

H-France Review Vol. 11 (September 2011), No. 207

John D. Lyons and Kathleen Wine, eds. *Chance, Literature and Culture in Early Modern France*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009. x + 223 pp. \$99.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 075466435X.

Review by Zahi Zalloua, Whitman College.

In their introduction, titled “Early-Modern Chaos and the Chance Hypothesis,” John D. Lyons and Kathleen Wine lay out in clear and concise fashion what is at stake in thinking about chance in the dynamic realities of early modern France. The reader discovers quickly the hermeneutic slipperiness of chance; to engage the concept fully, the editors argue, one must grasp its cross-disciplinary character. The philosophical, historical, literary, and theological registers serve as the main framework for this analysis, which begins by interrogating the term itself: What is chance? Is its existence an ontological given? Do chance events simply happen? Or is this already to presuppose too much? Relationally speaking, does chance assume a metaphysical reality fundamentally at odds with Providence, Fortune’s presumed other, so to speak?

Chance *as such*, then, requires theoretical scrutiny. Its meaning must undergo careful unpacking. At the experiential level, chance can be described as the unruly experience of life; in the absence of mechanical regularity, the external world *appears* chaotic, devoid of transcendent meaning, that is, providential design. It is not difficult to see how chance can both occasion and reflect a skeptical ethos, often conceptualized in the Renaissance as a “crisis in exemplarity.” No moral rule or pattern for behavior can be deciphered or determined from any actual example—or in the famous words of Michel de Montaigne, “tout exemple cloche.” Yet it would be erroneous to leap from skepticism to disbelief. Many early modern writers wrestled with the intellectual challenges posed by the “reality” of chance: Is the unpredictability of a chance event compatible with the existence of an omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent God? How does one reconcile the perfect Creator with his imperfect creations? Some had recourse to an Augustinian explanation. That is to say, what we take to be chance is in fact only the result of man’s inability to understand fully the workings of the divine. At the theological level, then, chance figures as a kind of stubborn illusion that needs to be explained away through humility, through an acknowledgment of our cognitive deficiencies. For others still, chance, in all its unsettling and paralyzing effects, required a more rational containment. The discovery of the laws of probability reflected this strong interpretive desire “to tame chance,” to make it “amenable to calculation” (p. 7).^[1]

Needless to say, early modern writers diverged widely in responding to chance and its vicissitudes. Attesting to the multifaceted character of the topic, the editors divide the volume thematically into four parts: Providence in Question; Poetics and Aesthetics of Chance; the Law and the Ethics of Chance; Chance and its Remedies.

Part 1 opens with Alain Legros’s chapter, “Montaigne Between Fortune and Providence.” Legros explores the essayist’s complex relation to the grammar of chance. Playfully adopting and adapting existing pagan and religious discourses in his endless pursuit of truth, Montaigne, argues Legros, short-circuited the logic that would see fortune and providence as mutually exclusive. Providence, like fortune, exposes man’s lack of self-sufficiency and self-mastery,

pointing to the limits of human reason, to a mystery that exceeds human knowledge and the world of appearance. Nevertheless, this other, mysterious world remains accessible only by faith, and this faith sustains rather than pierces the mystery in question. In other words, Montaigne put the rhetoric of providence in the service of complication rather than elucidation. Frank Lestringant, in “Providence and *Imago Mundi*,” locates the ambiguities surrounding providence in the Church’s double vision or understanding of the world under providential rule: the word “world” in its Greek and Latin origins also conveyed a sense of beauty. For early modern writers, this association between world and beauty came to be understood as the expression of God’s goodness and generosity. But the question of sin complicated this narrative of providence, raising doubt about the alleged perfection of the cosmos. According to Lestringant, Renaissance cosmography captured well this inherent tension between the world as a sinful material place full of anomalies and imperfections, and the world as plenitude, that is, as God’s perfect gift. Take for example the universal archipelago: Were these islands, having apparently increased in number since the Flood, additional proof of man’s original sin or better interpreted as evidence of “divine perfection,” further proof of God’s “infinite wisdom” (p. 33)? The same holds for the problematic of the monster (the marvelous par excellence), which François Rigolot takes up explicitly in his contribution, “Chance and Errors: A Literature of Demystification.” Turning with good reason to Rabelais and Montaigne, Rigolot detects in these Renaissance authors a certain will to demystify the monstrous—and to demystify through the monstrous (monsters coded as nature’s random failures or errors)—to highlight the historical (and thus contingent) ontology of the wondrous, and thus to relativize and contextualize its moral, social, and/or phantasmatic meaning in the hope of reducing their readers’ fear of monsters.

