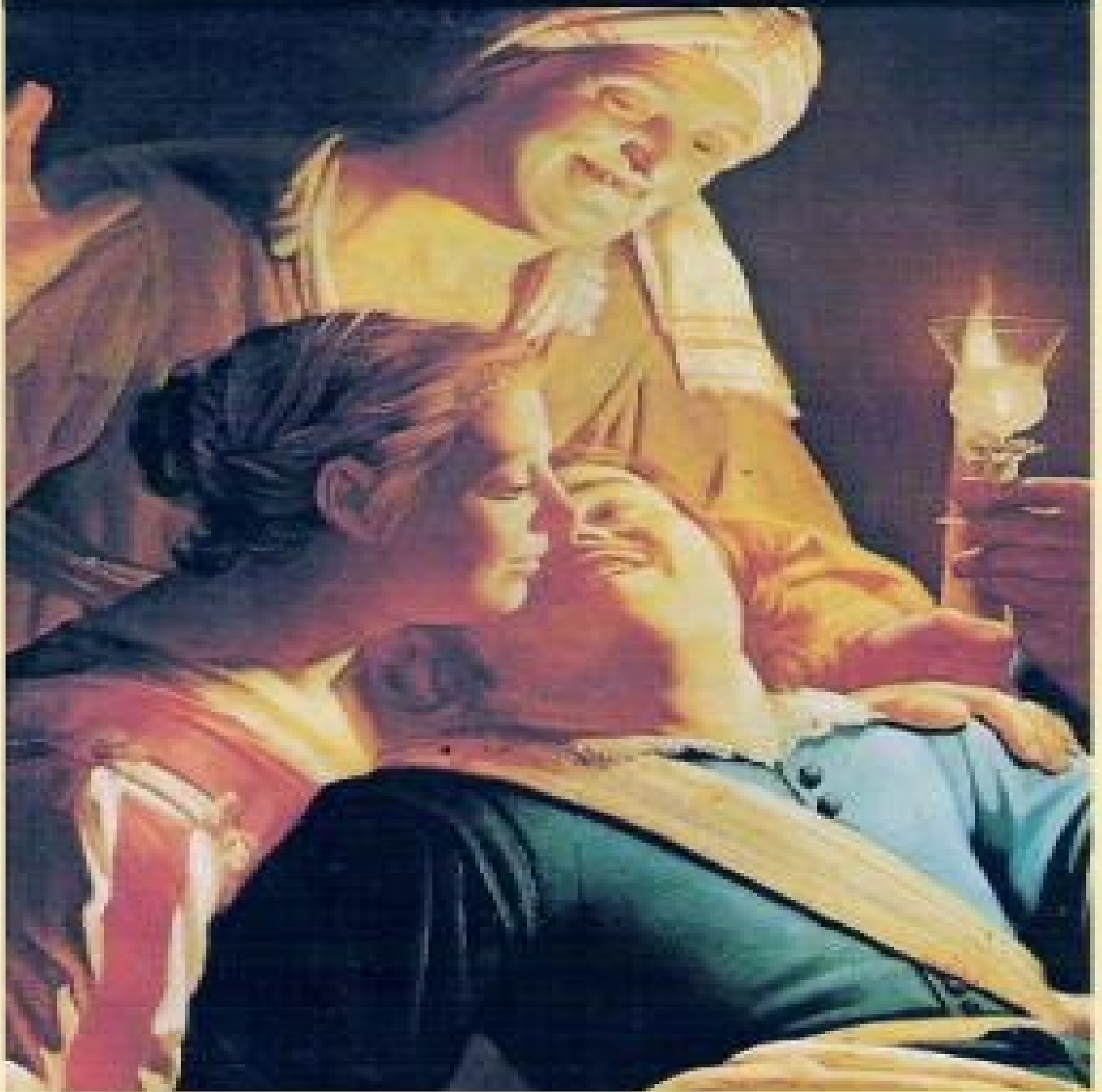


PENGUIN CLASSICS



FRANÇOIS RABELAIS  
GARGANTUA AND  
PANTAGRUEL



## GARGANTUA AND PANTAGRUEL

FRANÇOIS RABELAIS, born in the 1480s, is very much a Renaissance man. As a Franciscan turned Benedictine he studied Law; he graduated as a doctor at Montpellier in 1530. Living irregularly, he published in 1532 the first of his comic 'Chronicles', *Pantagruel*; it revealed his genius as a storyteller and creator of comic characters and situations. By early 1535 he had published *Gargantua* outrageously mocking old-fashioned education and rash imperialism. Against monastic ideals it opposes an Abbey where noblemen and ladies live in evangelical freedom and Renaissance splendour. In January 1535 Rabelais fled from his post as physician in Lyons. His profound and audacious *Third Book* was published in 1546. He was then a secular priest. He fled to Metz. His *Fourth Book*, published in January 1552 not long before he died, contains some of his deepest, boldest and funniest pages. It enjoyed the public support of the King and two Cardinals. (It outlived the *Index of Prohibited Books* on which it was eventually placed.) A *Fifth Book* appeared under his name in 1564. His genius was acknowledged in his own day: his world-wide influence remains enormous.

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# Gargantua and Pantagruel

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*Translated and edited  
with an Introduction and Notes by*

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# Chronology

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1483 Possible date for the birth of Rabelais at La Devinière near Chinon. (An alternative date 1494 is not well supported.)

1500–1510 Some time during these years Rabelais studies law, perhaps at Bourges, Angers and/or Poitiers.

1510–26 Rabelais, previously a novice and lay-brother (possibly in the Franciscan convent at La Baumette), is ordained priest, either there or at the Franciscan abbey of Le Puy-Saint-Martin near Fontenay-le-Comte, where he remains until 1526.

