist, in that impairments can create discomforts or limitations that are not purely socially constructed.<sup>8</sup> A Foucauldian scholar eschews the disability/impairment distinction because "the identity of the subject in the social model ('people with impairments') is actually formed in large measure by the political arrangements that the model was designed to contest,"<sup>9</sup> that is, in many instances the impairment is as socially constructed as the disability. However, in her book *Disability in Medieval Europe: Thinking about Physical Impairment during*

*the High Middle Ages, c. 1100–1400*, Irina Metzler offers a defense of these terms. She writes, “It is . . . preferable to speak of ‘impairment’ during the medieval period rather than of ‘disability,’ which implies certain social and cultural connotations that medieval impaired persons may not have shared with modern impaired people.”<sup>10</sup> The distinction between disability and impairment is useful in the present work because of distinctly medieval constructions that did not grow out of the nature of the impairment but made it a disability in ways specific to that era. Our historical distance from the Middle Ages allows us to see these constructions of blindness with greater clarity because modern ones are so different.

Disability theorists most often divide types of impairment into three groups: sensory, for blindness, deafness, and other impairments of the senses; physical or somatic, for impairments of other parts of the body; and mental, for cognitive disability and mental illness. In most writing on sensory disability the focus is on deafness, partly due to the fact that with the invention of sign language, the lives of deaf people improved to the point that we can speak of deaf culture, inasmuch as language is a defining component of culture. Indeed, many writers capitalize the word *Deaf* when it is used in this context, claiming a group identity for people with the impairment. While many ameliorative technologies for blind people have been invented and refined in the past centuries—from braille to guide dogs to computerized optical character recognition systems—these do not necessarily bring blind people together as sign language does deaf people. Thus as issues of identity among people with disabilities (integral to Longmore’s set of questions) have become central to disability studies, Deaf culture can lay claim to a uniqueness that blindness cannot, as those who use sign language will always have a sense of community that does not necessarily belong to blind people.

As in any field of theoretical inquiry, disagreements about fundamental issues in disability theory abound, but out of these, useful taxonomies have emerged. The two models of disability that dominated this theoretical field in its first two decades, perhaps too neatly constructed as binaries, are the medical model and the social model. The social model, which was and perhaps still is most popular in Britain, demands redefinition of *able-bodied* and *disabled* in such a way that society can acknowledge and include the full spectrum of physical types. Disability is no longer individualized as a condition “belonging” to a person but as one of a number of possible physical states in society, “reframing disability as a designation having primarily so-

cial and political significance.”<sup>11</sup> Carol Thomas has effectively described both the value of and challenges presented by the social model at the time of its inception as a theory in the mid-1970s.

Disability now resided in a nexus of social relationships connecting those socially identified as impaired and those deemed non-impaired or “normal,” relationships that worked to exclude and disadvantage the former while promoting the relative inclusion and privileging of the latter. The new challenge was to: i) describe this nexus of social relationships, that is, to make clear the manifestations of disability in the social world (in organisations, systems, policies, practices, ideologies, and discourses), and ii) to explain it, by employing theoretical paradigms that generate ways of understanding what gives form to and sustains these relationships.<sup>12</sup>

Disability theorist Lennard Davis has focused on a different aspect of the social model that he calls the “constructionist model,” which highlights the artificiality of the process through which people with impairments become disabled. He writes, “The constructionist model sees disability as a social process in which no inherent meanings attach to physical difference other than those assigned by a community.”<sup>13</sup> The construction of disabilities and the social relations that define them must be recognized and rethought before society as a whole can begin to envision disability as something other than an individualized issue. In medieval France, as blind people became more socially visible, partly due to the foundation of a hospice for them by Louis IX, social anxieties also apparently emerged that made themselves felt in literature and law. In England, on the other hand, blindness remained relatively unmarked as a disability, and such anxieties about blind people are far less obvious.

Although Robert A. Scott wrote *The Making of Blind Men: A Study of Adult Socialization* in 1969, before disability studies grew into an academic field, he implicitly understood the constructionist model as it relates to blindness.

The disability of blindness is a learned social role. The various attitudes and patterns of behavior that characterize people who are blind are not inherent in their condition but, rather, are acquired through ordinary processes of social learning. Thus there is nothing inherent in the condition of blindness that requires a person to be docile, dependent, melancholy, or helpless; nor is there anything about it that should lead him to become independent or assertive.

Blind men are made, and by the same processes of socialization that have made us all.<sup>14</sup>

Scott's ideas here apply as fruitfully to medieval Europe as they do to contemporary society, though the stereotypes of blind people that he lists differ greatly from medieval ones. So to borrow Scott's phrase, one goal of this book is to examine evidence of the processes of socialization that made blind people in the Middle Ages.

Where did people with impairments fit into medieval society? Because there were relatively few institutions for them, they tended to remain integrated in their communities, so far as we know. In *A History of Disability*, Henri-Jacques Stiker says that medieval societies extended to people with impairments "an acceptance at times awkward, at times brutal, at times compassionate, a kind of indifferent, fatalistic integration."<sup>15</sup> For the Middle Ages, we do not have detailed historical records of people with impairments who were integrated into their societies, because they lived lives too unexceptional to leave lasting textual evidence. Furthermore, varying degrees of visual impairment must have been so widespread as to be unremarkable, especially before the Italian invention of eyeglasses for nearsightedness in the 1280s and for farsightedness in about 1450.<sup>16</sup> Even so, peculiar aspects of medieval law and customs to be discussed later in the chapter made the full integration of blind people into medieval European societies problematic at best.

In contrast to the social model, the medical model constructs disability as a deficit or a pathology that requires correction or cure. One of the most persuasive voices in disability theory, Simi Linton, describes the medical model in its modern context but also in a way that will be helpful in relation to what I perceive as its analogue in the Middle Ages. In *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*, Linton writes that much of the meaning of disability in contemporary society has been appropriated by the medical profession, with unfortunate results for people with disabilities.

