

REVIEW: *Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Stories for an Uncertain World: Agency in the Decameron and the Canterbury Tales*, by Robert W. Hanning. London: Oxford University Press, 2022. Pp. 384. Hardback, Ebook: \$135.00. ISBN: 978-0-192-89475-5.

In *Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Stories for an Uncertain World*, Robert Hanning conducts a comprehensive and well-organized comparative analysis of Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron* and Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*. A pioneer in medieval studies, Hanning once again fills a scholarly aperture with novel research that powerfully bonds two significant texts in a way that has never been explored. In his study, Hanning systematically engages with the layered worlds of the two framed narratives to explore the concept of uncertainty, its impact on society, and one's ability to persevere through the power of human agency. As "a culture is the tales it tells about itself and about its members" (2), both works lend themselves well to this task, showcasing the multifaceted voices and experiences of those navigating society's uncertainties. He defines uncertainty as a force that "operates at several levels that, taken together, challenge effective human knowledge [what to think], perception [what to believe], and strategy [how to act]" (1). Each construct is disrupted by sources of instability and adversity, with Hanning investigating *Fortuna* (chance), *Fama* (unverifiable report), ambiguous signification systems, and power as the main causes influencing an individual's ability to thrive.

Hanning's research is panoramic and well-constructed, with an introduction that establishes direction and presents the reader with a clear exposition of his intricate thesis and a mapping of the study. In Chapter One, Hanning applies theories of Aristotle and Cicero to methodically expound on the meaning and attainment of prudence and, thus, human agency. Employing theoretical evidence, he explains that deliberation, cultivated by experience and opinions, along with rhetoric and opportunity, leads to one's ability to assess and often overcome or exploit forces of uncertainty. He also argues that while the philosophers of antiquity incorporate a moral component to the purpose and power of prudence, Boccaccio and Chaucer treat human agency quite differently, depicting circumstances where "amoral ingenuity is deployed" (17). This "pragmatic prudence," a phrase Hanning coins to underscore the self-interest motive, is represented as an increasingly prevalent response to life's instabilities. He proceeds to examine this construct from a historical context, providing evidence of its growing popularity and acceptance within the realms of governance, commerce, and institutional religion during the late Middle Ages. Through these fictitious collections, Hanning illustrates that as the world grew more complex and unpredictable regarding policy, trade, and religion, individuals endeavored to survive and thrive by employing self-serving calculation and deliberation. He supports this claim by directly exploring several tales in the first chapter to highlight three existing stages of prudent agency: acting opportunistically, acting appropriately, and acting decisively. Hanning's objective with the subsequent chapters is twofold: to provide extensive evidence of what he deduces are the four major sources of uncertainty and to analyze relevant examples of pragmatic prudence across both tale collections.

With pragmatic prudence defined, Hanning takes his readers on a complex journey to encounter the "formidable adversaries" (96) emitted by an unstable



world. Chapter Two begins this quest with a thorough investigation of *Fortuna* and *Fama*, the first two sources of uncertainty, and their impact on “knowledge.” Beginning with the former, Hanning emphasizes that chance “endows the present with an ominous awareness of contingency” (95). With the presence of *Fortuna* prevailing in both the *Decameron* and the *Canterbury Tales*, he explores *Decameron* 2.4 and *The Knight’s Tale* to examine unanticipated environmental and situational changes and one’s ability to counter them, or not. When it comes to *Fama* or “unreliable news, rumor, and information, true or false” (135), Hanning investigates how this force influences established norms, beliefs, and conditions. Incorporating the *Decameron* 3.8 and *The Man of Law’s Tale*, we observe how news, information, and reputation are exploited to manipulate individuals and circumstances to produce intended outcomes. In *Decameron* 3.8, Hanning reminds us of the salacious abbot who desires the wife of Fernando. Engaging in acts to ensure that his reputation (*Fama*) remains intact, the abbot further employs this force by devising a scheme primarily driven by fabricated stories to convince Fernando that he will remain in Purgatory unless he allows his wife to do as she wishes, an outcome that satisfies the abbot’s agenda. Hanning notes that “the fiction-making [evident within this tale and across the collections] ... offers further corroboration for a foundational argument of this study, namely, that society functions ... by its circulation, transmission, and exchange of stories, plausible or not” (143). Throughout his research, the reader witnesses Hanning’s capacity to reinforce his argument from multiple angles and across varying levels, adding depth to his work.

The third and fourth chapters are committed to addressing additional forces of uncertainty, fueled by *Fortuna* and *Fama*, and their impact on communication. Chapter Three presents the reader with an in-depth analysis of “equivocal and malleable signifying systems,” and their effect on human perception. Hanning asserts “language is beset as a signifying system by an uncontrollable ambiguity and/or slippage of reference ... it depends on contextualized circumstances” (155). Employing *The Reeve’s Tale* and *Decameron* 3.2, he sets out to expose the instability of these systems. He uses these tales to demonstrate how structures, boundaries, and norms are easily permeated by manipulating forms of communication, thus creating ambiguous conditions for some and advantageous circumstances for others. In addition, we observe the fragility of these systems as both stories highlight how simple objects, a rod and a cradle, respectively, have the ability to manipulate perception and allow ambiguity to obscure the reality of situations. According to Hanning, this force is exacerbated by “intention,” which he explores in Chapter Four. “The possible gap—whether accidental or planned—between intention and execution creates prudential problems for all those ... who wish, or need, to interpret human behavior” (188), from confessors within the church to the everyday individual attempting to maintain and thrive in an unpredictable world. Hanning explains the effect of intention on signifying systems by referencing *Decameron* 3.3 and 8.7 as well as *The Wife of Bath’s Tale*. In all three tales, he reminds the reader that the question of intent drives the actions that unfold, providing those with hidden intentions the ability to employ agency over others. Through the investigation between behaviors and words, Hanning underscores that things are not always how they appear.

Concluding his study with the final source of uncertainty, Hanning describes “power” as a shape-shifting force that insidiously limits the agency of those it targets, operating through patriarchal, political, institutional, and ideological

conduits of society. Hanning examines “patriarchal” power in *Decameron* 4.1 and *The Merchant’s Tale* as well as the power of “desire” in the *Decameron* 2.7 and *The Miller’s Tale*. He uses these tales to analyze society’s engagement with two pervasive forms of power and an individual’s ability to cultivate instability by advantageously exploiting varying facets of society or falling victim to their consequences.

Boccaccio, Chaucer, and Stories for an Uncertain World is a scholarly tour de force that bridges two prominent medieval texts in a thorough and systematic way. Hanning’s comparative analysis is distinctive in that it brings together two framed narratives to produce a powerful discourse around society’s instabilities, humanity’s imperfections, and how, despite them or because of them, one can traverse an uncertain world through human agency. While the study incorporates theory throughout, it is textually driven, relying on the stories to guide his arguments. Tailored toward scholars, medieval aficionados, and students, Hanning’s sophisticated study remains entertaining and refreshing throughout, giving voice to diverse and evolving forms of human agency throughout medieval society - as well as today.

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