SEEING THE LIGHT? BLINDNESS AND SANCTITY IN LATER MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

by JOY HAWKINS

The fifteenth-century collection of miracles attributed to Henry VI and collated as evidence for his canonization proceedings includes the tale of John Robbins of Worcestershire, who, it is reported, 'rashly insulted the blessed King Henry, heaping many rebukes upon him'. The late king punished the irreverent Robbins, striking him blind. When Robbins repented, and 'vowed with many tears to visit [Henry's] holy tomb, he recovered his faculty of sight'. Robbins appears to have been understandably embarrassed about the event: when he later made his pilgrimage to Windsor, he failed to reveal the whole story to the shrine official.[1] In late medieval England, a common moral justification for disease was that God and his saints inflicted infirmity on sinners as a punishment for their transgressions, providing the opportunity for repentance and atonement.[2] However, blindness could also be regarded as a divine gift, offering protection from worldly distractions and allowing holy individuals to communicate more easily with God. Indeed, a lack of earthly sight allowed potential saints to demonstrate that they possessed the intrinsic values of humility and patience deemed necessary to achieve sanctity. This paper examines these two different theological explanations for blindness.

Although wide-ranging and comprehensive studies have been made of leprosy, insanity and the religious responses to disability, the common affliction of blindness has not received nearly as much scholarly attention.[3] The purpose of the present survey is to begin redressing this issue, exploring the relationship between sanctity

[1] *The Miracles of Henry VI: Being an Account and Translation of Twenty-Three Miracles*, ed. R. Knox and S. Leslie (Cambridge, 1923), 112–13.

[2] P. B. R. Doob, *Nebuchadnezzar's Children: Conventions of Madness in Middle English Literature* (London, 1974), 3.

[3] Carole Rawcliffe, *Leprosy in Medieval England* (Stroud, 2006); Basil Clarke, *Mental Disorder in Earlier Britain: Exploratory Studies* (Cardiff, 1975); Irina Metzler, *Disability in Medieval Europe* (London, 2006); C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT, 2006). Moshe Barasch, *Blindness: The History of a Mental Image in*

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and blindness during the later Middle Ages, whilst demonstrating that being deprived of one's sight could be an important element in attaining sanctity. It was believed that blind saints possessed qualities which others did not. Furthermore, saints who suffered from visual impairments during life often, in turn, gained a reputation for curing eye complaints after their death. It is not surprising, therefore, that shrine-keepers advertised the efficacy of their saint's healing powers in order to attract pilgrims. The ability to restore the sight of the blind offered 'proof' of God's omnipotence and the power he invested in his agents.[4]

The first understanding of blindness was as a physical manifestation of divine punishment. The ability to inflict blindness upon the impious underlined the saints' special status as God's agents, with the power to punish earthly mortals who irreverently committed sacrilege or succumbed to the sins of gluttony or pride. Sinners could be encouraged to improve their conduct by being blinded temporarily, as we have seen in the case of John Robbins above.[5] Throughout the Middle Ages hagiographers appear to have relished recounting stories of the saints meting out blindness upon the impious. For instance, in the immensely popular thirteenth-century *Golden Legend*, one tale describes how a vain English woman visited the shrine of Thomas Becket at Canterbury to request that he change her eye colour to make her more attractive. Her reward for such a trivial request was to be smitten with blindness until she repented of her coquettish behaviour.[6]

Blindness was believed to be an appropriate chastisement because it denied the individual the ability to see the 'light of heuen'.[7] Indeed, losing the sense of sight enclosed the individual in a private world of darkness, providing an enforced opportu-

Western Thought (New York, 2001), concentrates on the representations of the blind rather than the medieval understanding of, and reactions to, visual impairment.

4 S. J. Roth, *The Blind, the Lame and the Poor: Character Types in Luke-Acts* (Sheffield, 1997), 16, 106.

5 Robert Bartlett, *Gerald of Wales: A Voice of the Middle Ages* (Stroud, 2006), 93.

6 Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan, 2 vols (Princeton, NJ, 1993), 1: 62. For a continental comparison, see *The Book of Sainte Foy*, trans. Pamela Sheingorn (Philadephia, PA, 1995), 50–1, 151–2, 162–4.

