

**‘Entertaining “Disability”:
Disability and Performance in the Records from Medieval Britain’**

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The much-studied French manuscript in Oxford’s Bodleian Library, Bodl. MS 264, contains a famous illustration of a blind symphonia player, complete with a guide dog and apparent begging bowl (fol. 180v). Pictured in the margin amongst a group of musicians, this blind performer has received a great deal of critical attention, especially from manuscript scholars, art historians, social historians, as well as scholars of premodern disability (e.g., Carlson 2021; Wheatley 2005). As vivid as he may appear, however, Bodleian 264’s blind musician arguably represents a *conceptualisation* of disability as part of medieval performance rather than any life actually lived. His marginalised presentation—in the literal margins of Bodleian 264—certainly prefigures his increasingly iconographic appearance in later European art. Yet Bodleian 264’s symphonia player remains a fiction, an ideation of a blind performer, rather than reality.

Drawn from my recent book on *Performing Disability in Medieval and Early Modern Britain* (ARC Humanities, 2024), this paper will introduce some of the records for actual historic performers with apparent ‘disabilities’ from medieval Britain. It will showcase, in particular, some of those records for ‘disabled’ performance from the great medieval Priory of Durham—one of the North of England’s most powerful monastic institutions. Using the evidence of the long-running Records of Early English Drama project (REED), the paper will offer comment on disability as an aspect of performance, considering how the records might shed light on artistic models—like Bodleian 264’s symphonia player. It thus aims show how ‘disability’ played a part in medieval performance culture, and how evidence such as REED might help us reassess lives lived beyond the imaginative margins.