Briefly, the medicalization of disability casts human variation as deviance from the norm, as pathological condition, as deficit, and, significantly, as an individual burden and personal tragedy. Society, in agreeing to assign medical meaning to disability, colludes to keep the issue within the purview of the medical establishment, to keep it a personal matter and "treat" the condition and the person with the condition rather than "treating" the social processes and policies that constrict disabled people's lives.<sup>17</sup>



The medical model of disability obviously does not apply to the Middle Ages, when medicine had hardly begun to develop into the institution that it is now. Medical knowledge based in universities, monasteries, or folk practices was too decentralized to wield the institutional and discursive power that it has today. Hospices and hospitals were not the sites of medical treatment, so they occupied a very different place in the social structure than they do currently. Above all, the medical model seems inapplicable to this study because medical options for the visually impaired were very limited: cataract removal was a possibility at certain times and places in medieval Europe, but no other treatments resulted in similarly consistent success, as shown in chapter 7.

But the power dynamic whereby the church controlled—or attempted to control—not only medicine but also many other cultural practices bears further examination. Darrel W. Amundsen has both defined medicine as it was practiced in premodern times and discussed its subordinate relationship to the church.

By “medicine” we mean (1) the substances, mechanisms, and procedures for restoring and preserving health and physical wellness; and (2) those who employed such substances and mechanisms in order to avail themselves of their expertise. So medicine’s role has been like that of religion but much more limited: to restore the health of those who were beset by sickness or hampered by disfunction or injury; in some instances to succor those whose health medicine could not restore; and to preserve health through prophylaxis or regimen.<sup>18</sup>

Amundsen goes on to describe the relationship between medicine and religion in “a monolithic society” as one in which medicine is subsumed by religion, since “religion’s all-inclusive concern with humanity’s well-being provides the exclusive context for medicine’s much more limited concern with the well-being of the body.”<sup>19</sup> Part of that concern was made manifest through the church’s control over discourse related to disability in a manner analogous to the way modern medicine attempts to maintain control over it now. Indeed, if institutionalized religion were substituted for institutionalized medicine in Linton’s preceding analysis—if we replaced each use of the adjective *medical* with the adjective *religious*—we would have a rough picture of how the meaning of disability, including blindness, was constructed in much of Europe during the Middle Ages. I have chosen to call this institutionalized medieval construction of disability the *religious model*.

## DEFINING THE RELIGIOUS MODEL OF DISABILITY

The church's control of the discursive terrain of illness and disability grew out of New Testament theology. Doctrinally the church's interest in the impaired was based on Jesus's role as miraculous healer and spiritual "physician." His most significant encounter with a blind person is described in John 9.

1. And Jesus passing by, saw a man, who was blind from his birth:
2. And his disciples asked him: Rabbi, who hath sinned, this man, or his parents, that he should be born blind.
3. Jesus answered: Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents; but that the works of God should be made manifest in him.<sup>20</sup>

With his saliva and dust from the ground Jesus makes clay that he applies to the blind man's eyes, and he tells the man to wash it away at the pool of Siloe. After washing, the man can see. The Jews who learn of this miracle are skeptical that the man had ever been blind (skepticism about impairment that is also typical of medieval Christians, as we will see later); ultimately they turn against the cured man, telling him to become Jesus's disciple. The disciples here allude to the conception of blindness as punishment for sin, which is a pathological condition in Judeo-Christian teaching, but Jesus negates that possibility, only to recast the impairment as a site of deficit ready for divine intervention and miraculous cure. The cure also offers the opportunity to test the faith of the community affected by the miracle. Thus disabled Christians in the Middle Ages who put themselves in the care of Jesus's institutional representative, the church, could hope more optimistically for recovery.

However, another passage from John, this one relating to Jesus's miraculous cure of a man lame for thirty-eight years, problematizes the connection between impairment and true Christian belief. Jesus's words to the formerly lame man were quoted in one of the widely reproduced canons of the influential Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which regularized the practice of confession.

Since bodily infirmity is sometimes caused by sin, the Lord saying to the sick man whom he had healed: "Go and sin no more, lest some worse thing happen to thee" (John 5:14), we declare in the present decree and strictly command that when physicians of the body are called to the bedside of the sick, before all else

they admonish them to call for the physician of souls, so that after spiritual health has been restored to them, the application of bodily medicine may be of greater benefit, for the cause being removed, the effect will pass away.<sup>21</sup>

Here the examination of spiritual health takes precedence over medical intervention as the Fourth Lateran Council tried to circumscribe the practice of medicine within the conventions of Christianity. It is surely not coincidental that this edict came out of the same council that required the annual confession of sins, which may be the restoration of spiritual health to which the passage refers. Confession at least temporarily removes sin, allowing the “effect” of the infirmity to pass away.

Repeatedly in medieval literature, art, and religious teaching, impairment in general and blindness in particular functioned in ways largely structured by Jesus’s miracles. The impairment was the site where a saint or holy figure was to prove his or her holiness, and the religious figures were aided in that effort if the person with a impairment claimed to have immutable faith in the curer. Representations of moments of miraculous cure saturated all genres of medieval visual art, and they were also performed frequently in the living art of the drama. Aside from the Bible, such miracles filled what has been called “the only book more widely read than the Bible” in the late Middle Ages, Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* or *Golden Legend*, a lengthy compilation of saints’ lives and other religious texts written about 1260.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, proof that a potential saint had performed miracles while alive was integral to the canonization process, and paramount among those was the cure of impairments.<sup>23</sup>

Here we begin to see resemblances between the discursive power of religion in the Middle Ages and that of medicine in the modern world. At its most restrictive, medicine tends to view a disability as an absence of full health that requires a cure; similarly, medieval Christianity often constructed disability as a spiritually pathological site of absence of the divine where “the works of God [could] be made manifest.” Modern medicine tends to retain discursive control over disability by holding out the possibility of cures through developments in research; medieval Christianity held out the possibility of cure through freedom from sin and increased personal faith, whether that of the person with the disability or a miracle worker nearby. And thus, to some extent in modern medicine and to a greater one in medieval Christianity, there is a tacit implication that somehow the disabled person himself is to blame for resisting a cure. (The religious model of miraculous cure is, of course, still alive and well at Euro-

pean holy sites such as Lourdes and Medjedorje, and in the United States it is exemplified in the faith healing of pentecostal preachers. It has also brought about legal intervention in some cases involving Christian Scientists, who abjure medicine in favor of prayer for cures of illnesses and disabilities.)