7 Tob. 5: 10; biblical citations are taken from *The Holy Bible containing the Old and New Testaments in the Earliest English Versions made from the Latin Vulgate by John Wycliffe and his Followers*, ed. J. Forshall and F. Madden, 4 vols (Oxford, 1850).

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nity for reflection. It also, of course, acted as a visual deterrent to others. A fifteenth-century chantry priest, John Audelay, who lost both his sight and hearing, looked upon his physical afflictions as a punishment sent by God for his previous follies and lax way of living.[8] He wrote a collection of poems as a warning, urging his readers to make a full confession of their sins while they still had the ability.[9] If a person's impairment was deemed to have been caused by gluttony or pride, or was punishment for a felony, he or she would often be shunned by the community.[10] The blind were further disadvantaged because they were unable to participate fully in Christian rituals, including the mass, which during the later Middle Ages was predominantly a visual experience.[11] Taking its evidence from the Book of Leviticus, the Church taught that anyone who had a blemish in the eye, or was blind, should be forbidden from consuming, or even approaching, the bread of God.[12] This had severe repercussions for priests with eye complaints as there was understandable fear that a blind priest might spill the wine or drop the host, a potentially excommunicable offence.[13] Consequently, men with only slight problems with their sight had to receive special dispensation from the pope before they were allowed to join the priesthood.[14]

There was, however, a contrasting understanding of blindness which explains why, on occasion, a blind priest was allowed to retain his benefice. A lack of physical sight could shield against earthly temptations, and thus was often viewed as a divine gift bestowed upon the fortunate few. It was widely accepted that the eyes were the main passageways for sin to enter the body; sight, therefore, ranked as the most dangerous of the senses, constantly

[8] *The Poems of John Audelay*, ed. E. K. Whiting, EETS os 184 (1931), 49, 93–4, 111, 123.

[9] Ibid. 101.

[10] *Calendar of the Patent Rolls Preserved in the Public Record Office: Edward I, A.D. 1281–1292* (London, 1893), 192.

[11] Eamon Duffy argues that 'seeing the Host became the high point of the lay experience of the Mass': *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c. 1400 – c. 1580*, 2nd edn (New Haven, CT, 2005), 96.

[12] Lev. 21: 16–21.

[13] Nicholas Vincent, *The Holy Blood: King Henry III and the Westminster Blood Relic* (Cambridge, 2001), 31, 49.

[14] *Calendar of Papal Registers: Letters and Petitions, 1198–1492*, 15 vols (London, 1894–1961), 4: 540; 5: 540. Similarly, men who had blinded another, even accidentally, also had to receive dispensation before they could enter the priesthood: ibid. 4: 355.

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and unexpectedly threatening a person's morals.[15] Preachers and theologians warned that an 'unchaste eye' was a sign of 'an impure mind'.[16] Bernard of Clairvaux (c. 1090–1153) described the dire consequences for those who failed to guard their eyes against licentious or otherwise corrupting sights and permitted spiritual pollution to enter the body. An uncontrolled roving eye could transmit an overabundance of foul images to the brain, contaminating the whole body 'with intolerable filth'.[17] The belief that the eye had the potential for iniquity remained popular: one fourteenth-century preachers' handbook warned that the 'eyes are very quick to harm [the] soul', 'goading' the rest of the body into committing crimes, and explained that 'for this reason some call their eyes their worse enemies'.[18] The blind were protected from the threats associated with a wanton gaze. The handbook provided a striking *exemplum* for preachers to illustrate and reinforce the moral message of their sermons. The tale begins with two hermits cultivating a vineyard. One pierces his eye on a small, sharp branch, but rather than lament his loss, he rejoices, crying: 'I have lost a grievous enemy … God be praised, I have lost one. If I had lost both, I could be quite sure of my soul's salvation.'[19]

Members of the congregation listening to such examples would be made to understand that suffering the torments of blindness was not necessarily a dreadful fate. Indeed, the Gospel of St Matthew warned that any man who 'seeth a womman' and 'coueite hire' has already committed adultery with her 'in his herte'. Thus readers are instructed that 'yif thi right eiye sclaundre thee, pulle it oute, and cast it fro thee; for [better that] oon of thi membris perishe, than al thi body go in to helle'.[20] It was far preferable to have the offending eye plucked out than to endure the everlasting torments of hell. As John Trevisa's translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's encyclopaedia succinctly observed, it was 'bettir [for] thee to goo

[15] Woolgar, *Senses*, 176–7.

