

Redefining (Dis)Ability as Labor in Dante's Florence

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This paper reconsiders the relationship between poverty, disability, and work in late medieval Florence through the lens of Dante Alighieri's *Commedia*. Central to my approach is a methodological challenge: the long-standing scholarly and historical tendency to locate the medieval disabled within the undifferentiated mass of the impoverished. This conflation obscures the existence of disabled people who were economically independent or socially advantaged, flattening the diversity of disabled lives and erasing examples of those who were not poor. Through archival evidence and textual analysis, I show how these were overlapping but distinct categories, reframing how Dante's works engage with both economic productivity and social marginalization. I argue that Dante's descriptions of beggars—religious and lay, often also disabled—and of almsgiving in his contemporary Italy reveal an overlooked labor category: he represents a cohesive group of the blind, who actively worked together to extract monetary gains from able-bodied donors. By foregrounding the agency of the blind, Dante invites the reader to consider begging itself as a form of structured, skilled labor within medieval economies.

I center a question that itself challenges modern stigma in scholarship on poverty: is medieval begging work? In medieval canon law, the poor were classified into three main categories—the religious, the “lay miserable” (beggars, widows, orphans, disabled), and the lay poor. Canonists such as Rufinus distinguished between the *honestus* beggar, genuinely unable to work, and the *inhonestus*, capable but unwilling. These distinctions reveal that systems of charity were often oriented more toward the moral and spiritual benefit of the giver than toward alleviating material need. This moral economy complicates how we interpret the role of disabled beggars in Dante's world.

To situate Dante's portraits within their historical context, I examine the Franciscan model of voluntary poverty, as embodied by St. Francis in *Paradiso* 11 and 13. Dante elevates Francis above profit-seeking professions such as law and medicine, while also critiquing the fractured Franciscans of his own day for disputes over the Rule and proper modes of begging. Figures such as Illuminato, reportedly cured of blindness by Francis, exemplify the overlap between categories of the “religious poor” and the disabled. Archival donation records—such as the case of *La Prima*, a blind tertiary with two children—further illustrate how intersecting identities (religious affiliation, motherhood, disability) shaped perceptions of merit and determined the allocation of charity.

Within the *Commedia*, Dante's terrace of envy in *Purgatorio* 13 offers one of his most vivid images of disability as collective, strategic labor. He likens the blinded penitents—moving together, heads resting on each other's shoulders—to groups of blind beggars outside churches, who coordinate their voices and physical presence to elicit alms. Here, disability is not passive misfortune, but an organized, visible performance designed to

provoke compassion and produce economic gain. This framing casts disabled people as active participants in shaping their own social and economic realities.

Dante's engagement with disability is not purely observational; in the *Convivio*, he metaphorically figures himself as a marked, potentially disabled beggar, aligning his poetic persona with embodied difference. Across his works, Dante's attention to bodily variance and social marginalization produces a portrait of poverty grounded in material experience rather than abstract moralizing. His poetry calls us to reconsider medieval begging not solely as a state of lack, but as a condition embedded in networks of labor, charity, and agency—and, crucially, to rethink the assumption that poverty and disability were inherently synonymous in the medieval imagination.

Finally, this paper points toward a broader theoretical provocation: the idea of disability itself as work. The disabled body in Dante's Florence could operate as a productive site of labor—its visibility, affective impact, and capacity to elicit alms functioning as forms of economic generation. This is not to romanticize precarity, but to recognize how embodiment, performance, and social perception intersected to create value. When we consider contemporary disability movements such as *Piss on Pity*—which reject the application of charity to the disabled body and instead center disabled people's own coordination of their needs—Dante's own representation of blind beggars becomes surprisingly resonant. His depiction frames the blind as strategic actors who determine the terms of their participation in the economy, thereby anticipating the activist rejection of passive recipient status and affirming disabled agency in shaping both social relations and material survival