The requirement of confession along with myriad exemplary stories of miraculous cures as rewards for the righteous worked together to create the kind of internalized discipline that Michel Foucault has effectively theorized, though as is often the case in his work, he initially located the concept in a period later than the Middle Ages. Thus the church's control over the hope of divine blessing became part of the complex network of cultural practices that made medieval Catholics with disabilities the "docile bodies" that Foucault describes.

A "political anatomy," which was also a "mechanics of power," . . . defined how one may have a hold over others' bodies, not only so that they may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed, and the efficiency that one determines. Thus discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, "docile" bodies. Discipline increases the forces of the body (in economic terms of utility) and diminishes these same forces (in political terms of obedience). In short, it dissociates power from the body; on the one hand, it turns it into an "aptitude," a "capacity," which it seeks to increase; on the other hand, it reverses the course of energy, the power that might result from it, and turns it into a relation of strict subjection.<sup>24</sup>

The religious model of disability increases the economic utility of people with disabilities by keeping them tied to—and perhaps working for—the church as the possible source of a cure, but it also diminishes the possibility of independent agency by requiring of them the obedience to Christian teaching and clerical instruction that would keep them in the institution's good graces.

In his later writing, Foucault acknowledged the importance of the practice of confession as a form of discipline.

Christianity is not only a salvation religion, it's a confessional religion. . . . Each person has the duty to know who he [*sic*] is, that is, to try to know what is happening inside him, to acknowledge faults, to recognize temptations, to locate desires, and everyone is obliged to disclose these things either to God or to oth-

ers in the community and hence to bear public or private witness against oneself.<sup>25</sup>

Such practices as confession shape religious subjects, defining and controlling them through the discipline they have internalized. Because of certain medieval religious practices, confession was, surprisingly, even more necessary for visually impaired people than for the sighted.

The religious model of disability that was operative in the late Middle Ages can also explain the change in attitudes toward disabilities, and particularly blindness, that took place between the classical and Christian eras. There were no clear “models” of disability in Greece and Rome before the advent of Christianity. Martha Rose repeatedly states in her work on disability in the Hellenic world that “the story of blind people in the ancient Greek world is neither glorious nor dismal,” and that insufficient evidence survives to draw conclusions that this society espoused the “negative social practices and attitudes toward blindness [that] abound in modern, developed society.”<sup>26</sup> Robert Garland, another historian of disability in the classical world, cites the respect with which blind poets were treated, due to the renown of Homer—a stereotype, no doubt, but a relatively positive one nevertheless.<sup>27</sup> In the *Tusculan Disputations* Cicero cites several exemplary blind Romans, some of whom were his contemporaries, and he states, “The soul may have delight in many different ways, even without the use of sight.”<sup>28</sup> Because the Graeco-Roman world did not operate under any kind of unified discursive system resembling orthodox Christian teaching, classical history presents an ambiguous picture in its written records about blind people.

Another aspect of the medieval religious model of disability lay in the control that the church retained over some people with disabilities through charity based on both almsgiving to individuals and institutional foundations for groups. According to Stiker, who entitled his chapter on the Middle Ages “The System(s) of Charity,” Christian benevolence structured the place of the poor and the disabled in late medieval society. He notes the development of

[a] system of foundations where, through the intermediary of the church, the generosity of the rich was transformed into the subsistence of the poor, the passage from an economic system based on gifts to a system of exchange. We should add that the ongoing discourse of the Middle Ages claimed that the rich

assured their salvation by giving alms to the poor and it thus posited the necessity of the poor for such salvation.<sup>29</sup>

The care of the ill and the disabled earned generous gifts and bequests for religious institutions, particularly monasteries and convents. Hospitals founded by kings, lords, merchants, guilds, and municipalities were generally under the control of religious orders, some of which were founded specifically to care for the infirm.<sup>30</sup> Treatises written by and for clerics practicing medicine abjured payment from the poor but encouraged acceptance of payment from the wealthy.<sup>31</sup>

The structure of charity delineated by Stiker plays a part in the religious model of disability, but unlike Stiker, I do not believe that almsgiving was the primary socioreligious system controlling the lives of disabled people. Even if we assume that the majority of people with disabilities needed alms or institutional care, many would have needed neither, and therefore charity would not have constructed their experience of disability. But more importantly, those who wanted to receive the charity discussed by Stiker needed first to internalize the discipline of the doctrines of the church, including penance and perhaps even faith in the possibility of miraculous cure; in other words, they had to become “docile bodies” in the Christian community before they were eligible for its charitable outreach. Therefore the aspects of the religious model described here take precedence over acts of charity: people with disabilities had to make themselves worthy to receive the benevolence of others in order for that benevolence to strengthen the Christian community. Overemphasis on charity also deprives people with disabilities of agency. Some blind people worked in the Middle Ages, and the same would have been true of people with other disabilities; they were not all simply passive recipients of alms.