[16] Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church: A Translation of* Gemma ecclesiastica, trans. J. Hagen (Leiden, 1979), 182–3; Robert Mannyng of Brunne, *Handlyng Synne*, ed. Frederick J. Furnivall, EETS os 119, 123 (1901, 1903), 1: 242, 258, 280.

[17] Bernard of Clairvaux, 'On Conversion', in *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, ed. G. R. Evans, CWS (New York, 2005), 11.

[18] *Fasciculus morum: A Fourteenth-Century Preacher's Handbook*, ed. Siegfried Wenzel (London, 1989), 651–3.

[19] Ibid. 653.

[20] Matt. 5: 29–30.

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vniyed [one-eyed] into lif than to haue tweye [two eyes] and be sent into fure [fire] with outen ende'.[21] A lack of sight, therefore, freed blind men and women from vulnerability to many of the cardinal sins, including gluttony, avarice and lust.[22]

A similar assumption prompted Teresa de Cartagena (b. 1415) to come to terms with her deafness. In her *Grove of the Infirm*, the Spanish nun reflected on the spiritual benefits of her disability. She believed it to be liberating because it defended her against the noisy, earthly world so that she was able to hear God's voice with greater clarity:

> Since God has placed such cloisters on my hearing [he shows] me clearly by increasing my suffering that it is His will that I avoid any worldly chatter and maintain complete silence in order to better understand what with the din of worldly distractions I would not be able to hear. ... Certainly these words thanking God for having removed all my obstacles and hindrances should be a very helpful example for others.[23]

Teresa's wisdom could apply equally to those who had lost their sight rather than their hearing. Sensory impairment was often seen as a divine blessing to be utilized by future saints to strengthen their belief and bring them closer to God, while also creating the potential for spiritual wisdom. As reworked in Jacobus de Voragine's *Golden Legend*, the tale describing Saul's conversion on the road to Damascus provided a graphic illustration of the last of these gifts. The narrative explained that Saul 'was blinded to be enlightened in his darkened intelligence. Hence it is said that in the three days during which he remained blind, he was taught the Gospel.'[24] Only while his body was suffering from hunger and thirst, and otherwise immune to distractions, could Saul hear God's voice. It can be argued that the biblical precedent of his temporary infirmity served as a model for later accounts in which the sinner was persuaded to repent after a period of enforced reflection. For

[21] *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' De proprietatibus rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour, 3 vols (Oxford, 1975–88), 1: 365–6.

[22] S. Shahar, *Growing Old in the Middle Ages: 'Winter Clothes us in Shadow and Pain'*, trans. Y. Lotan (London, 1997), 55.

[23] *The Writings of Teresa de Cartagena*, trans. Dayle Seidenspinner-Núñez (Woodbridge, 1998), 28–9.

[24] De Voragine, *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 1: 120.

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instance, one twelfth-century miracle, attributed to the hand of St James preserved at Reading Abbey, describes how Gilbert, a keeper of hounds 'who was over-fond of the vanity of the chase', had his sight taken away as a penance for hunting on the saint's feast day.[25] Only through the consequent adversities Gilbert faced was he able to recognize and testify to God's power. The themes of punishment and repentance recurred in later medieval saints' lives, as has been shown with the fifteenth-century example of John Robbins.

