I. GENDER AND RISK

The threat posed by newly discovered lands and populations, like the threat posed by an unruly subject, has often been represented through the image of a woman. As both exotic personifications of new fertile lands, and the accounts of Jean de Lery, Girolamo Benzoni’s travels to the West Indies, and Theodore and Johann Israel, engaged by the Amsterdam bookseller and engraver Jacob van Meurs; all illustrations pertain to the Americas.


The famous Flemish goldsmith and engraver Theodoro de Bry (1528-1598) was also a recognized bookseller, and editor who, along with his sons Johann Theodore and Johann Israel, engaged in the profitable publication and illustrations of manuscripts pertaining to the conquest and colonization of the Americas and the East Indies. *Das sechste Theil Americae* is a compilation of what he called the great voyages to the Americas, including the voyage of Jacques le Moyne to Florida, Thomas Harriot’s expedition to Virginia, Girolamo Benzoni’s travels to the West Indies, Central and South America, and the accounts of Jean de Lery, Antonio de Herrera, Ulrich Schmidt, Joseph Acosta, and Sir Frances Drake. Although de Bry never visited America, he vividly depicted and recreated the violence of risky encounters between Europeans and indigenous people in the Americas through the use of copper plate engravings.

Case 2


Recently rediscovered, this is the second extant copy of a book that risked complete annihilation. The biography of the spirited Countess Paolina Rubbi, written by her husband, Count Gianinaldo Carli (1720-1793), had been doomed to destruction by its own author. The Count, who narrated his wife’s life shortly after her death at the age of twenty-five, judged his own work too daring and asked the editor to burn all existing copies. Until January 2010, there was only one known copy, preserved in Lucca, Italy. Countess Paolina’s risky story is now known to be at the University of Illinois.

II. POLITICS AND RISK

How is risk to be accounted for in political discourse and practice? How does it serve to frame decision-making? Early modern political treatises abound in terms such as caution, prudence, and the assessment of risks. In their aim to achieve conciliation between reason of state and the religious and moral foundations of political legitimacy, they set the basis for the modern form of the state at the crossroads between decision-making and public perception.

Case 3


Pedro de Ribadeneyra (1526-1611) was a Jesuit thinker and writer. As the subtitle of his work states, “Against the teachings of Nicolas Machiavelli and the politics of our own time,” Ribadeneyra aims at rebuking Machiavello’s influential *Il Principio* outlining the political conditions under which reason of state is compatible with Christian values.


Machiavelli was one of the riskiest books of all time, forever accused of corrupting morality, considered an acceptable means of commercial and diplomatic exchange.

III. PIRACY AND RISK

Tricky and risky negotiations and adventures, amicable but sometimes volatile transactions, violence, robberies, unexpected attacks on coastal areas, and the imposition of fear and threat constituted crucial elements of piracy narratives. The Americas, or so-called “New World” served as perfect scenarios for British, French, and Dutch pirates, privateers, and buccaneers to engage in risky encounters with the aim to acquire riches. However, the Barbary coast and the Pacific coasts also represented centers of piracy. To engage in the business of piracy represented an act of the risks taken, as it entailed a profitable business in which illegality was considered an acceptable means of commercial and diplomatic exchange.

Case 4


Two early editions of Niccolò Machiavelli’s *Il Principe*, one of the foundational texts of modern political theory. Machiavelli (1469-1527) wrote the treatise while excluded from political life. Managing *fortuna*, the ever changing mutation of the objective situation, is the skill that the prince, entrepreneur of risk, must deploy. Machiavelli’s famous book is not only one of the riskiest books of all time, forever accused of corrupting morality, but also a manual about how to control the unpredictable future through political virtu in the spirit of the Italian Renaissance.


Diego Valadés (1533-1592) was a Franciscan missioner in New Spain. His *Christian Rhetoric*, a theological treatise enriched with several engravings, addresses the need to preach Christian doctrine to the native inhabitants of America. Through his insistence upon combining textual and visual messages, Diego Valadés deals with the risk of reproducing doctrine: how to convey orthodox teaching and how to help with the memorizing of it, how to prepare the Indian body to accept Christianity, and how to identify those elements in native societies that are willing to receive Christian doctrine.