The religious model of disability neither denies medicine its place in medieval society nor asserts that medieval people always viewed impairment as the result of sin. Metzler has helpfully delineated the ways in which modern historiography rather than medieval attitudes has created the monolithic view that in medieval Europe impairment was inevitably associated with sin.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the religious model as a *discursive* model was the most widely available construction in medieval European culture for recasting impairment as disability. Furthermore, while the medical model may have grown in acceptance in relation to certain kinds of impairments in the later Middle Ages, medicine had very little to offer people with visual impairments.

Hitherto I have not consistently differentiated between blind people

and people with other disabilities. However, within the larger framework sketched here, the blind and visually impaired were victimized in a particular way by an important religious practice of the medieval church—in fact, perhaps its most important practice for lay people. From the twelfth century through the remainder of the Middle Ages, the laity generally partook of the Eucharist through only their sense of sight. In its earliest form, the so-called *elevatio* involved the priest consecrating the eucharistic bread and then raising it to make it visible to the congregants. The synodal statutes of Paris of 1205–8 mandated that the *elevatio* take place only after the bread was consecrated, so that the viewers would be looking not at bread but at the actual body of Christ, and the synod instructed priests to be sure to raise the Host high enough for all of the faithful to see it. As the practice became more widespread, the Host was raised higher, with the upward gaze of the congregants symbolically imitating the upward gaze to God himself.<sup>33</sup> According to Eamon Duffy, the *elevatio* became “the high point of the lay experience of the Mass,”<sup>34</sup> as witnessed not only in written texts but also the visual arts, in which representations of the Host generally show the moment that the priest elevates it. After the Synod of Paris, the practice of elevating the Host spread across Europe within a surprisingly short period of fifteen years,<sup>35</sup> and during the later Middle Ages it “almost completely replac[ed] sacramental communion.”<sup>36</sup>

The intensity with which medieval Christians desired to see the Host made itself apparent in a number of ways. William of Auxerre wrote in about 1200, “Many prayers were heard at the sight of the body of the Lord and rich treasures of mercy were granted,” an observation echoed by Alexander of Hales within the next decades.<sup>37</sup> Medieval documents record complaints against people walking from church to church to see the Host repeatedly on a single day. Christians under interdict were known to drill holes in the doors of churches in order to catch a glimpse of the *elevatio*.<sup>38</sup> In some churches in which wooden rood-screens blocked the view of the Host, holes called elevation squints were drilled in the wood at the eye level of kneeling congregants.<sup>39</sup> The fervor to see the Host at least partially contributed to the creation of Corpus Christi Day in 1264, the celebration of which sometimes involved taking the Host out of the church in a public procession.<sup>40</sup> By 1300, the design of *ostensoria*, reliquaries with glass windows through which people could see holy relics, had been adopted in the creation of portable monstrances that would protect the Host while leaving it visible.

The exclusion of blind and visually impaired people from the *elevatio* made them marginal to an observance that was central to both personal af-

fective piety and Christian community-building, but other beliefs that came to be associated with the practice disadvantaged them further in comparison to the sighted. According to Snoek, people were allowed to derive the spiritual benefits inherent in gazing upon the Host without having to confess their sins, whereas the taking of communion required confession. In other words, “‘communion with the eyes’ implied no confession and no danger of receiving communion unworthily.”<sup>41</sup> So the spiritual renewal of this common form of quasi communion was unavailable to the visually impaired, leaving them less spiritually elevated in the eyes of the sighted communities around them. Ironically, among the physical blessings that the gaze upon the consecrated Host could grant its viewers was protection for the remainder of the day from, among other inflictions, blindness.<sup>42</sup> Such an assurance appears in the early fifteenth-century *Instructions for Parish Priests* by John Mirk, who says that Saint Augustine teaches that those who see the Host will be protected from a remarkable range of ills: they will have sufficient meat and drink, their idle words and oaths will be forgiven by God, they will not fall prey to sudden death, and they will not go blind. (“Also þat day I the plyzte / þow schalt not lese þyn ye-syzte.”)<sup>43</sup> This belief highlights the circularity of the sacred power of seeing the Eucharist: those who see it will be blessed with the continuing ability to see it, at least for a day, while those who physically cannot see it are deprived of access to its beneficent power to help them see.

Texts from both sides of the Channel attest to the significance of the elevation and connect visual impairment to it. According to an anonymous Middle English chronicle written by a London author in the late 1460s,<sup>44</sup> a locksmith who had helped a Lollard steal the Eucharist later went to Mass to pray for forgiveness, where he was unable to see the Host any of the times that it should have been visible: “whenn the pryste hylde uppe that hooly sacrament at the tyme of levacyon he myght se nothyng of that blessyd body of Cryste at noo tyme of the masse, not so moche at Agnus Dei.” Doubting his own sanity, the man drank an entire hob of ale, attended three more masses, and experienced similar selective blindness. Then he and his accomplices were arrested, thrown in Newgate, and sentenced to death. On the day of his execution the locksmith confessed his sins and again went to mass, where now he could “see that blessyd sacrament well inowe.”<sup>45</sup> The chronicler closes the story by saying of the condemned men that he “truste[d] that hyr soulys ben savyd.” The text thus equates sinfulness with the inability to see the elevation of the Host, and spiritual rectitude with restored vision.



The locksmith's relief at his reentry into the Christian fold hours before his death must have been akin to the relief of fourteenth-century French poet Gilles le Muisit (whose work will be discussed in chapter 7) when he reentered the community of the sighted after having his cataracts removed. In a poem thanking the Virgin Mary for the miracle of his restored vision, he mentions specifically his joy in being able to see the Savior at the altar, almost certainly a reference to the *elevatio* ("Je voy me Sauveur al autel vrayement").<sup>46</sup> The cataract removal not only allowed Gilles to participate fully in this spiritual moment, but it also allowed him to rejoin the community of congregants, like the repentant English thief. Although we would call the removal of cataracts a medical procedure, for Gilles it is a miracle that exemplifies the religious model of disability.