Individual *vitae* and collections of stories about the saints suggest that blindness was bestowed by God not only as a necessary precursor to the attainment of sanctity, but as a sign of holiness revealing the prospective saint's true nature to those around him or her. Indeed, a visual impairment could magnify an individual's exemplary virtues, which, although not necessarily associated with his or her disability, might otherwise have remained hidden. For example, St Gilbert, who founded the Gilbertine Order at Sempringham about 1131, suffered from deteriorating eyesight as he grew older. Significantly for Gilbert's original thirteenth-century biographer, despite his being almost completely blind Gilbert's intellectual abilities and spiritual awareness did not diminish. In fact, it appeared that 'in return for having lost light from his body, he received the illumination he merited from the greater and more important blessing of the spirit. Although he was infirm, sick and blind he lost none of his mental energy.'[26] Moreover, because of his disability, Gilbert was no longer troubled by 'secular preoccupations' and thus was able to dwell 'entirely among the things of heaven', escaping from the worldly distractions which had been thrust upon him as abbot. Gilbert's blindness allowed him to transcend the mundane so that he could concentrate on 'good deeds of pious activity' and meditation, which had led him originally to found his own religious order.[27]

In the fifteenth-century Middle English version of Gilbert's *Life*, translated and expanded by John Capgrave (1393–1464), the author explains that Gilbert's blindness was not inflicted by God as an enemy, but bestowed by a friend, 'prouokyng a man to batayle and

[25] 'The Miracles of the Hand of St James', trans. Brian Kemp, *Berkshire Archaeological Journal* 65 (1970), 1–19, at 13.

[26] *The Book of St Gilbert*, ed. R. Foreville and G. Keir (Oxford, 1987), 87.

[27] Ibid. 89.

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behestyng victorie to him'. Capgrave believed that Gilbert's blindness served to promote a greater degree of holiness than would have been possible had the abbot remained fully sighted. Gilbert's disability provided him with 'grete perfeccion of vnderstanding in his soule', filling him with the 'grace of the Holy Goost',[28] thereby emphasizing that his impairment was an essential element to his sanctity. Not surprisingly, this conviction originated with the first *Life*, which insisted that, despite Gilbert's pious and copious weeping, his blindness was not self-inflicted but was, in fact, a sign of the Lord's clemency:

> we know that he [Gilbert] weakened [his] eyes with frequent floods of tears while he was preaching, and that he suffered much harm from winds, dust, vigils ... we do not blush for it, since the same thing happened to Isaac, Jacob, and many other holy men; on the contrary we give thanks all the more fervently because we know that this was proof not of God's anger and indignation, but of his mercy.[29]

Gilbert was not alone in shedding 'frequent floods of tears'; in their moments of ecstasy, saints often wept copiously. Tears were not perceived as signs of weakness: indeed, it has been suggested by Richard Kieckhefer that weeping reflected the saints' heightened awareness of the 'gulf which unfortunately separated themselves from God. In their raptures and in their identification with the crucified Saviour they sought to close this gap.'[30] Francis of Assisi's blindness was also attributed to his 'tears of contrition'.[31] His early biographers held up the saint's courage as an *exemplum* of how to cope with pain.[32] One early *Life* describes how the medical practitioners consulted by Francis decided to try cauterization:

[28] John Capgrave, *Lives of St Augustine and St Gilbert of Sempringham*, ed. J. J. Munro, EETS os 140 (1910), 95–6.

[29] *Book of St Gilbert*, ed. Foreville and Keir, 87.

[30] Richard Kieckhefer, *Unquiet Souls: Fourteenth-Century Saints and Their Religious Milieu* (Chicago, IL, 1984), 180–2.

[31] St Bonaventure, 'Major Life of St Francis', trans. Benen Fahy, in Marion A. Habig, ed., *St Francis of Assisi: Writings and Early Biographies* (Chicago, IL, 1983), 627–787, at 668. For the Latin text, see St Bonaventure, 'Legenda maior S. Francisci', ed. Michael Bihl, *Analecta Franciscana* 10 (1926–41), 557–626, at 580. Rachel Fulton discusses 'tears of contrition' in greater detail: *From Judgment to Passion: Devotion to Christ and the Virgin Mary, 800–1200* (New York, 2002), 165, 171, 175.

[32] Bonaventure, 'Major Life of St Francis', 664–70 (ed. Bihl, 578–81); de Voragine, *Golden Legend*, trans. Ryan, 2: 226.

