



Cap sur l'école inclusive  
en Europe



## Resource sheet

The literature of the Middle Ages to the 18th century.

### Section of the module / D

#### 1/ Theme:

Through French literature, we find the place of disability in society.

#### **Middle Ages:**

The fabliau of the Middle Ages.

#### **18th Century:**

*Jean de La Fontaine*: Collection of Fables (1668 to 1694)

#### 2/ Context:

In French literature, we find for the first time disabled characters in the fabliau of the Middle Ages: The three blind of Compiègne or The three hunchbacks of Douai. These are short folk tales between the tale and the fable which are ironic and only speak of familiar people to mock them. In these two stories, these half-real, half-fantastic characters are described as people who are mocked and used by the hero as an object to deceive the villain. Characters speak with one voice as they recite a song; their statements seem not to be reflected but more dictated by the hero who intends through them to show that he is the strongest. They are thus assimilated to the object of help that we find in tales like a magic wand in the best case. These people are in any case beggars who have neither work nor family, abandoned by the society and acting only the exceptional role of the object of mockery.

Later, in the 17th century, Jean de La Fontaine, through his collection of fables, takes a critical look at the court of Louis XIV. Fable is a very short type of writing which is also satirical and uses humor to convey a message that in this case is in the form of a moral. "I use animals to instruct men" wrote La Fontaine at the beginning of the collection of his fables.

The characters traits of the animal are then often resumed as well as its supposed qualities and defects (like the force for wolf or the cunning for fox); he is also endowed with the faculty of

speech; he is thus personified. If the famous fabulist did not take back disabled person in his writings, it serves him to justify the inexplicable in the fable Love and Folly: a dispute between these two states considered here as characters takes place:

“Together on a certain day,  
Said Love and Folly were at play:  
The former yet enjoyed his eyes.  
Dispute arose. Love thought it wise  
Before the council of the gods to go,  
Where both of them by birth held stations;  
But Folly, in her lack of patience,  
Dealt on his forehead such a blow  
As sealed his orbs to all the light of heaven.”

Here, la Fontaine prefers to use a euphemism instead of the word blind, which is never used in the text as if we were talking about an attribute more than a handicap. The moral of this fable is thus written:

“ The case maturely weighed and cast,  
The public weal with private squared:  
Poor Folly was condemned at last,  
By judgment of the court above,  
To serve for aye as guide to Love.”

It is thus resumed the idea that love is blind. Thus, the disabled switch between being an object and being picture, which explains a grey area in human knowledge.

### **3/ Objectives:**

This sheet is attached to the training module of the history of disability and its legislative framework.

### **4/ Limits:**

We have studied only the case of France.

