

John D. Lyons. *The Phantom of Chance: From Fortune to Randomness in Seventeenth-Century French Literature*.

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Why do unforeseeable and uncontrollable events crop up throughout the literature of a seventeenth-century France whose rationalists refused to grant any explanatory power to chance? In answering this question, John D. Lyons documents a literary trajectory that moves from representations of chance as grand, coherent, personified Fortune to banal, fragmented, impersonal randomness. In this underexplored field, Lyons's study of Corneille, Pascal, Madame de Lafayette, Bossuet, Racine, and La Bruyère complements Thomas Kavanagh's work on games of chance and Ross Hamilton's 2008 philosophical and literary history of the Aristotelian notion of the inessential, *Accident*.

Lyons's introduction takes the reader on a breathtakingly rapid, yet cogent literary-historical tour through the evolution of the notion of chance. Beginning with Aristotle and moving through Cicero, Boethius, Machiavelli, and Montaigne, Lyons notes that if contradictory currents (pro-chance and anti-chance) exist in seventeenth-century writers, it is because their precursors furnished them with varied and incompatible traditions.

The five chapters progress roughly chronologically and according to a two-pronged methodology. One mode of inquiry is semantic. From Aristotle's *tyche* and *automaton* to later uses of *fortune*, *providence*, *hasard*, and *accident*, Lyons is particularly skillful in negotiating definitions that shift over time and under the pens of different writers. But he does not limit his analysis to occurrences of standard terms for the inexplicable. Instead, he also dissects plot lines to find where chance is apparent, where it is cloaked, and where it is rejected.

Chapter 1 reveals diverse attitudes towards the unexpected in a single writer, Corneille. Chance occurrences abound in his first tragi-comedy, *Clitandre*, but are largely absent from *Le Cid* except in the guise of the legitimately arbitrary (unexplained but not random) decisions made by King Fernand or in the historical contingencies of time (anticipated at the close of the play). An unforeseeable, uncontrollable, capricious force is at work in the religious conversions of *Polyeucte*, but it is called divine grace rather than chance.

In the second chapter, Pascal's *Pensées* and *Provincial Letters* depict a world governed by random events, the existence of an active God notwithstanding. Chance (neither Fortuna nor divine intervention) is everywhere, in the minute details of everyday life as much as in spectacular events. But behaviors that individually may be random can nonetheless communicate useful information when viewed as a conglomerate. Thus, chance in conjunction with observed experience yields frequency as a new source of knowledge and guidance for living in a random world.

Chapter 3 shows that in both *Zayde*, a pastiche of the romance genre with its stock markers of chance, and the more plausible *The Princess of Clèves*, Marie-Madeleine de Lafayette systematically debunks *fortune*, *caprice*, *hasard*, and *destinée*. Rejecting these notions as intentional forces, she — like Corneille — accepts that random events happen in life and therefore ought to be tolerated in fiction.

The fourth chapter treats Bossuet and Racine together because both prefer the explanatory power of providence to random chance. Lyons's unique take on Bossuet is to argue that the historian strategically underscored the confusion and randomness of profane history so that the neat order of sacred history might stand the clearer in relief. Racine masterfully evacuates chance from *Athalie*, but Lyons contends that he pits a denial of chance (*Athalie*'s dream must mean something) against chance itself (her increased probability of error by going to the temple). Finally, in La Bruyère chance takes the form of the accidental (fortuitous; inessential), which he deplors. The machine of society, fueled by superficiality, replaces Fortune's wheel.

Surprisingly, Lyons does not justify his selection of five minds to represent the arc of thinking on chance from Antiquity through the sixteenth century, nor does he explain how or why he chose the texts that find their way (by chance?) into his chapters. His choice of authors may be obvious (though Molière and Descartes are absent), but his corpus is less so.

Overall, this intriguing, erudite, readable study offers some beautiful examples of textual analysis and suggestive avenues for further research. Students and scholars of the period, its authors, and the limits of rationalism will be richly rewarded by Lyons's insightful reinterpretations, particularly of *Zayde* and Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History*.

REBECCA C. HARMON  
Grove City College