A miracle in Jean Gobi's *Miracles de Sainte Marie-Madeleine*, written in the first quarter of the fourteenth century, shows that a blind person contemplating the elevation of the Host with the eyes of the spirit understands that his experience is inferior to seeing it with the eyes of the flesh. A Genoese man named Jacques, imprisoned by his enemies for more than seven years, became blind because of the harsh conditions of his imprisonment and the loss of blood due to the wounds inflicted on him during the ordeal. After his release, he goes to a church dedicated to Mary Magdalene in Genoa, where a priest celebrating the mass elevates the Host. Ardently venerating the Eucharist and weeping abundantly, Jacques says to Christ that he sees the savior's body with the eyes of his faithful spirit and recognizes him in the sacrament, but he also prays that Christ perform a miracle so that he can contemplate the sacrament with the eyes of his flesh. Jacques then miraculously recovers his sight.<sup>47</sup> The structure of this miracle strongly suggests that the elevation of the Host is experienced most intensely by the sighted. It is also significant that Jacques prays to have his vision restored specifically in order to see the Host, not necessarily in order to take part in other activities of sighted people, indicating that visual contemplation of the Host is the best possible use of physical sight.<sup>48</sup>

Yet another prayer from a blind man asking specifically to see the elevation of the Host is documented in *The Life and Gestes of S. Thomas Cantilupe*, a bishop of Hereford who died in 1282 and was canonized in 1320. Richard Strange, who wrote the hagiography in the early 1670s, says that a man who had in his youth been a menial servant to Thomas lost his sight after the saint's canonization and remained "stark blind" for three years.<sup>49</sup> He prays to the Virgin "to obtayne of Alm[ighty] God a cure of his misery and restorement of his sight that he might againe to his comfort behold her

Sonn in the Consecrated Host, while it is elevated for all to adore.” He sends a “measure” of himself (presumably his height) along with two wax eyes to Hambleton, Lincolnshire, where the saint was born and christened. Over the course of ten days his vision improves to the point that he no longer needs a guide, and he “could discern, as he desired, the elevated Host at a competent distance.”<sup>50</sup>

In all of these exempla blindness, practically by necessity, functions both literally and metaphorically. Although Naomi Schor’s article “Blindness as Metaphor” focuses on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, she offers more generalized ideas about why the impairment is such a powerful metaphor, quoting from nineteenth-century rhetorician Pierre Fontanier’s *Les Figures de Discours* (1821–30).

Blindness must have at first referred only to the deprivation of the sense of sight; but he who does not clearly distinguish ideas and their relationships; he whose reason is disturbed, obscured, does he not slightly resemble the blind man who does not perceive physical objects? The word blindness came naturally to hand to also express this deprivation of moral sight.<sup>51</sup>

Schor follows Fontanier’s lead in labeling the metaphor of blindness a catachresis:

What makes some of these metaphors so difficult to extirpate is that these metaphors are catachreses, that is, they belong to that peculiar and little understood category of figures that signifies (at least in French, for there are interesting divergences between English and French definitions of this figure) a necessary trope, and obligatory metaphor to which language offers no alternative, e.g. the leg of a table, the arm of a windmill.

Animating the idea of metaphor, Schor goes on to say that “metaphors, by their very nature, strive toward catachresis,” and she adds that Paul de Man used the terms *trope* and *catachresis* interchangeably.<sup>52</sup>

Schor’s perceptions undergird my idea of blindness in the religious model of disability. While the uses of blindness as a metaphor varied in medieval discourse as a whole, within religious discourse of the period blindness reached the status of a catachresis. Since religious discourse was a critical sociocultural determinant of the mores of medieval Europe, how did medieval people separate their perceptions of the impairment from the catachrestic meaning of the impairment as “deprivation of moral sight,” to

quote Fontanier? This catachrestic synergy is nowhere more evident in Christian discourse than in the use of blindness as an epithet applied to Jews for refusing to “see” the divinity of Jesus. The metaphorical association of blind people with Jews, which resulted in remarkably similar stereotyping and marginalization for both groups, will be the subject of chapter 3.

Medieval Christian discourse included a few relatively isolated metaphorical constructions of blindness as advantageous, which is perhaps not surprising given the dominant belief that the body was essentially tainted with sin. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says that a man who looks on a woman with lust has committed adultery in his heart, and therefore, “If thy right eye scandalize thee, pluck it out and cast it from thee. For it is expedient for thee that one of thy members should perish than that thy whole body be cast into hell” (Matthew 5:29).<sup>53</sup> Inasmuch as such self-mutilation is easiest to undertake figuratively, metaphorical self-blinding in order to avoid gazing upon temptation appears in some religious texts. For example, the author of the *Ancrene Wisse*, a conduct book for anchoresses, advises the women to be “blind to the outside world.”<sup>54</sup> However, metaphors of blindness with negative connotations are almost exclusively the norm.

The issues discussed in relation to the religious model that I am espousing show the complexity of the power structure between the church and people with impairments. The church needed people with impairments for reasons of both earthly economy, manifested in the creation of foundations and institutions, and the economy of charity and salvation of individual Christians who gave alms to disabled beggars, a practice that Stiker rightly calls a “system of exchange.” Like all medieval Christians, people with impairments relied on the church to give them both an earthly community structure that would sometimes offer aid, and the hope of a spiritual community after death. People with impairments would also have had a special attraction to the church because of its discourse of miraculous cure, even though some of the church’s practices were actively discriminatory against people with impairments, especially blind people.

#### THE SOCIAL MODEL AND THE AMBIGUITIES OF STIGMATIZATION: BLINDNESS AND BLINDING

The religious model described here overlapped with the social model of disability in medieval Europe, but in the social environment, additional practices structured the disability of blindness.