1520 Rabelais, a Franciscan at Fontenay-le-Comte, writes his first (lost) letter to Guillaume Budé.

1521 Second letter of Rabelais to Budé.

1522 Amaury Bouchard publishes *Of the Female Sex, against André Tiraqueau*. Rabelais remains friends with both Bouchard and Tiraqueau.

1523–4 Rabelais, in trouble with his superiors for studying Greek, has already translated into Latin the first book of Herodotus and some works of Lucian. He is supported by his bishop Geoffroy d'Estissac. Rabelais ceases to be a mendicant friar and becomes a monk (Benedictine).

1524–6 Based at the Benedictine house at Saint-Pierre-de-Maillezais, Rabelais works for, and travels with, his bishop.

1525 Rabelais possibly in Lyons.

February: A disastrous defeat for the French at Pavia. François I is prisoner in Madrid.

1526 By the Peace of Madrid, François I is released from captivity and the royal sons are kept hostages for his ransom. Milan is ceded to Charles V.

1526–30 Rabelais leaves Poitou. He studies the great Greek medical authorities (Hippocrates and Galen), probably in Paris. Two of his three children, François and Junie Rabelais, perhaps born during this period.

1528 Late summer sees the beginning of over five years of disastrous drought in large parts of France.

1529 The Peace of Cambrai: the royal sons are to be released against a ransom of 2 million crowns.

1530 Rabelais signs the matriculation rolls at Montpellier and quickly graduates as Bachelor of Medicine.

1530–32 Rabelais in Montpellier.

1531 Rabelais lectures at Montpellier on the *Aphorisms* of Hippocrates and Galen's *Ars Parva*.

May: The Paris Parlement consolidates its powers over the Sorbonne's right to censor books.

1532 Rabelais, in the University of Montpellier, acts in *The Farce of the Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*. Practises medicine in the Midi, including Narbonne; by June, he is established

Lyons.

