Introduction

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Living dangerously, or living on the margins, in medieval and early modern Europe holds considerable fascination. Marginals have been identified as including the poor, people of low status, and lawbreakers. Bronislaw Geremek, in his study of the low life of Paris, lumped all marginals into one class. They were not only people and groups who fell outside the social and economic mainstream, but they also formed an underclass that rendezvoused in taverns and other gathering places.¹ While some of the essays in this book look at the poor or at a criminal underclass, this definition of marginality is far too narrow. It has a structural limitation in that it presumes that only social outcasts will be on the margins of society. The essays in this book portray people living dangerously and on the edges, but they are marginal for many reasons. Poverty and crime may put people into the margins, but not all of the people considered in these essays are poor or criminal. Indeed, medieval and early modern society could express some sympathy for those who fell into want and need. Some marginals were from religious groups persecuted by the dominant state- and church-supported religion. Here one thinks of the Beguines, Moriscos, and Jews. Others were wealthy traders of the seventeenth century who took advantage of the burgeoning speculative markets and fraud. Women could fall into the class of marginal because of their knowledge of the occult or even their sexual or spiritual independence.
Simply because these people or groups were marginal in medieval and early modern society does not mean that they were of no social use, as Geremek would argue. Indeed, a symbiotic relationship often existed between marginals and the social establishment. The dominant culture needed the services of marginals for their own purposes. The mainstream found the margins a place for thrills and titillation—a place to live dangerously—to have sex, to engage in petty crime, or to commit major fraud. The authors show that the exemplars of bad behavior were very useful for setting off good behavior. A German author of romance forgives his hero for his confessed seduction of the king’s daughter and lets him win a trial by ordeal so that this social climber can marry the princess. The author praises his hero’s otherwise excellent moral character by letting him achieve his upwardly mobile aspirations. The seventeenth- and eighteenth-century moralists who criticized those who traded in false bills of exchange developed a language for praising honest mercantilism. Critics of princes and popes used satire, heavily laden with the imagery of sodomy, to attack their victims. Some marginals (cunning women mostly) sold love potions, herbal cures, spells for getting rid of evil, concoctions to encourage marriage, and so on to respectable people willing to pay. The beggar also had his or her value in the spiritual economy, given the Gospels’ message that those who gave alms to the poor would find their passage to heaven made smoother. The very act of giving charity might enhance the social status of the wealthy and bring public recognition and acclaim to the donor. Spiritual comfort was also available on the margins of society, if one thinks of heresies or the many spiritual services that the Beguines practiced, including washing the dead.

The margins in many ways functioned as a safety valve for society. Even the respectable might move into this ambiguous space and place when necessity demanded. Medieval and early modern society was tolerant of those outside the mainstream until they came to the attention of authorities or until the public became frightened of personal violence or began to feel that their space was somehow polluted by the presence of marginals. The local, neighborhood beggar was a figure of pity and charity, but when the population of Europe began to move around in the fifteenth century and to flood the cities, urban and royal authorities began to promulgate laws against “sturdy beggars,” who were disruptive and unproductive. The Beguines were marginalized by the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215, which barred the creation of new religious orders. When Marguerite Porete, a Beguine, refused to bow to official censure, she came to the attention of the Inquisition.
two Parisian prostitutes moved from being involved in the sex trade to being accused of murder, they were burned at the stake. Satirists who made accusations of sodomy against powerful political figures ended up in prison or exile.

Another theme that runs through the essays in this book is that a traditional tolerance for those living dangerously and outside the normal constraints of society began to change in the later Middle Ages as the power of the central state grew stronger. Misbehavior, deviance, and escape into the world of marginals was more acceptable when it was a matter of local control, but as the state began to extend its laws into the hinterland and local officials began to lose power to state bureaucrats and law enforcers, the degree of tolerance decreased. When it was unified under Ferdinand and Isabella, Spain moved from being the religiously tolerant society that it had been in the Middle Ages to being a persecuting society. The centralized tools of the state and the army in conjunction with the Church were employed in the persecution of Jews and Muslims and ultimately drove them out of Spain.

Not only changes in the state, but also changes in religion, made a difference in toleration in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Lutheranism, Calvinism, and the newly reformed Catholic Church imposed stricter moral standards on members and on society as a whole. Again, the latitude allowed to those living on the margins was curtailed. Sodomy, seldom mentioned in the Middle Ages, became illegal, risky, and more publicized. Gypsies were harassed, and even Muslims and Jews in Spain who had converted to Catholicism were held in suspicion. Seventeenth-century speculators were condemned as being unfit for the sober and serious business of governing the new Protestant republics.