This book is considered the most important work written on piracy during the seventeenth century. It was published in 1684 and was considered the most important work written on piracy during the seventeenth century. It was
first published in 1678 in Amsterdam. Exquemelin (c.1645-1701) himself was a French privateer who was sold to the West India Company of France, and, after gaining freedom, settled in the Caribbean, namely on the island of Tortuga along with Henry Morgan. This book describes the adventures of the different buccaneers who roamed the Caribbean islands and the coasts of Central America and includes their violent attacks, their risky endeavors, and their encounters with the inhabitants of these territories. It also offers descriptions of all these lands and their population.


Ogilby’s America is basically a translation of Arnoldus Montanus’s, De Nieuw en onbekende wereld (Item 1). Ogilby added information and maps pertaining to the colonization and the territories of North America. Ogilby (1600-1676), a Scottish translator and cartographer, declared himself the author of the work. The work is divided into three books. The first part contains five woodcuts purporting to be the earliest pictures of the New World. The moment of the encounter represented here portrays at the same time the potential for gain and the threat of the radically alien.


This is one of the most influential translations of Marco Polo’s Travels into German, by Hieronymus Megiser (ca. 1554-1618), scholastic, linguist, and historian. It is decorated by vignettes that depict the customs of the Asian lands visited by the Venetian explorer, domesticating through exoticism the risks of the unknown.

IV. EXPLORATION AND RISK

Exploration, conquest, and commerce are privileged fields for gauging risks in the early modern period. As large territories are being integrated into new political and global economic systems, travelers, historians, and cartographers inform entrepreneurs and rulers on how to gauge economic potentials and risks. Inversely, the initiative for exploration and the production of knowledge about discoveries is informed in most cases by private investment and potential profitability.

Case 5


This incunable contains the best De insulis super in Mari Indico reportis, Leandro di Cosco’s Latin translation of Columbus’s letter to Luis de Santángel, bound with the historical drama in Latin prose by Carlo Verardi (1440-1500) about Ferdinand’s 1492 capture of Granada. This edition of the De insulis, like the one printed in Basel the previous year, contains five woodcuts purporting to be the earliest pictures of the New World. The moment of the encounter represented here portrays at the same time the potential for gain and the how political action resides in choosing the lesser risk. On the other hand, the author warns the King that failing to choose constitutes the worst of risks.

V. MANAGING NATURAL RISK

From natural disaster to disease, natural risk is hardly foreseeable. Still, when such an event occurs, it gives cause to a wide repertoire of discourses on how unnecessary risk has been taken, how it could have been avoided, and how to prepare for the future. Thus, natural disasters serve not only as opportunities to study how humans manage risk, but also how societies conceptualize risk as a rhetorical tool for their own policing.

Case 6


Diego de Saavedra Fajardo (1584-1648), was a Spanish diplomat and writer. His Idea of Christian Political Prince is a collection of emblems that aims at instructing the ruler on the political behavior compatible with Christian doctrine. In the emblem "Minimum elogium," Saavedra Fajardo applies the image of the dangers inherent to exploration and navigation to illustrate and Sicily, and recorded the results of his researches in this large work, published four years later. Spallanzani’s volcanoes, extinct, dormant, and active, embody natural risk and its indissoluble link with human settlement.


Ulloa and Juan were part of a scientific expedition organized by the French Academy of Sciences to study with precision not only the shape of the earth but also to measure the longitudinal meridian at the Equator. The expedition was authorized by Philip V in 1735, under the leadership of French geographer and mathematician Charles Marie de la Condamin. The book was originally published in Spanish under the title Relación historica del viaje hecho de orden de su Majestad a la America Meridional (1746). The account relates their observations in South America, including their views on geography, natural history, the inhabitants of these territories, and the risky negotiations that took place there.

Catalog of an exhibition, 27 August through 26 October, 2010, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

The Rare Book & Manuscript Library University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Held in conjunction with the conference, “Geographies of Risk, September 23-24, 2010.” Sponsored by the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Test by Marielle Melendez, Eleonora Stoppino, and Javier Irigoyen Garcia

Design and photography by Dennis J. Sears

Catalog funding provided by the Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese, and Marielle McKirdy

Special thanks to Paula Carms, Valerie Hotchkiss, Alvan Bregman, Christopher Moore, Linda Bial, Laura Larkin, Karin Fischer, and Yasmeen Shortish

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Case 7


Lazzaro Spallanzani (1729-1799), the Italian biologist and physiologist who pioneered the study of biogenesis before Pasteur, traveled widely across the Mediterranean. In 1788 he visited Vesuvius and the volcanoes of the Lipari Islands...