The implication that an “uncured” disability somehow represents shameful incompleteness is an important aspect of what sociologist Erving Goffman called “stigmatization” in his influential book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*, which is frequently cited by theorists of disability. Goffman traces the term to the branding or scarring that identified Greek slaves, and he adds that in the Christian era it referred to “bodily signs of physical disorder.” He continues, “Today, the term is widely used in something like the original literal sense, but is applied more to the disgrace itself than to the bodily evidence of it. Furthermore, shifts have occurred in the kinds of disgrace that arouse concern.”<sup>55</sup> Goffman wrote decades before the constructionist model of disability was delineated, but his ideas here closely resemble it: the “disgrace” that attaches itself to a stigma is more powerful than the bodily evidence that gives rise to the stigma. In other words, the disgrace constructs the disability, regardless of the impairment, and the kind of disgrace caused by particular “bodily evidence” changes over time, as do the disabilities relating to a particular impairment.

If we apply Goffman’s ideas to the Christian Middle Ages, we can see that the church created a complex set of attitudes toward people with disabilities that resulted in a kind of stigmatization. The religious stigmatization of blindness represents a unique subset of the attitudes that constructed disability more broadly. However, the stigma associated with spiritual “incompleteness” or sinfulness of blind people was not limited to religious discourse alone; in France, England, and elsewhere in Europe, disability could be read as a sign of sociopolitical sinfulness, which is to say criminality. Physical mutilation as punishment, which will be discussed at length in chapter 2, would have seriously complicated the social meaning of several disabilities, particularly among the Normans and the French. At certain times and places in medieval Europe, people must have questioned the type of stigma that certain disabilities represented. Was a man without a hand born that way, or did he lose it in an accident, or did he lose it as punishment for theft? Was a blind person’s impairment caused by God for spiritual reasons or by the king for criminal ones?

The intermittent use of blinding as punishment would have kept such questions alive until well into the Renaissance, particularly on the Continent. Mutilation as punishment situated blindness in the Middle Ages ambiguously between the bodily marks of shame suffered by Greek slaves and Goffman’s modern concept of stigma, due to the possibility that the disability might have been a governmentally created stigma, a marked sign of

a literal judgment of criminal activity rather than a unmarked impairment. In a very real way, blinding as punishment criminalizes the impairment of blindness, thus constructing a kind of disability that has disappeared, we hope, from the world today.

Marxist disability theorist Bill Armer draws a connection between crime and disability in contemporary Western culture that is useful to my analysis of blindness in the Middle Ages: "I suggest that disabled people are socially dislocated. I derive 'dislocation' from criminology, where it has been used to refer to both [the] physical and psychological distance from home of prisoners."<sup>56</sup> Armer goes on to discuss the incarceration of both prisoners in jails and disabled people in institutions. In medieval literature and culture we frequently see blind people and characters in such situations of "dislocation," at the margins of society where social relations are ill-defined and ambiguous and where marginalized people tend to be viewed suspiciously. Characteristics that would naturally have been associated with morally suspect blinded criminals came to be broadly applied to visually impaired people generally, adding to the sense of social dislocation. A set of stereotypes of blind people as drunks, moral reprobates, and thieves developed during the Middle Ages, especially in France, and this stereotyping became widespread in the fourteenth century. Of this era Stiker writes,

We may distinguish two kinds of marginality: that which challenges the social order and that, much deeper, which calls into question the organization of culture and ideology. To the former belong the robbers and rovers, to the second, the disabled or foreigners. But these two kinds of marginality are often rather confused in the general mind. Distrust, often amounting to slander, was leveled on the disabled and the ill.<sup>57</sup>

The practice of punitive blinding further confuses the two kinds of marginality that Stiker describes. Slanderous distrust of the disabled is represented in numerous texts discussed later, including the thirteenth-century farce *Le Garçon et l'Aveugle*. In a historical example of a putative well-poisoning episode in Chartres in 1390, it was considered material evidence that one of the four suspects had spent some days in the company of a blind man.<sup>58</sup>

I am not implying that the practice of blinding as punishment somehow contributed to the increasing social recognition of blind people in medieval culture; obviously, blinded criminals would have been shunned so long as they remained in locations where their criminal past was known.

However, the preponderance of literary, religious, and historical texts involving blind people, especially on the Continent, shows that in the later Middle Ages, they attracted attention as a type and were more visible in society, so the use of blinding as punishment during these centuries would certainly have influenced that attention unfavorably. This mutilation, while ostensibly undertaken for political aims, literalizes the catachrestic notion of blindness as “deprivation of moral sight” by enacting it upon the bodies of criminals as the deprivation of sensory sight, and that catachresis is central to the religious model of disability discussed earlier. So here the religious model and the social model of disability work synergistically to create a unique kind of stumbling block that no longer exists.

The distrust of blind people intersects with a common medieval anxiety about beggars who feign disability. Here we are clearly not talking about people with visual—or any other—impairment, and yet this type loomed so large in the medieval imagination that it affected the treatment of the genuinely visually impaired. (This type, too, has a biblical precedent: in the miraculous cure of the blind man in John 9, quoted earlier, the Jews respond to the miracle by asserting that the cured man had never been blind [John 9:18].) Politically, the fear of beggars feigning disabilities resulted in a number of laws limiting their movements to specified areas, either the places where they were born or areas in which they were licensed;<sup>59</sup> such measures kept them in a community that knew whether they were actually disabled. The effect of anxiety about feigned beggars also resulted in the marking of people who were truly visually impaired. Some wore badges that identified them as residents of particular institutions, and others wore emblems that served as recognizable licenses to beg.<sup>60</sup> Aside from the legal and institutional documentation of the creation of insignias for beggars, varied textual evidence about feigned disabilities among beggars comes from both France and England. In a satirical ballad from the late fourteenth or early fifteenth century, “De Cahymans et de Coquins” (“Of Beggars and Vagabonds”), Eustache Deschamps complains of people in church who “faignent maux et en mainte guise” (“feign illness in many ways”) and who beg so loudly that the mass can hardly be heard; they make themselves up using blood and herbs.<sup>61</sup> Other texts that raise the issue of feigned disability include *Les Trois Aveugles de Compiègne*, the plot of which is set in motion by a clerk who tests whether three men are pretending to be blind, and William Langland’s *Piers Plowman*, in which the allegorical figure of Hunger miraculously “cures” beggars feigning blindness when the Black Death renders begging useless.