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Dedicates his edition of Manardi's *Epistolae Medicinales* to Tiraqueau, his edition of works of Galen and Hippocrates to Bishop Geoffroy d'Estissac and his edition of Lucius Cuspidius' *Testamentum* to Amaury Bouchard. First edition of *Pantagruel* (if not in 1531). Appointed physician to the Hôtel-Dieu in November, the great hospital in Lyons, Rabelais publishes his *Almanac for the year 1533*. Writes to Erasmus; the letter is sent with a Greek manuscript of *Josephus* sought by Erasmus. The *Pantagrueline Prognostication* for 1533.

1533 February: Permission is given to wear masks in the streets of Paris during the Shrovetide revels. 'Anti-Lutheran' demonstrations and sermons are orchestrated by the Sorbonne.

May: An attempt by the Sorbonne to censor *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul* of Marguerite de Navarre as well as *Pantagruel*. The Sorbonne theologians Béda, Picart and Leclerc are exiled twenty leagues from Paris. Critical posters (*placards*) are displayed in Paris. Reprisals.

July: The Sorbonne authorizes Nicolas Bouchart and Louis Théobald to supplicate François I on behalf of Béda. They are unsuccessful.

October: The Sorbonne denies ever having intended to censor *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*.

Rabelais publishes an augmented *Pantagruel* and the *Pantagrueline Prognostication* for 1534.

The plague, endemic in Europe, spreads. Rabelais is praised for his devotion to his patients.

1534 Rabelais leaves for Rome with Bishop Jean Du Bellay, possibly entrusting a manuscript of *Gargantua* to François Juste in Lyons. He leaves Rome in March.

April: Rabelais in Lyons with Jean Du Bellay (who goes on to Paris). Rabelais' movements unknown between April and July. *Gargantua*, if not already published, now in hand.

August: Rabelais resumes his post as physician in the Hôtel-Dieu. He dedicates his edition of Marliani's *Topographia Romae* to Jean Du Bellay.

October: The (first) *Affaire des Placards* (17–18 October). Posters (now known to be Calvinist/Zwinglian) attack the Mass as idolatry. Repression follows.

November-December: The publication of the *Almanac for the Year 1535* and the expanded *Pantagrueline Prognostication* for 1535, critical of the suppression of Evangelicals.

1535 The *Affaire du 13 janvier*: a rash repeat of the *Placards* of October 1534. Violent repercussions. Many flee. All printing is forbidden but later restored through the influence of Guillaume Budé and the Du Bellays. A great national act of expiation led by François I; the Du Bellays remain in favour. Heretics are burnt.

January: The probable date for the publication of *Gargantua*. Rabelais' son Théodule, born about this time (?). *Pantagruel* published without the permission of Rabelais by the printer Sainte-Lucie dit Le Prince in Lyons.

February: Guillaume Du Bellay publishes for François I a letter to the German states defending the French alliance with the Turks even while 'heresy' is suppressed at home. Béda's *amen* *honorable* before Notre-Dame-de-Paris; he is exiled once and for all to Mont-Saint-Michel.

Rabelais abandons his post in the Hôtel-Dieu, Lyons; he publishes his *Almanac for 1536*.

May: Jean Du Bellay is named cardinal, amidst accusations of Lutheranism.



June: François I invites Melanchthon to Paris.

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Jean Du Bellay and Rabelais in Rome: they may have travelled there together, passing through Ferrara. The second edition of *Gargantua*, specifically dated 1535, may have been left en route Lyons with François Juste.

1535–6 Rabelais arranges a papal absolution for his ‘apostasy’.

1536 February: Rabelais is installed in Jean Du Bellay’s Benedictine abbey at Saint-Maur-le-Fossés; it is secularized, and Rabelais with it. A papal brief authorizes him to practise medicine. He is now a secular priest, a ‘father’.

August: Rabelais figures among the canons of Saint-Maur.

1537 During this year, *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* republished in Lyons and Paris.

January: Béda dies in exile at Mont-Saint-Michel.