Richard Firth Green, in “‘Nede ne hath no lawe’: The Plea of Necessity in Medieval Literature and Law,” explores a famous proverb that appears in *Piers Plowman*. The character of Need explains that when clothing and sustenance are lacking, then it is all right to take what is necessary. In the countryside, where food could be in short supply and devastating famines were not uncommon, need was often looked upon by Langland’s contemporaries as an excuse for begging and petty theft. Need was also an excuse for a messenger to take a shortcut across a field of standing grain. The maxim *necessitas non habet legem* appeared in at least the thirteenth century to defend acts that were either excusable or justifiable. Green traces the various cases and legal tracts in medieval law in which the dictum moves beyond literature and is explicitly applied. Extreme poverty was an excuse for
petty theft. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, criminal acts committed out of private need disappear almost entirely, but the plea of public necessity became more frequent. The first reference to this that Green identifies dates from the early seventeenth century, when James I argued for the crown’s need to mine saltpeter on private land. The shift away from *nede ne hath no lawe* also appears in handbooks for justices of the peace in the eighteenth century. The move toward state enforcement of law privileged the state and left behind the charitable interpretation of “need” that one finds in Langland. The niche for petty theft in order to survive disappears.

Medieval society was one of social change, with some people rising through the ranks and others falling into poverty. Vickie Ziegler in “Upward Mobility in the German High Middle Ages: The Ascent of a Faithful Liar” talks about the ordeal in Konrad von Würzburg’s *Engelhard*, a late thirteenth-century poem. The poem, perhaps addressed to a socially ambitious urban audience in Basel, shows that the upwardly mobile were also a marginal group who desired to move into the ranks of nobility but found their way blocked by tradition and inherited titles. Engelhard, offspring of poor nobility, has very good qualities but lacks possessions to advance himself sufficiently to marry the king’s daughter. But he moves into the position of the king’s most trusted servant. He is a brilliant knight, has solid judgment, and above all is faithful to the king’s service. Engelhard not only wins over the king, but also succeeds in seducing the princess. Found in a compromising position with her by the king’s nephew, he must fight a duel. Although Engelhard acknowledges the truth of his seduction, Konrad has him win the duel, thus allowing the aspiring Engelhard to increase his social standing and marry the princess. The faithful service Engelhard rendered the king is rewarded. Social margins and laws were permeable in romance by the thirteenth century.

Dyan Elliott’s “Women in Love: Carnal and Spiritual Transgressions in Late Medieval France” moves us to marginalization based on gender, occupation, social groups, sorcery, and sexuality. She gives a background to living dangerously by exploring what we mean by the canny (known, normal) and the uncanny (unknown, occult). It is the uncanny that gets marginalized. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 attempted to regulate both the formation of marriages and to forestall the creation of new religious orders. Non-procreative sex (including prostitution), though always forbidden, was newly stigmatized, as was the pursuit of a religious life outside an approved order (i.e., the Beguines). To explore these two marginal groups in more detail,
Elliott has looked at the case of Margot de la Barre, a prostitute, who ended up in the Châtelet, the Parisian prison, in 1390 for practicing sorcery to help a fellow prostitute, Marion La Droiturière, to secure a man’s love. Reading the case closely, she shows how the accused prostitutes, eventually burned for sorcery, tried to understand their interrogators’ wishes and make their testimony conform to their expectations. Equally alien to the spirit of regulation that directed the Fourth Lateran Council was the Beguine mystic, Marguerite Porete. The three women—two sinners and one religious woman—were single and not under patriarchal protection, a precarious position for a woman to be in throughout the Middle Ages. Further, Marguerite Porete’s book, *The Mirror of Simple Souls*, was burned by the Church. The book was an erotic invocation to love of the divine, perhaps even with lesbian overtones. Marginal women, even single women and prostitutes, could be tolerated in the society, but when they became too obvious to authorities, they were penalized.