Blind people must have found themselves frequently accused of feigning, because, as Georgina Kleege states in her memoir *Sight Unseen*, sighted people tend to assume that people labeled “blind” cannot see anything at all. According to Kleege, among modern Americans who are designated “legally blind,” only about 10 percent have “a complete absence of any visual experience.”<sup>62</sup> Kleege recounts experiences of people who “object” that she is not *really* blind because she can read if she wears thick glasses and holds printed matter an inch from her eyes. So in both the medieval and the modern world, the sighted find it unsettling to learn that their appraisal of the blind is incorrect and that they have partial vision. In a largely preclinical period like the Middle Ages in which percentages of sightedness were not measurable, a person who was seriously visually impaired but not totally sightless could thus raise suspicions of feigning, as the three blind men in *Les Trois Aveugles de Compiègne* do. Furthermore, in France the most common begging cry of blind people claimed that they saw nothing at all (“ne voir goutte”), so visually impaired people with some sight were basically required by linguistic convention to lie when they used this expression.

These constructions and stereotypes of blindness were not all equally operative in England and France from the late eleventh through the fifteenth centuries. To quote Stiker, “The era of medieval Christianity never found an entirely stable position, nor an effective praxis to address disability,”<sup>63</sup> and this generalization holds true even for countries with histories as intertwined as England and France. However, these constructions were woven together through such a complex set of beliefs and practices that none could be fully operative without one or more of the others: the religious model of disability that I have formulated made its power felt in the social perceptions of blind people, though those perceptions might also have grown out of other practices. I hope I have demonstrated why I cannot agree with Stiker when he says that the medieval social model of disability at its most benign is “without ideology”;<sup>64</sup> rather, it seems to me that ideologies were so thoroughly internalized in medieval Christian society that they became utterly normative. Many of the stumbling blocks before blind people in the Middle Ages were probably invisible to the sighted.

The changing institutional and cultural practices in medieval Europe, especially France, marked blindness as a special disability in a number of ways: through the creation of the first institutions specifically for the blind; through the use of blinding as punishment; and, across Europe, through the privileging of sight in the practice of the elevation of the Host. Zina Weygand sees the creation of residential institutions, the first of which ap-

peared in the Middle Ages, as giving the residents “an identity as a social group” (“une identité en tant que groupe social”),<sup>65</sup> but beyond wearing the visible insignia of their institution, they shared with other blind people the sign of the disability, which could be read in a number of ways. In her history of disability in medieval Europe, Irina Metzler is rightly reticent in deploying the term *identity* in relation to disabled people as a whole, not least because no overarching terms such as *disabled* or *handicapped* existed in European languages; however, terms for different disabilities were in common use,<sup>66</sup> and *blind* and its cognates as signifiers took on added meaning during the Middle Ages, allowing us to see the beginnings of group identity.

#### DISABILITY THEORY AND LITERATURE: NARRATIVE PROSTHESIS AND GROTESQUE EXCESS

While historical and cultural contexts as read through the lens of disability theory are paramount in understanding any medieval text about blindness, a recent attempt to create a literary theory relating to disability will also be helpful to this discussion. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* examines the use of disability as an aspect of characterization in literature from the Renaissance through the twentieth century. As is true of disability theory generally, their ideas are closely tied to the period covered by their study, and they focus exclusively on physical disability; however, with some modification their ideas can be fruitfully applied to medieval literature.

Mitchell and Snyder base the metaphor of narrative prosthesis on the function served by an actual prosthesis.

In a literal sense a prosthesis seeks to accomplish an illusion. A body deemed lacking, unfunctional, or inappropriately functional needs compensation, and prosthesis helps to effect this end. . . . If disability falls too far from an acceptable norm, a prosthetic intervention seeks to accomplish an erasure of difference all together [*sic*]; yet, failing that, as is always the case with prosthesis, the minimal goal is to return to an acceptable degree of difference.<sup>67</sup>

According to these writers, narrative prosthesis accomplishes an analogous type of illusion that serves to alleviate readers’ anxieties about disability.

While an actual prosthesis is always somewhat discomfiting, a textual prosthesis alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view. . . . The era-



sure of disability via a “quick fix” of an impaired physicality or intellect removes an audience’s need for concern or continuing vigilance. . . . Narrative prosthesis is first and foremost about the ways in which the ruse of prosthesis fails in its primary objective: to return the incomplete body to the invisible status of a normative essence.<sup>68</sup>

This passage echoes a number of concepts mentioned earlier. In medieval representations of blindness, the most common “quick fix” whereby impairment is removed is, of course, the miraculous cure. But Mitchell and Snyder go on to say that, ironically, the texts in their analysis that attempt narrative prosthesis “expose, rather than conceal, the prosthetic relation,” because disability “refuse[s] its desired cultural return to the land of the normative.”<sup>69</sup> This assertion is not fully applicable to much of the medieval literature that I will discuss here, for reasons that have already been implied. Many of the short, exemplary texts featuring characters with disabilities do not engage in what modern readers would call “characterization” of them; they remain flat and emblematic, the site where God’s work can be made manifest. And when confronting these texts the reader has no choice but to think that miraculously cured characters “return to the land of the normative,” because the texts do not follow them long enough to show slippages in the characterization or role in the narrative.

