Linda Woodbridge. *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Pp. 338.

With an eye trained on our iron age, which blames the poor for not being rich, Linda Woodbridge has written a provocative study about the ways in which trivial comic fictions led to colder attitudes and crueler laws about the destitute in early modern England. The homeless who so vexed the guardians of order were subjects and victims of a “discourse of vagrancy” that fueled Reformation debates, preoccupied humanists, and obsessed writers on manners and architects of nationhood. Woodbridge has pulled together a broad and diverse array of writings, most memorably Simon Fish’s *Supplication for the Beggars*, satirizing greedy priests as competitors for beggars’ alms; Richard Layton’s Boccaccian reports to Thomas Cromwell about naughty English monks; Erasmus’s colloquies “Beggar Talk” and *Convivium Religiosum*; brutal scatological polemics by Luther and More; Thomas Harman’s rogue exposé *A Caveat for Common Cursetors*; a scurrilous jest book, *A Merry Jest of a Man That Was Called Howlgas*; and a number of conduct books, sermons, statutes, and plays. Texts high and low painted the vagrant as fiendishly clever, theatrical, lazy, promiscuous, double-talking, seditious, filthy, and diseased, in this way “hardening hearts” (a recurring phrase) against the homeless and any consideration of root causes and solutions. Writings like these justified a new distancing between almsgiver and beggar that eventually gave rise to modern attitudes about “welfare cheats” and “fake” panhandlers, and helped form consciences that permit the poor to die of exposure in American cities, just as in early modern London. If Woodbridge had done only this, it would have been a worthy endeavor, but she attempts far more by attacking scholars’ use of rogue literature as evidence about actual vagrants (chap. 1), pointing out humanism’s failure to extend its educational ideals to the poorest, judged to be uneducable (chap. 3), and showing how writers deployed the language of filth and disease to link incivility, barbarism, and vagrancy (chap. 5). A noted Shakespearean, Woodbridge concludes with a chapter on *King Lear*, in which she discerns “a few maverick sympathetic voices” (p. 205) about the lives of the poor and the callousness of the comfortable.

Central to her thesis is the stunning congruency of seemingly disparate realms of Renaissance thought when the topic was the ragged and rootless vagrant. Catholic or Protestant, magistrate or humanist, everyone in authority apparently agreed that the unhoused poor were dangerous and not to be pitied: “The vagrant poor became such bogeymen not because they were big bogeymen so much as because they were everybody’s bogeymen” (p. 13). Unlike “the deserving poor,” who managed to keep a roof over their heads, the homeless and therefore “undeserving poor” were forced to move constantly. Their mobility was disorderly by definition, and someone with no fixed abode in search of charity or work was suspicious and probably criminal. Woodbridge ably tracks how the Reformation, and Calvinist doctrine in particular, wrought radical changes in attitudes about almsgiving, intensifying the demonization of the vagrant. (Some people continued to help them anyway, as Woodbridge herself points out, so the assertion that

vagrants were “everybody’s bogeymen” may be a bit forced.) This story has been told by others. What is new is Woodbridge’s focus on the evolving discourse of vagrancy in such serious genres as law, history, and tragedy, which she skillfully connects with the use of vagrancy as a largely comic trope in unserious texts, such as jest books and rogue pamphlets. In the case of legal statutes, the connection is causal. As she puts it, “the similarities here between official law and trashy popular literature comprise more than an odd coincidence: rogue literature (the tabloids of its day) influenced statutes” (p. 4). Sometimes her argument seems a bit stretched. Her effort to show that the word “rogue” first entered statutes via the rogue literature, for instance, fails to convince. She shows that an Elizabethan law referred to “rogues” soon after a cony-catching pamphlet first used the word, but it seems just as likely that the statute writers heard the word spoken rather than reading it.

