

David Hughes. *The Hack's Tale: Hunting the Makers of Media: Chaucer, Froissart, Boccaccio*. London: Bloomsbury Press, 2004. xiv + 205 pp.

David Hughes' book is an entertaining if not rigorously academic work that meanders through Britain, Italy, Sweden, the Aegean, and France in an attempt to understand better three men whom Hughes dubs "the makers of the media": Geoffrey Chaucer (1342?–1400), Jean Froissart (1333?–1400?), and Giovanni Boccaccio (1313–1375). A journalist by profession, Hughes explains that this book arose because the media had begun "swamping my mind, telling me how or what to think, forcing me by their urgency to spend so much time on the vicarious that I was losing grip on the direct" (xi). Though already acquainted to some extent with each author, Hughes also broadens his knowledge as he goes along by drawing upon copies and translations of their works. However, no detailed textual analysis, lengthy quotations, notes, or bibliography are included in *The Hack's Tale*; instead, the book aims to follow imaginatively "the intertwining paths trod by these three fourteenth-century contemporaries who may or may not have known one another..." (xiii).

Given that all three men "went on journeys for their life's work," Hughes decides to embark on a trip in order to liberate himself from the harmful effects of his media consumption, which he colorfully describes as "death of brain cells, narcolepsy, demise of imagination, zapping of independent judgment, attrition of ability to engage at depth in family life, or social activity..." (xiv). Hughes' various travels last over several seasons and span Europe: winter in London, spring in the Aegean and in Kent, summer in France, fall in Sweden and Tuscany.

He begins in Britain, his home country, by visiting Canterbury. Hughes' wry musings on the setting of *The Canterbury Tales* — "The place where Becket in fact crumpled to his death, in a transept, is marked by a sappy plaque which, in lettering so trendy as to look already outmoded, records that Pope John Paul II and Archbishop Runcie prayed by it" (41–42) — are accompanied, as they will be in later chapters about the other two authors, by a small saga of his physical ailments, bad weather, indifferent food, and other common traveler's tribulations. Hughes also relies upon a beloved, dusty edition in multiple volumes of the *Canterbury Tales* to flesh out his visit.

To retrace Froissart's career, Hughes travels next to France, where he seeks out, among other sites, Froissart's birthplace, the Field of the Cloth of Gold, described by John Bourchier, a translator of Froissart's chronicles, and the battlefield of Crécy. Desolate, cold, muddy, the landscape elicits first imaginative historical reconstruction then grim thoughts and gastrointestinal distress from a weary Hughes. "As I walk I feel needless bones massed under my feet" (96).

After more journeying through France in search of Froissart's elusive presence — the Place Froissart yields up a massive and weighty statue with "a flat hat on it, a medieval beret that betokens wisdom; Erasmus used to wear one" (107) — Hughes is invited to a villa in Tuscany, which serves as his base for studying Boccaccio. Boccaccio, perhaps not surprisingly, is described with a touch more brio than either Froissart or Chaucer; Hughes imagines the gathering of the *brigata* in Santa Maria Novella as if it were a movie production directed

by Boccaccio. Yet, the “ghost of Boccaccio is far too subtle to be captured by persistence,” writes Hughes. “Discoveries are made on the wing” (192). And with a lunch-time visit to the set of “The Triumph of Love,” a film directed by Clare Peploe, Bernardo Bertolucci’s wife, Hughes winds up his quest with a new media figure: Bertolucci. “He is Chaucer in his humour, Boccaccio in the clip of his narrative, Froissart in his aptitude for gossip. Yes, I will say when I am invalided home, I met Bertolucci” (198).

Hughes concludes, while resting after much-delayed ankle surgery, that “by bringing those three men and their time together in my own fashion” he had grown “full of affection for, understanding of, delight in, the media they cast the mold of...” (203). Far from the hunted quarry implied by the book’s title, Chaucer, Froissart, and Boccaccio are finally “my three dear old friends from the past” (205).

In conclusion, though this is not a scholarly book addressing an academic audience, perhaps, if one enjoys the occasionally barbed wit and cantankerousness of Hughes’ authorial persona and his sketches of the three authors, *The Hack’s Tale* can offer a pleasant voyage through history and contemporary Europe.

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