Part 2 begins with Virginia Krause’s piece “Toward a Poetics of Adventure: *Amadis de Gaule*.” Looking at the Renaissance reception and publication of (about) adventure novels (*Amadis de Gaule* as the exemplary text), Krause interrogates the transformation of the errant knight and his paradigmatic adventures. What happens to medieval romance and the singularity of adventure (what in medieval romance “trouble[d] the narrative order of things” [p. 71]), however, when the book becomes increasingly commodified, that is, when it is subject to serialization? Increased public familiarity with the *Amadis* series led authors to engage in meta-reflections about the nature of adventure. Indeed, as Krause insightfully notes, paratextual concerns with the poetics of adventure—the expression of an authorial desire to safeguard the elusiveness of some adventures: chance, as opposed to providence or human agency, remains the cause of some knight’s actions—emblemize a certain uncertainty about the staging of adventures. Adding to the demystification of adventure (all reflections about “adventure” invariably and ironically work to diminish or tame its mysterious, unruly or aleatory quality), to the “disenchantment of the *romanesque*” (p. 77), was a more general will among later sixteenth-century humanists to allegorize the fortuitous event, to uncover its *altior sensus*. In “Random Trials: Chance and Chronotope in Gomberville’s *Polexandre*,” Kathleen Wine continues this line of inquiry. Drawing critically on Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of chronotope—literally “time-space,” or as he defines it, “the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature” [2]—Wine considers the representation of historical time and space in seventeenth-century romance, focusing on the central role of chance (and again its other, providence) in Gomberville’s baroque work and the crucial image of the calculating hero that it helps to inaugurate.

The authors of the next two essays investigate a stronger resistance to *taming chance* in the seventeenth century. In “Sublime Accidents,” John D. Lyons analyzes the unpredictability associated with the aesthetic category of the sublime. Navigating between the various competing accounts of the sublime, Lyons turns to Pierre Corneille’s concept of tragedy and the playwright’s commitment to “sublime in things” (p. 95) for a fresh and probing look at the

poetics of chance and “chance in poetics” (p. 107).^[3] If, as Lyons argues, Corneille’s sublime produces wonder, an unexpected experience that jars with the verisimilitude of everyday life, what about Racine’s tragedies, which are traditionally taken to be metaphysically overdetermined, that is, devoid of any sense of the unpredictable? To that end, John Campbell, in his contribution “Chance in the Tragedies of Racine,” troubles this standard view of Racine’s plays. What Campbell meticulously uncovers suggests a more complicated picture. Far from being foreign to Racine’s theater, accidents and human agency appear as intrinsic to the textual fabric of his tragedies; their success in fact depends on the spectators/readers’ recognition that chance events do happen (contrary to the Neo-Aristotelian perspective that would see Racine’s tragic dramas as the outcome of a devastating, preordained or inescapable logic), and that Racinian characters are precisely not predestined. The experience of the tragic (for tragedy’s emotional impact to be most effective) requires not only an acknowledgment of an unforgiving cause-and-effect logic, but also a belief in contingency, or more precisely, a belief in (the appearance of) chance. Campbell formulates it concisely: “It is in the creative tension between the unpredictable and the probable or necessary that Racine’s tragedies are composed” (p. 121).

Part three shifts to the issues of law and ethics. In “Prudence and the Ethics of Contingency in Montaigne’s *Essais*,” Richard Regosin examines Montaigne’s complex engagement with ancient philosophy and its cherished model of prudence. Firmly situated in the world of fortune—where an irreducible gap between intention and outcome persists—Montaigne cultivated an art of rusing^[4] (“judging in the absence of criteria” [p. 140]), using reason while developing an ironic distance from its operations) as both a way of dealing with the tumultuous legal, political, and ethical realities of late sixteenth-century France, and an alternative to man’s phantasmatic idealization of his cognitive powers and philosophy’s narcissistic aspirations for self-sufficiency and self-mastery. If Montaigne’s updated prudent man recognizes his interpretive limits in the face of a contingent world, opting to believe in what is most likely (thus upholding the criterion of verisimilitude), later seventeenth-century thinkers, working from a horizon marked by Cartesian certitude, asserted far more faith in man’s rational capacity, in his ability to harmonize law and chance. Nicolas Malebranche is a case in point. In “Malebranche and the Laws of Grace,” Michael Moriarty analyzes Malebranche’s reconceptualization of chance as a mere appearance (rather than a cause). Malebranche’s idiosyncratic account of grace frames his meditations on chance. On the one hand, theodicy attests to God’s will, explaining (away) the existence of chance events (undoing the misrecognition that world unfolds in a purposeless manner), yet, on the other hand, Malebranche insists that a given event should not be interpreted as the expression of “any particular volition on the part of God” (p. 142): “we must see the world as shaped and governed in accordance with law” (p. 143). Law here refers to nature and grace; both orders exclude the possibility of chance (as the by-product of the limitations of human perception); chance is incompatible with transcendent law, with God’s *work ethos*, to act in accordance with simple and general laws, since it would be beneath God to get involved personally in a particular case, to grant *this* or *that* person grace, for instance.