Like Thomas Harman, her first quarry, Woodbridge sets out to expose hypocrisy (“I here unmask imposture” [p. 6]). She works by indirection, tracing Harman’s unconscious mirroring of sins he sees in the vagrants he interviews — he is extortionate, tricky, and deceitful, even feigning his own illness. The satire on Harman is witty and well-deserved, but it does not prove that *Caveat* is entirely a collage of other rogue tales or nothing but “a subspecies of the Tudor jest book,” not a piece of proto-sociology (p. 46). In Woodbridge’s view, rogue tales and jest books are false trash meant to make people mock the foolish poor or marvel at the clever rogue, and bear no relation to the lives of the homeless who filled England’s roads and barns. But the trouble with dismissing jests as unusable for historical study, as Keith Thomas has pointed out, is that they do provide important traces of everyday practices and contestations within society, as well as of what people considered funny, pathetic, and shameful, and should not be shunned by anyone seeking to write on ideology and common beliefs. Another problem with discounting a work like *Caveat* is that the actions in jests and merry tales often match evidence from court records quite closely. Harman’s famous “The Walking Mort” tells of a female vagrant who has allies among the wives of a farming neighborhood. When a husband arranges with the vagrant to meet in his barn for sex, she tells his wife, who calls together her gossips. They lie in wait, jump out, and beat him. This story resembles accounts in court records of women who come to the aid of friends who have been sexually threatened, lying in wait to mock and beat the offender. Whatever its source, Harman’s story does represent a measure of sympathy for the homeless woman by other non-elite women. By discounting the entire book as a framed jest collection, Woodbridge also dismisses that “sympathetic maverick voice” within it that she finds so readily in the lofty genre of Shakespearean tragedy. The chance that women would find pleasure in the story, and that pleasure might also foster sympathy for the homeless, does not enter the picture. Her implication is that subliterate must be journalistically factual and straight-faced or it is worthless, whereas high literature such as *Lear* can be wholly notional and set in the legendary past, yet still reveal something vital about both early modern mores and dissenting voices.

As this criticism suggests, one weakness in this very fine book is that Woodbridge continually reads joking as top-down and one-sided, harming poor people with no voice in the matter. Jokes neutralize any serious response to poverty, “disabling” serious consideration of the issue (p. 147, n. 9). This is too limiting. To place any subject in the realm of jest is to declare war, to flirt, to initiate a volley, or to recruit an ally, but the act is never simply disabling. A jest may be blown out of the water with a “quick answer,” and a pointed jest often permits a speaker to convince hearers about an issue where sober reason fails. That is why Cicero advised orators to study jests and Petrarch, Castiglione, Poggio Bracciolini, More, and many others valued and collected them. Most of these collected jests are not “authored” at all but culled from hoary apothegms, medieval exempla, and folk tales, a fact Woodbridge mentions but downplays in her attempt to show that a humanist elite created a corpus of snobbish jests laughing at the poor and weak, and then disavowed it (p. 127). Unfortunately, this argument almost completely erases the agency of non-elite people as jest creators, revisers, listeners, and performers. Authors, rather than readers or hearers, are her chief concern throughout the book. She does not explore the idea that challenges to dominant ideologies circulated orally and in anonymous texts, although some pamphlets and ballads show a different picture of charity and vagrancy, many of them arguably shaped by a Catholic, antipuritan, or recusant world-view. The many songs and satires about the cruel rich, the decline of hospitality, and the death of Christmas merit greater mention as expressions that appeal to an older and more compassionate attitude toward the poor. Not every jest about beggars figures them as the butts of humor. Even if a beggarwoman gets the laugh (and in some jests they do), does it harden our hearts because we think her too merry or clever to need our pity, as Woodbridge would have it, or does it force us to hear her—to realize she is not a silent bundle of rags, but human and rhetorically alive, with an even more insistent demand on our humanity?

These reservations aside, *Vagrancy, Homelessness, and English Renaissance Literature* is a brilliant, ingenious, and trenchant study that deserves a wide readership among scholars and students of early modern culture, especially those interested in the ways fictions produce history, and in the ways elite and non-elite literary texts performed ideological work within reformist discourses and debates. I also strongly recommend this to anyone studying *King Lear* and the literature of roguery, or the history and historiography of poverty, or the advent of early modern nationalism. The book’s greatest strength is its consistent quality and depth of scholarship in so many fields—a remarkable achievement that has even greater weight and point because of its demonstrated connection to the discourse of vagrancy today. Many politically committed critics promise their work will throw new light on contemporary attitudes, but Woodbridge fulfills that promise many times over. In a book about want, such bounty is gratifying.

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