

# Figures of Chance I

## Chance in Literature and the Arts (16th–21st Centuries)

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Edited by  
Anne Duprat, Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian  
and Anne-Gaëlle Weber

English Translation: Martyn Back

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## Introduction

*Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian*

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# Introduction

*Fiona McIntosh-Varjabédian*

Chance stubbornly resists being conceptualised; it escapes our grasp. A graphic novel by Ivar Ekeland and Étienne Léacroart published in 2019 (Ekeland & Léacroart 2019) on the mathematical approach to chance amusingly suggests this, with pictures showing butterflies (referring to the butterfly effect), trees (showing the random intersections of causal chains) and the allegory of Fortune, who appears on the cover blindfolded, preparing to shoot an arrow. While David Vandermeulen's foreword recalls the success of Antoine-Augustin Cournot's definition of chance as "the fortuitous encounter between two independent causal chains", it also briefly suggests literature's capacity for anticipation insofar as it is able to embrace ideas and sense their import before they crystallise or are expressed scientifically (Ekeland & Léacroart 2019, 7–8).

Literature is an arena for debate and different approaches to representation; as such it builds chance into its plotlines, as Carsten Meiner and Jason Puskar have shown (see Meiner 2008; Molesworth 2010; Puskar 2012). It makes use of happenstance and the vicissitudes of Fortune and attempts to respond to the very scandals stirred up by the notion of chance, be they of a theological or scientific nature. Artists, meanwhile, particularly in the sphere of contemporary art, adopt creative postures that involve allowing themselves to be caught off guard by the experience of contingency and seek to integrate chance into the creative act itself. Instead of discursive representations or scientific treatises, they bring a sensitive dimension to chance by visually representing its attributes.

The authority of science raises the question of the relevance of literature and, to a lesser extent, art, as points from which the evolution of the notion of chance can be observed. They can be seen as melting pots of ideas and, thanks to their ability to engage with polemics (see especially Chapters 2 and 3 of this volume for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), are able to lead the way in scholarly debate. But literature can, in its modes of representation and the linguistic definitions that inform it, also be more conservative, as it was in Britain in the early nineteenth century (see

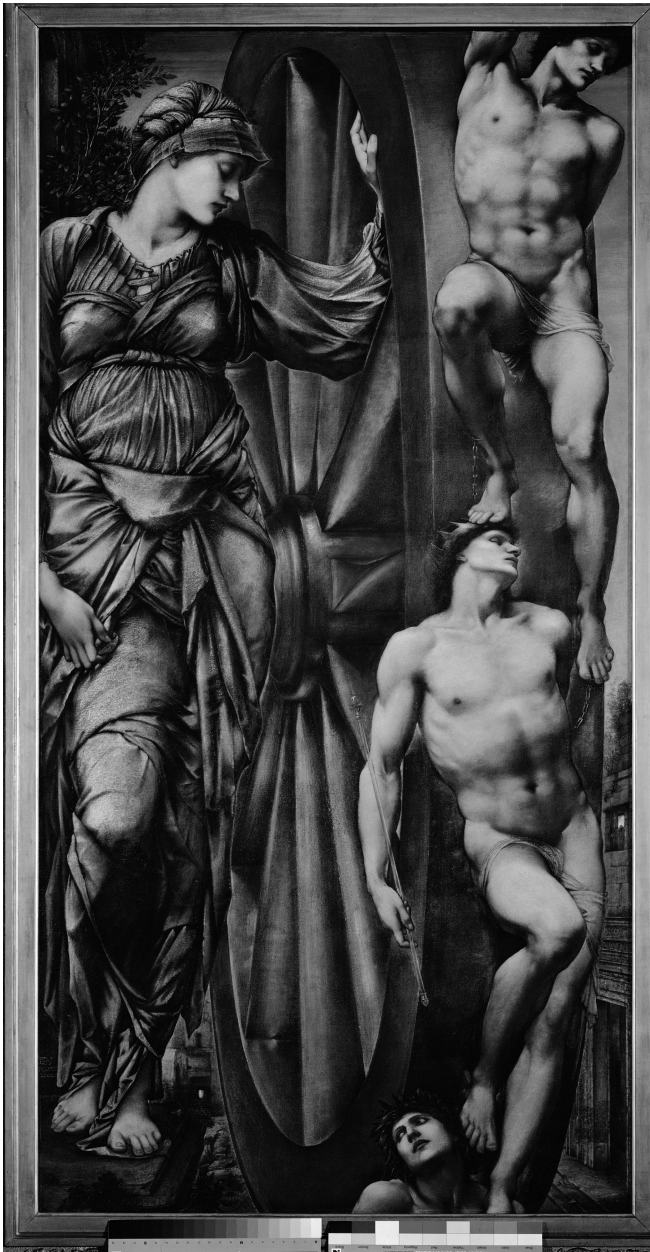


Figure 0.1 Edward Burne-Jones, *The Wheel of Fortune*, 1875–1883 Oil on canvas, 200 × 100 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY.