The fourth and last section appropriately considers remedies to the dilemmas of chance. Can philosophy or political theory, after all, offer faithful practitioners any comfort? In “The Language of Fortune in Descartes,” Emma Gilby surveys Descartes’ various positions toward fortune. What emerges from her perceptive reading is a Descartes who is more than the author of the *cogito* (synonymous here with the birth of the modern epistemological subject). Gilby reminds us that ethical concerns informed the Cartesian project from its inception. Descartes’ fascination with fortune exceeded a strict epistemological framework: What attitude should the mind take vis-à-vis the contingent world of fortune is first and foremost an ethical question. Gilby demonstrates how Descartes’ later *Les Passions de l’âme* and correspondence continued this “moral philosophizing” (p. 156). Descartes’ understanding of fortune took several forms, however. The philosopher, at times, simply dismissed it as a mere chimera (a failure to observe

divine providence at work) and also argued for its conquest by reorienting the direction of our will toward what we could actually control. Yet Descartes, as a keen observer of the human condition, acknowledged the limits of forethought and diligence, opening a space for the here and now of fortune (that is, how human beings experience life, the world of fortune, at the affective level), or what Gilby describes as “the phenomenological order of response” (p. 164).

The following contribution revisits Montaigne, whose presence in this volume is, as we have already seen, quite notable. Amy Wygant, in her contribution “Fortune, Long Life, Montaigne,” situates the essayist within early modern discourses about aging, paying special attention to the figuration of Fortuna, how in early modern literature, representations of Fortuna tended to differ from fortune’s ancient depiction as an evil or cruel stepmother, or conversely a good and helpful mother. Early modern Fortuna was resolutely young, tied to the figure of Occasio (chance or opportunity), depicted as a young woman. Wygant shows that while “political theorists, humanists, philosophers, and courtiers worshipped the [young] hero who possessed the qualities necessary to counter Fortune” (p. 171), there existed a simultaneous discourse that privileged old age (the habitual pursuit of science and art) as the most effective way to conquer fortune (ill health, death, chance). Wygant sees Montaigne as an example of the latter. While Wygant limits her scope of analysis of Montaigne almost exclusively to “De l’expérience” (III, 13), the last chapter of his *Essais*, it would have been advisable to engage briefly with “De l’oisiveté” (I, 8)—where Montaigne’s old age is precisely what fails to translate into wisdom, into self-knowledge and self-mastery *à la* Seneca (cf. Regosin’s contribution in this volume, page 125). The last chapter of the volume addresses political remedies to the unbearable assaults of fortune. In “Cardinal de Retz’s Memoirs: Encountering Fortune and Taking Timely Steps,” Malina Stefanovska examines the politics of the Cardinal de Retz. Rather than taking a reactive position in relation to the unexpectedness of fortune, Retz urged his audience to be more bold, “to seize the right moment” (p. 189), seeking, in turn, to transform the troubling uncertainty of fortune into a political advantage.

The volume as a whole succeeds in bringing together divergent voices and perspectives, adding to our understanding of the all-too-elusive notion of chance. From the first to the last chapter, the reader experiences the rich multiplicity of chance: What does chance mean? How does it relate to providence, human agency, and history? Can it ever be interpretively contained? Or is chance’s hermeneutic excess intrinsic to its definition?

NOTES

[1] The editors borrow this formulation from Ian Hacking’s *The Taming of Chance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

[2] Mikhail Bakhtin, “Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics,” *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 84.

[3] While Boileau-Despréaux, for example, locates the sublime in events (this view of the sublime foregrounds what is beyond human mastery; it associates the sublime with both chance, what takes place in an unmastered world, and providence), others such as Pierre-Daniel Huet and René Rapin emphasize its discursive quality—the sublime as a willful rhetorical effect; as something teachable.

[4] Richard Regosin acknowledges his debt to Jean-François Lyotard’s use of rusing in *Au juste*.

Zahi Zalloua
Whitman College
zallouz@whitman.edu

Copyright © 2011 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for edistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/ republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172