Anne J. Cruz’s essay, “Gendering the Disenfranchised: Down, Out, and Female in Early Modern Spain,” continues the story that Elliott has begun of suspicion of women but adds the categories of Gypsy and Morisca to make the marginalization even greater. Renaissance Spain, of course, used the Inquisition to eliminate Moriscos and harass Gypsies, but these marginal groups, as Cruz shows, also performed useful functions for the society. Cruz explores the heroine of Miguel de Cervantes’s novella *La gitanella* (*The Little Gipsy Girl*) as having a contradictory, double role: she is both a chaste Gypsy and a vagabond virgin. As such, Cervantes can use her as a foil to investigate and expose aristocratic Spanish society compared to Gypsies. While Cervantes regards Gypsies as past masters in the art of thieving, his heroine, who turns out to be a noble girl stolen and raised by Gypsies, demonstrates that they also have some virtues. Cruz places the novella in the historical context of sixteenth-century Spain. Inquisition records show that, like Parisian prostitutes, Gypsy women were accused of sorcery for making love potions. They and other marginalized women were a threat to society. Moriscas suffered from similar accusations, in addition to those related to their adherence to Islam. Sexuality and irreverence toward Christianity alone did not lead these women into conflicts with the law—they too were skilled at healing and at potions. She concludes that these marginal women were not only victims of patriarchy, but they also subverted it to their own ends.

Gender and sexuality played a large role in the early modern period. As Ian Frederick Moulton points out in “Sodomy and the Lash: Sexualized
Satire in the Renaissance,” sex and sexual subjects, particularly sodomy, became a way of satirizing and talking about taboo subjects, such as politics and religion. Sodomy, Moulton observes, was punishable by law, but it was not regarded as effeminate, as it would be in the modern world. Indeed, courting women was viewed as more feminizing than buggery. References to sodomy were common in John Donne, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Nashe when they wished to make fun of political figures and personal enemies. The English satirists, however, were not nearly as explicit in their invocation of sex in general and sodomy in particular as were the Italian models that they admired. Popes and the papal court were ripe for the sexual innuendos of these Italians. But, as Moulton shows, Antonio Vignali’s La Cazzaria (The Book of the Prick), written in the mid-1520s, went further than any other text in linking sexual aggression with criticism of politics. Vignali’s works, however, were too explicit even for the Renaissance acceptance of raunchy humor. The use of sodomy for satire could be dangerous for authors. Nicolò Franco was tortured and executed; Pietro Aretino was stabbed and driven from Rome; Nashe fled London after his satirical play, The Isle of Dogs, was performed; and Jonson, Nashe’s collaborator, was imprisoned.

Leaving the free use of sexual humor to the social and political critics of the Italian and English Renaissance, we move into the world of northern European republics and serious social and economic commentary in Mary Lindemann’s “The Wind Traders: Speculators and Frauds in Northern Europe, 1650–1720.” The new capitalist economy had given rise to instruments such as stocks and bills of exchange that could be stolen and forged. Many speculators lived very much on the economic edge, and their inflation of the market hurt the more honest dealers. These marginals were certainly not the lower classes, but rather were people who lived dangerously, either at the center of trade or on its peripheries. The boundaries between the honest trader and the scoundrel blurred, as critics were quick to point out. Rather than talking about sodomy, the playwrights and pamphleteers of the eighteenth century spoke of men going “mad,” of “playing,” of being “wind traders.” Between 1650 and 1720 the discourse that developed around speculation was used to criticize political, moral, and mercantile faults alike. The case of the South Sea Company in England, which was universally called “hokus-bokus,” was particularly egregious, leading to the South Sea Bubble. The underlying problem, however, was a deeper one, because it commented upon the ability of these traders/speculators to be citizens and to govern soberly the wealthy republics of northern Europe.
The authors in this volume have explored a number of different texts and contexts that show us how various people in the medieval and early modern periods lived dangerously and on the margins of society. We have traversed considerable territory in these essays, moving from the concept of “need” permitting theft when a person faces starvation to the condemnation of scoundrels of the mercantile economy who used false bills of exchange to defraud honest people. Sometimes the marginals were victims of forces larger than themselves, as were the Beguines, Gypsies, and Moriscos. At other times the actors, such as the Renaissance satirist, sought out dangerous adventures for the excitement and challenges they provided. Marguerite Porete felt that she had a greater truth than the Church in her embracing of divine love and went out of her way to preach her views. The essays show us two sides of the coin. People at large found those on the outskirts of respectable and honest society useful at times, but at other times they found this demiworld threatening and too dangerous to tolerate. The volume offers a rich and diverse picture of marginals seeking regulation of their lives in order to avoid danger; flirting with the possibility of death to express their ideas and beliefs; offering their skills for a price; and looking for wrongful gain, but not out of need.

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