Économie du miracle et fabrique de la bourgeoisie : les rôles de l'Aveugle et du Boiteux dans les mystères médiévaux

The Economy of the Miracle and the Making of the Bourgeoisie: The Roles of the Blind Man and the Lame Man in Medieval Mystery Plays

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This paper aims to examinate the recurring figures of the Blind Man and his lame servant in late medieval French mystery plays, situating them at the intersection of comic spectacle, hagiographic tradition, and bourgeois cultural construction. Although the lower classes were excluded from the process of creating these urban religious dramas, the plays frequently incorporated characters from social mrgins: beggars, fools, or peasants, who were ofteh heroes of popular farces Among these, the pair of the Blind and the Lame became a particularly enduring duo[1].

Three Archetypes of the Blind Man

The Blind Man in mystery plays emerges from three distinct archetypes :
1) the Man Born Blind, known from the Gospel (Jn 9:1–18), whose healing demonstrates divine power without the blindness being a punishment for sin.
2) Longinus, the apocryphal blind soldier, who pierced Jesus's side with a spear and was healed by his blood.
3) the Farcical Blind : beggar, accompanied by his lame valet, whose quarrelsome banter and comic beatings amused audiences.
The porous boundaries between these archetypes allowed playwrights to blend sacred narrative with farcical conventions: the Man Born Blind could sing as a mendicant with his servant, while Longinus might be guided by an attendant mocking his incapacity. Such hybrid portrayals underline the theatrical, rather than catechetical, nature of the genre.

The Side Effects of the Miracle – Loss of Social Identity

Central to these representations is the paradox of miraculous healing. On stage, the miracle that restores physical sight simultaneously destroys social identity: once cured, the Blind Man and his servant lose their livelihood and are compelled to reconfigure their place within society. At the same time, the community itself proves unable to cope with the cognitive dissonance: someone whom they had perceived solely as a blind man suddenly loses, in their eyes, all personality. This paradox, already implicit in the Passion plays, is exploited with comic effect by authors such as André de La Vigne. In his Mystery of Saint Martin, disabled characters resist divine healing for fear of being forced into a new, unfamiliar mode of life. The miracle thus produces both laughter and unease, exposing the social dislocation that accompanies bodily transformation.

[1] Franck Collard et Évelyne Samama, ed., *Handicaps et sociétés dans l'histoire : l'estropié, l'aveugle et le paralytique de l'Antiquité aux temps modernes*, 1 vol. (L'Harmattan, 2010).

Between Ridicule and Admiration

The Blind-Lame duo oscillates between ridicule and admiration. Some interpreters read them as allegories of the sinner blinded by his sin[2]; others see them as theatrical reflections of the blind beggars feared in medieval towns[3]. One must not forget, however, that these were roles within a living performance that was pious and entertaining simultaneously, and that the actors portraying disability were not truly blind. This seemingly banal fact highlights the extent to which these were technically demanding roles, often requiring spectacular physical agility and likely entrusted to professional jesters.

Spectacular Disability – A Bourgeois Creation ?

This spectacularization of disability functioned within a broader social economy. The enduring popularity of the Blind and the Lame provided medieval audiences with a shared cultural code akin to that of our clown. Social cohesion was reinforced maby not primarily through ridicule of the weak, but through the stabilization of recognizable figures that mediated between the sacred and the comic realities.

While mystery plays cannot yield direct evidence about the lives or voices of disabled persons in the Middle Ages, they may show us how disability was culturally constructed and theatralicly deployed. Read through the lens of disability studies, these roles exemplify the transformation of embodied difference into a vehicle of bourgeois spectacular culture that simultaneously entertained, instructed, and reinforced communal norms in the upcoming « social class ».

[« Mystery play: a French theatrical work from the 15th or 16th century, of religious inspiration, drawing its subject matter from the Bible, the miracles of the Virgin, or the lives of saints. Such plays, which might stage a single episode in the life of a "hero" or encompass the entire history of humanity from Creation to Judgment Day, vary enormously in length – from 1,000 to 60,000 verses. Whatever the subject is, the mystery play is "historical" in the sense that its authors sought to represent on stage events that Christian audiences believed to be true. The verse is most often written in octosyllables, with mnemonic rhyme schemes designed to help the actors, though a wide variety of complex meters is also frequently encountered. […] The primary aim of the play is clearly didactic, though the text is often lightened by humorous or even somewhat coarse scenes. Performances were usually held outdoors, before a broad audience, on stages built specifically for the occasion.[4] »]

[2] JACQUES DE VITRY, *Sermones vulgares vel ad status*, ed. Jean Longère (Brepols, 2013), sermon 20.
[3] O. RICHARD, « Le jeu des aveugles et du cochon : rite, handicap et société urbaine à la fin du Moyen Âge », *Revue Historique*, vol. 317, 3 (675) (PUF, 2015), p. 525-556.
[4] Jean Molinet (?), *Le mystère de Judith et Holofernés*, ed. Graham A. Runnalls (Droz, 1995).