Chapter 4). Despite Ian Hacking's contention that, for centuries in enlightened circles, chance was rejected and associated with mental instability and vulgar superstition (Hacking 1990, 1, 13), the already archaic figure of Fortune was nonetheless mentioned in texts as a representation of contingency. Her allegorical function, which had been so important in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance (see Buttay 2008), survives in *The Wheel of Fortune* painted by the Pre-Raphaelite Edward Burne-Jones in 1883 (see Figure 0.1). Accidents, coincidences, collisions, financial losses, discoveries and unexpected encounters were, and still are today, used as plot drivers. As Jesse Molesworth points out, accidents and misadventures stubbornly resisted attempts to rationalise chance in the eighteenth century (see Molesworth's critique of Watt's thesis: Molesworth 2010, 129), in spite of the parallel emergence of the latest probabilistic developments in mathematics and the rise of prudential calculations in insurance, a field that expanded significantly in the same period (see in particular Pradier 2006, 19–24, for the application of mathematical expectations to insurance). Gambling, financial speculation and illness, all themes that are closely bound up with the notion of probability, can bring catastrophic events into plotlines or test the patience and fortitude of fictional characters. In his essay titled *The Great Derangement* (2016), the novelist Amitav Ghosh reflects upon the way in which literature must engage with today's chaotic climate situation: the current crisis brings more frequent disasters, derails probabilistic and prudential forecasts, and so challenges the very prospect of "taming" chance and random events. In a nutshell, misfortune is not dead but rises like a phoenix from the ashes of determinism and statistics.

In poetry, often the Cinderella of critical work on the subject of chance, a secularised figure of the ancient creative muse looms large, signifying the poet's ability to embrace what circumstance and chance bring their way. Luck as a poetic motif spans the centuries: it is associated with gambling in the Frank Loesser song *Luck Be a Lady* (1950), a Frank Sinatra staple in Las Vegas, and in the curious poem by Alexander Thomson titled *Whist* (1791). Fortune is a motif in both low-brow and scholarly culture, featuring in ballads and in Robert Burns' *Lament of Mary, Queen of Scots on the Approach of Spring* (1791). Mallarmé, as shown in Chapter 5, saw chance as a threat to poetry, but this ontological fear elevated chance to the rank of a principle of writing: come what may, chance comes through as an irreducible creative force.

The role of literature and art is not merely to reflect a predominant collective mindset: such an idea would be tantamount to denying the singularity of the literary and artistic enterprise and the ability to create realities through language,<sup>1</sup> as Rorty's liberal, sceptical "ironism" claims, for example (see Rorty 1989, 5; see also Tinland 2022). Literature and art help to change representations and offer a fruitful counterpoint to accepted

values. Resistance to an emerging *doxa* can, in this sense, be as productive as avant-garde positions which, on the contrary, reflect the desire of certain artists and authors to echo the latest scientific discoveries.

Having touched on the complex relationships between literature, art and the history of ideas, it is important to define the scope of literature, which is perhaps harder to circumscribe than that of art insofar as it shares its didactic and explanatory function with other forms of scholarly discourse. This is essential to understanding how our approach differs from others dealing with the same question. The boundaries of literature have not always been defined in the same way. Today, lyrical poetry and all types of fiction form part of what we call “literature”, but until the mid-nineteenth century, before the institutional separation of disciplines that was gradually established, *les belles lettres* in France also included history, philosophy, morals, theology and even the sciences.<sup>2</sup> The chapters in this part of the book reflect these differences, making room, to varying degrees, for texts on the margins of fiction-as-entertainment. This is especially the case in Chapter 3 (eighteenth century), which discusses Enlightenment philosophers, and Chapters 2 (seventeenth century) and 3, which deal with the writings of apologists and mathematicians. We did, however, establish a rule that scientific theories of chance would only be included if they could be shown to have a perceptible influence on literary and artistic representations and creative processes, or at least conversed with them in some way.

The timeframe that had to be established for this study raised further challenges. We chose to take the Renaissance as our starting point, defined broadly as including the Italian Quattrocento. Antiquity and the late Middle Ages offer a wealth of ideas relating to Fortune, as evidenced in Martha Nussbaum’s seminal work on the ancient world (Nussbaum 1986), the numerous studies on chance in the work of Thucydides (see in particular Schillinger 2021, 4, 986–997; Edmunds 1975) and the abundant commentary that exists on mediaeval iconography (see in particular Dubois & Vassilieva-Codognot 2017; Wirth 2003, 105–128). However, as the book edited by Yasmina Foehr-Janssens and Emmanuelle Métry shows (Foehr-Janssens & Métry 2003), Fortune seemed too pagan after Saint Augustine (†430), and references to Fortune waxed and waned following Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* (524). The oldest known “wheel of Fortune” dates from the eleventh century, but it was in the thirteenth century, with *La Mort le roi Artu* and Guillaume de Lorris’ *Roman de la Rose*, that Fortune began to play a decisive role in the mediaeval romance (Lucken 2003, 162). The vocabulary of *occasion* and *rencontre*, discussed in Chapter 1, justifies our chosen timeframe because the meanings of these French words crystallised towards the end of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance, referring to what arises in the form of an opportunity or a risk, both of which were perfectly compatible with a world

