

**Handicap et émotions dans l'incitation aux bonnes œuvres. Analyse des exempla  
médiévaux (fin XII<sup>e</sup> – début du XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle)**

*Disability and Emotions in the Encouragement of Charitable Works: A Study of Medieval Exempla (Late 12<sup>th</sup> – Early 14<sup>th</sup> Century)*

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This paper forms part of a doctoral thesis on disability and emotions in medieval exempla. It focuses on narratives depicting charitable works carried out for the sick and disabled (almsgiving, hospitality, care of the sick) between the late twelfth and early fourteenth centuries. The corpus includes exempla from collections and sermons produced in two distinct contexts: Cistercian exempla intended for the instruction of monks and lay brothers, and those composed by mendicant friars or secular clergy for pastoral use among lay audiences.

The twelfth and thirteenth centuries witnessed a profound transformation in both the conception and practice of charity. This evolution was evident in the multiplication of charitable institutions, the growing involvement of laypeople, and the emergence of a new category of charitable saints. It also appeared in theological and spiritual discourse, with renewed interest in works of mercy accompanied by the development of an affective spirituality centered on Christ's humanity and suffering. Devotion to the Passion reshaped understandings of charity, presenting it as participation in Christ's suffering and as an invitation to show compassion toward earthly sufferers.

Analysis must take into account the fundamental differences between these contexts of production. Cistercian exempla addressed monks living in communities withdrawn from the secular world, for whom charitable works were primarily collective undertakings rather than essential elements of individual spiritual practice. By contrast, mendicant and secular exempla operated within an active pastoral framework aimed at laypeople, for whom individual acts of charity represented both an essential duty and a privileged path to salvation. Despite these contrasts, both traditions drew on patristic sources, and Cistercian collections frequently served as material for mendicant compilers.

Beyond the diversity of contexts and forms of charity, this paper asks a specific question: how are sick or disabled figures represented in these exempla? The analysis focuses on descriptions of their bodies, gestures, and emotional states. The hypothesis is that the spiritual benefits and virtues the compilers wished to highlight, rather than the types of charitable works themselves, shaped the ways disabled characters were portrayed.

The study reveals a spectrum of representations ranging between two poles. At one end, some exempla depict charity as penance and salvific humiliation: the diseased body becomes an object of suffering for the benefactor (physical exertion, sensory ordeals), the sick remain largely passive, and the absence of disgust is celebrated as proof of humility. At the other end, other narratives emphasize the compassionate suffering provoked by the sight of illness: here, charity is mutual relief, and merit lies in compassion itself as a virtue, with the acts performed serving mainly to display its depth.

Most exempla fall between these extremes, combining the two perspectives in varying proportions. This hybridity reflects both the richness of the sources used by compilers and medieval authors' awareness of the multiple spiritual benefits of charity: combating vice, performing penance, acquiring merit, and expressing compassion. A single collection might thus contain narratives with divergent emphases, reflecting the complexity of theological debates in an age when the forms and meanings of works of mercy were being renegotiated.

This analysis sheds light on the evolution of medieval religious sensibility and shows how the growing emphasis on compassion as a Christian virtue gradually transformed depictions of disabled persons in religious literature, especially by granting increasing attention to their emotions as objects worthy of compassion.