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> [The surgeon] put a searing-iron in the fire in preparation for the operation. Francis trembled with fear, but then he began to encourage his body, addressing the fire like a friend ... . he made the sign of the cross over the red-hot instrument and waited unafraid. The sizzling iron was plunged into the soft flesh and drawn from his ear to his eye-brow ... when the doctor saw the extraordinary strength of his spirit which was revealed in his frail body, he hailed it as a miracle.[33]

The blindness from which Francis suffered enabled him to exercise the saintly qualities of courage, patience and humility, particularly when faced with the prospect of painful treatment. Such exemplary behaviour showed that saints could act as role models for the faithful to follow. Ordinary men and women were taught that, in order to emulate holy figures and to secure their place in heaven, or at least to reduce their time in purgatory, they needed to face their pain meekly. The possibility that God had protected St Francis from the agony of cauterization because he had such a strong faith would have given patients a modicum of comfort when such stories were repeated.

Upon other future saints God conferred blindness as a form of spiritual armour, shielding them from their enemies. In the famous case of St Lucy, who willingly embraced Christianity in the face of persecution, God gave the virgin martyr the strength to mutilate herself. According to legend, Lucy, determined to live a chaste and devout life, plucked out her own eyes and presented them to her pagan suitor on a plate. Lucy's act revealed to her persecutors the depth of her courage and provided a clear sign of her trust in God. Although she preserved her virginity, she was killed by her would-be husband for her stubborn insubordination. An early and widespread cult developed and she was quickly canonized.[34] Later, Lucy became the patron saint of the blind and she was often depicted bearing her eyes on a dish as a reminder of the torments she suffered.[35] Lucy's martyrdom thus associated the removal of

[33] Bonaventure, 'Major Life of St Francis', 668–9 (ed. Bihl, 580–1).

[34] David Sox, *Relics and Shrines* (London, 1985), 118.

[35] Emil F. Frey, 'Saints in Medical History', *Clio Medica* 14 (1979), 35–70, at 42–3; K. A. Winstead, *Virgin Martyrs: Legends of Sainthood in Late Medieval England* (London, 1997), 1–3; Greg Buzwell, *Saints in Medieval Manuscripts* (London, 2005), 61.

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earthly sight with faith and righteousness, a connection which could be made in cases where blindness was deemed to be self-inflicted. Moreover, Lucy's strength of belief and fidelity to God was rewarded with the miraculous restoration of her eyes.[36] This would have reassured the blind and purblind that loyalty to God in the face of adversity could reap physical and spiritual benefits.

Throughout the later Middle Ages, a connection was increasingly made between physical blindness and the possession of spiritual wisdom, which together granted the visually impaired the ability to 'see' God. Artists frequently portrayed bishops and saints wearing spectacles, promoting the belief that poor sight was a gift from God allowing the opportunity for personal redemption and even sanctity.[37] For example, Matthew the Evangelist was sometimes depicted needing a reading aid to consult his gospel.[38] There is a fine example on the rood screen at St Agnes Church, in Cawston, Norfolk, where he appears with a pair of glasses on his nose and holding the Bible. Such images would have reassured the hypermetropic (long-sighted) members of the congregation that declining vision did not preclude them from having inner sight. It could be argued that only the blind and purblind were truly able to see God as they were not distracted by material goods. Furthermore, blind men and women could turn to the saints in the hope of a cure because celestial helpers had the ability both to remove and to restore a person's sight.

The blind were prominent figures in the gospels, singled out by Christ as worthy recipients of healing. In the annual re-creation of the story of the 'Healing of the Blind Man', performed by the Glovers' Guild as part of the fifteenth-century Chester Mystery Cycle, the actor playing Jesus informed the crowd that he had performed this miracle to 'set forth God's great glory' and to demonstrate the magnitude of divine power.[39] The imitation of Christ through healing the blind was considered an important part of the saints' miraculous repertoire and clear proof of their sanctity. In an attempt to secure the canonization of Henry VI, his miracles were investigated and collated; particularly prominent are those of

[36] David Farmer, *The Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1997), 312.

[37] Richard Corson, *Fashions in Eyeglasses* (London, 1967), 22, 24–7; for later examples, see ibid. 34–5.

[38] Farmer, *Oxford Dictionary of Saints*, 340.