Mitchell and Snyder provide a schema for the narratological structure of the deployment of disability in literature in their second chapter, “Narrative Prosthesis and the Materiality of Metaphor.”

A simple schematic of narrative structure might run thus: first, a deviance or marked difference is exposed to the reader; second, a narrative consolidates the need for its own existence by calling for an explanation of the deviation’s origins and formative consequences; third, the deviance is brought from the periphery of concerns to the center of the story to come; and fourth, the remainder of the story rehabilitates or fixes the deviance in some manner. This fourth step of the repair of deviance may involve an obliteration of the difference through a “cure,” the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as purification of the social body, or the revaluation of an alternative mode of being.<sup>70</sup>

Here Mitchell and Snyder are clearly discussing narrative structure that relies largely on psychological characterization, but the medieval paradigm for narrative structure, especially in relation to blindness, is generally dif-

ferent. Rarely do authors sketch a disability's "origins and formative consequences"; rather, they seem to assume that disability simply exists, and in that sense they anticipate one aspect of the social model. But while in some instances this assumption might seem benign and integrationist, it is often undergirded by some version of the religious model whereby punishment for sin is implied.

Mitchell and Snyder's third point about the trajectory of the disability from the periphery of the narrative to the center is problematic in this study partly because of some medieval narrative conventions, but largely because among disabilities in narratives, blindness tends to become central as soon as it is introduced. Sensory disabilities may have a greater hold on the human psyche than physical disabilities because, rightly or wrongly, people tend to think that they understand the nature of the former.

Blindness as represented in medieval texts has a uniquely medieval way of remaining central: when blind characters play actual roles in plots rather than simply symbolizing their disability, medieval writers often created situations in which blind people were called upon to "perform" their disability. In some works (e.g., *Le Garçon et L'Aveugle*, *Les Trois Aveugles de Compiègne* and its variants), blind characters fulfill their roles in the plot by enacting physical awkwardness and/or some of the stereotypes of misrule that were associated with them. This enactment was evidently considered particularly effective in comic drama, in which actors playing blind characters presumably used a broad, slapstick style of acting in order to amuse audiences. This performance of disability relates to what sociologist Rod Michalko has called "a staging of the self," which he characterizes as "a disciplinary practice of the body."<sup>71</sup> Of course the degree to which a person "stages" or "performs" a disability relies on the presence of an audience, and evidently audiences tended to be both more interested in disability and more cruel toward it on the Continent than in England (as exemplified in the "game" of the blind men beating the pig to death).

What is striking about the options that Mitchell and Snyder list in their fourth step is that "the extermination of the deviant as the purification of the social body" almost never occurs in medieval literature. In both England and France, plots involving blind people tended to end in either vilification, without expulsion from the social body, or miraculous cure. The tendency to favor these two endings bespeaks the complex medieval attitude that kept blind people at the social periphery but also required their presence there in order to define the normative. This medieval phenomenon is discussed in chapter 3.

Another concept equally useful in understanding representations of the blind is complementary to narrative prosthesis. Some historical anxieties about blind people mentioned earlier made them the marginalized unruly “others,” bringers of disorder, and potential (or past) criminals. This stereotype appears in Jesus’s miraculous cure of a blind man in Luke: when the man hears that Jesus is about to pass by, “he cried out, saying: Jesus, son of David, have mercy on me. And they that went before rebuked him, that he should hold his peace: but he cried out much more: Son of David, have mercy on me” (Luke 18:38–39). The relatively benign raucous beggar who refuses to be silenced anticipates more malignant medieval literary representations of blind characters who frequently exemplify the vices listed by Zina Weygand: “laziness, foolishness, vanity, hypocrisy, drunkenness, a passion for gambling, lechery.”<sup>72</sup> As chapter 3 demonstrates, blind characters share some of these stereotypes with Jews, and so I have borrowed from a discussion of representations of Jews the concept of the “trope of grotesque excess,”<sup>73</sup> a phrase first used by Robert L. A. Clark and Claire Sponsler. This phrase obviously traces its genealogy to Bakhtin’s *Rabelais and His World*,<sup>74</sup> but it implies less extreme forms of grotesquerie than the deeply satirical, extravagant types exemplified in the work of Rabelais. It takes very little imagination to see how the performance of the pig-beating game would have exemplified this trope all too well: extravagant, misdirected blows with clubs; human shouting mingled with animalistic noise of the pig; and then the transgressions of bodily boundaries as the participants injured and drew blood from each other. Rabelaisian grotesquerie also raises the possibility of the temporary carnivalesque inversion of the social order, but the grotesque excess of blind characters is usually too delimited and powerless to pretend to significant social inversion; rather, it is simply meant to disgust and alienate its audience, justifying the marginalization of the blind but not entirely removing them from the realm of the recognizably human. And of course the imbalance of power in the relationship between the sighted and the blind here is reinforced by the fact that the sighted are using on the blind the very ability that the latter group does not have and that has put them in the position to stage their disability.

The term *excess* is useful because it intersects with Mitchell and Snyder’s notion of narrative prosthesis at a metaphorical level. A prosthesis is always an addition to the body, an excess. The grotesqueness of blind characters in medieval literature is excessive in the sense that it is meant to be seen and derided by sighted characters (and/or the audience). In literature, when the grotesqueness has reached a level arbitrarily deemed sufficient by the au-

thor, he dispenses with it; he tacitly acknowledges its excess by showing its prosthetic function. Mitchell and Snyder state that in modern literature the disability in narrative is generally “rehabilitated” or “fixed”; in some medieval literature (notably among French works), it is narratively sufficient that the disability of blindness simply be *proven* by being “staged,” often with some type of excess. At that point the onlookers “fix” the situation, if we can use that term, by simply walking away and leaving the blind character fixed in the social margins where he has proven that he belongs. And although the margins are important for helping to define the center, they, too, are always already excessive.