still dominated by the divine. The gradual emergence of a kind of chance seen as something that escapes determination and Providence modified conventional perceptions by making conflicting regimes of representation exist side by side—which also explains our chronological choices. Early allusions to *De natura rerum*, which was exhumed in 1417, do not highlight possible bones of contention with regard to Christian doctrine, contrary to what would happen later, when the idea of “pure chance” that escapes predictability and necessity, and thus evades God’s plan, became positively heretical. The context of the Reformation, which once again condemned the paganism of Fortune, along with the advent of the Wars of Religion, stoked theological debates about chance and raised the stakes surrounding its literary representation. This ideological and religious tension involving the notion of chance followed the emergence of materialism, as shown in Chapter 2 (seventeenth century), Chapter 3 (eighteenth century) and, more incidentally, Chapter 4 (nineteenth century), forming a kind of common thread. At the contemporary end of our timeline, Chapter 6 (twenty-first century) shows how the question of chance has once again raised its head in response to the great contemporary challenges of globalisation, climate change and datafication—challenges that we can understand as a dangerous convergence of independent causal chains fraught with menace for the future of our species. Theological questions relating to chance have undeniably faded into the background, while those of compatibilism and free will, dealt with in Chapters 3 and 4, have not entirely disappeared from a world increasingly characterised by a desire to predict collective behaviour using algorithms and artificial intelligence.

The question of the geographical boundaries of our study was much thornier. Our work follows on from that of Molesworth and Puskar on British and American literary history, respectively, but like Carsten Meiner’s *Le Carrosse littéraire et l’invention du hasard* (2008), which explores an extensive corpus ranging from Furetière to Robert Musil, we have made more room for other European domains alongside the influential French writers who form the core of our study. Indeed, we have included the spheres of influence of the different authors at the point when their writings were most widely disseminated in Europe, reflecting periods of intense intellectual activity in Italy, Spain, Germany and Scotland, for example. Lexicological studies of Russian have allowed us to hint at potentially fruitful avenues of inquiry in cultural areas which unfortunately, due to lack of space, could not be given the attention they deserve.

From a methodological standpoint, the different chapters offer a terminological focus for each century that makes it possible to assess certain changes and points of resistance. In the framework of this lexicographical and notional approach, it was necessary to include ideas connected to chance, such as *rencontre* and *occasion*, and notions that were pitted

against it, such as determinism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. We have dealt with chance-related conundrums such as, on the one hand, free will (can we freely make choices if everything is predetermined or if, on the contrary, choice itself is an illusion and results from the vagaries of contingency?), and, on the other hand, probability and certitude (what place for certainty in a world where events are understood in terms of probability?). This broad notional scope helps us to understand the underlying theoretical questions relating to narrative and dramatic plots and the reluctance, on conceptual and aesthetic grounds, to recognise the value of the genres and movements that use chance most liberally: tragi-comedies and picaresque romances, rhapsodic poems, the literary “steeplechase”, miscellanea, counterfactual stories and the output of the Fluxus movement, to name but a few. Character study in nineteenth-century fiction can partly be understood in the light of Charles Renouvier’s assertion that “if we could pinpoint the motivations of our peers, and of free individuals in general, all the events we call ‘fortuitous’ in the present state of our intelligence could be predicted and explained and the idea and the very name of chance would instantly vanish” (qtd. in Lechallas 1903, 148–149). Some, such as Barbey d’Aurevilly, responded by alluding to the mystery of human life and the irreducible existence of the unexplainable, while others, later on, deconstructed the novelist’s claim that (s)he was able to explain everything via multi-focal plots that leave gaps, accommodate uncertainties and fundamentally challenge the rationality of what people do. In fiction and art, as in life, can chance have agency? This recurrent question, first raised by the figure of Protogenes, has been reinterpreted over the centuries. Can the happenstance enjoyed by the Princes of Serendip (aka “serendipity”) exist when it is subjected to rational enquiry? The idea of developing “chance as a method”, to borrow the pithy title of Sarah Troche’s book (Troche 2015), may seem paradoxical, but it throws contemporary uses of randomness into sharp relief. Gambling no longer inspires only moral and didactic narratives designed to ward the public away from such iniquitous practices; it also gives rise to textual forms inspired by combinatorics and the subtle variations that repeated lot-drawing and dice-throwing allow. Increasingly, mass-produced art and literature have highlighted the fact that the authentic creative act, today more than ever before, draws inspiration from the unexpected, using accident to differentiate itself from serial formats and to assert its capacity for variety.

## Notes

- 1 “Chance is made of words” are J. Puskar’s first words: Puskar 2012, 1.
- 2 See in particular the entry for “Littéraire” [Literary] in Trévoux’s dictionary: “Which belongs to Letters, or to the Sciences”; also the entry for “Lettres”, *Dictionnaire de Trévoux* 1738–1742.

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