[39] *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, ed. David Mills (East Lansing, MI, 1992), 223.

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men and women receiving their sight through the intervention of the late king.[40] For instance, a Lancashire man, Richard Herdman, unable to distinguish day from night, devoutly appealed to Henry for help. Within a short time he 'recovered clearness of vision in both eyes'.[41]

The cure of Herdman can be located within a long tradition of similar cures throughout medieval England. Although blindness was often regarded as the bestowal of divine favour, for many the promise of a reward in the afterlife was insufficient and they wanted instant relief from their ocular complaint.[42] Consequently, those suffering from painful and debilitating eye diseases or injuries sought the intercession of the saints, who were considered to be 'a source of power to be tapped'.[43] It is not surprising that medieval men and women suffering from eye complaints should turn to those saints who had themselves suffered from blindness during their earthly lives. It was believed that physical remains, relics or any material possessions left behind by a saint emitted a form of 'holy radioactivity', secreting healing powers through the shrine; thus intimate contact with the relic, shrine or *feretrum* could lead directly to thaumaturgical healing.[44] For example, placing one's head on the spot where St Ethelreda had reputedly first been buried was believed to cure all maladies of the eyes.[45] Water in which a holy body or relics had been washed was regarded as beneficial for the alleviation of many ills, and in particular blindness and eye disease.[46] After St Gilbert of Sempringham's body had been washed, the water was used to cure pilgrims of their ocular complaints, including Ysouda of Pickworth, who had suffered from painful and inflamed eyes for the space of a month before she

[40] *Miracles of Henry VI*, ed. Knox and Leslie, 54, 73, 74, 111, 119, 136, 148, 189, 204, 214.

[41] Ibid. 204–5.

[42] Examples can be found in several *vitae*, e.g. *The Canonization of Saint Osmund*, ed. A. R. Malden (Salisbury, 1901), 45, 75; Thomas of Monmouth, *The Life and Miracles of St William of Norwich*, ed. A. Jessop and M. R. James (Cambridge, 1896), 167–8, 181–2, 228–31. For other examples, see Metzler, *Disability*, 129–38.

[43] Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 175.

[44] Ben Nilson, *Cathedral Shrines of Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 1998), 1.

[45] Richard of Cirencester, *Speculum Historiale de Gestis Regnum Angliae*, ed. J. E. B. Mayor, *RS* 30, 2 vols (1863–9), 1: 209.

[46] C. Grant Loomis, 'Hagiological Healing', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 8 (1940), 636–42, at 637.

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bathed her eyes in St Gilbert's water.[47] As we saw above, Gilbert's sight dimmed as he grew older; it seemed natural to his biographer that the holy man should relieve others of their blindness when they invoked him.[48]

Further investigation is needed to discover whether medieval pilgrims searching for cures deliberately selected and appealed to saints who had had comparable disabilities during life.[49] Nonetheless, it is clear that those suffering from visual impairments identified particularly with those saints who had themselves endured a similar trial. A sense of empathy and intimacy could develop between the saint and supplicant when there was a shared experience; the blind could confidently invoke the help of Lucy or Gilbert to bear their pain humbly in order to reap the spiritual rewards from their physical ordeal.[50] Blindness gave saints a special quality: this is evident from the time of St Paul. Paul's blindness gave him an inner vision that enabled him to distinguish the true path from the deceptions of this world. Building on the Old Testament book of Isaiah, medieval men and women were taught that 'God he shal come and sauen vs. Thanne shul ben opened the eyen of blynde men'.[51] Although this exhortation might be read as a metaphor for spiritual enlightenment, it also promised that, if the blind accepted their pain and afflictions with patience and humility, they would be rewarded with paradise.

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47 *Book of St Gilbert*, ed. Foreville and Keir, 301.

48 Ibid. 315–17.

49 For the post-1588 period, see Jacalyn Duffin, *Medical Miracles: Doctors, Saints, and Healing in the Modern World* (Oxford, 2009), 40.

50 Duffy, *Stripping of the Altars*, 180.

51 Isa. 35: 4–5; Roth, *The Blind, the Lame and the Poor*, 105.

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