February: Rabelais at a celebratory banquet in Paris with Etienne Dolet, Budé, Marot, Daneau, Macrin, Bourbon and others.

April: Rabelais graduates, in Montpellier, as a *licencié* (a step towards his full Doctorate in Medicine).

May: Rabelais becomes a Doctor of Medicine.

June-September: Rabelais possibly in Lyons.

August: Guillaume Du Bellay passes through Lyons on his way to govern the Piedmont. Rabelais joins him.

October: Rabelais lectures at Montpellier on the *Prognostics* of Hippocrates. The course lasts until April 1538.

November: Rabelais presides over a public dissection performed as a lesson in anatomy.

1538 Fresh severe measures decreed against heresy in France.

Summer: Rabelais in Montpellier, from where he joins Guillaume Du Bellay (now the Governor of the Piedmont) in Turin. Publishes his *Stratagemata*, praising the military prowess of Guillaume Du Bellay. No copy is known.

First edition of the anonymous *Panurge disciple de Pantagruel* (seven editions follow, variously named).

1538–40 Rabelais possibly in Lyons. He may have made a visit to Bordeaux. His son Théodoric may have been born in this period, rather than 1535.

1540 Rabelais’ children François and Junie relieved of the stigma of illegitimacy by the papal curia.

December: Rabelais back in France (via Chambéry). Publishes an *Almanac for 1541*.

1540–42 Rabelais in Piedmont with Guillaume Du Bellay.

1541 Rabelais returns to France in November (when Guillaume Du Bellay reports on Piedmont).

1542 Guillaume Postel violently attacks Rabelais in print. Rabelais will mock him in his *Four Books*.

April: Rabelais passes through Lyons en route for Turin with Guillaume Du Bellay. The revised *Pantagruel*, published by François Juste, dates from this period. Etienne Dolet brings out a pirate edition without the revisions made by Rabelais. During his various stays in Italy Rabelais reads Celio Calcagnini, the mythographer.

November: Guillaume Du Bellay, ill, includes Rabelais amongst the beneficiaries of his will. He leaves Turin for France in December. Rabelais is with him.

1543 January: Guillaume Du Bellay dies near Roanne. Rabelais is present and escorts the body home.

March: *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* figure on the list of censorable books drawn up by the Sorbonne for the Paris Parlement. Rabelais is present (with Ronsard and others) at the burial of Guillaume Du Bellay in the Cathedral of Le Mans.

1544 August: The Sorbonne's revised list of censorable books is sent to the printers: Rabelais figures in it.

1545 January: François Bribart, secretary of Jean Du Bellay, burnt at the stake.

April: The massacre of the Vaudois.

September: François I provides the royal *privilège* for the *Third Book of Pantagruel* (signed by Delauney).

1546 Before Easter: *The Third Book* printed by Christian Wechel (Paris). At least three other printings follow.

Rabelais discreetly slips away to Metz. He is appointed Physician to the City. He reads works of Luther.

August: Etienne Dolet is burnt in the Place Maubert. Jean Du Bellay exchanges his bishopric of Paris for that of Le Mans (which is better than Paris for his health).

December: The expanded catalogue of books censored since May 1544 is published; it includes the *Third Book of Pantagruel*.

1547 April: Henri II succeeds to the throne. Jean Du Bellay remains in favour.

June: After the coronation of Henri II at Rheims, Jean Du Bellay leaves for Rome.

Probably the last of the payments to Rabelais as physician in Metz. He travels from Metz to Rome, possibly leaving the 'partial' *Fourth Book* with Pierre de Tours in Lyons. Remains in Italy until 1549.

1548 During this year, there are at least two printings of the 'partial' *Fourth Book*.

June: Rabelais in Rome.

1549 February: The birth of Louis of Orleans, second son of Henry II.

March: The festivities held in Rome in honour of Henry II are described by Rabelais in his *Sciomachie*.

September: Jean Du Bellay leaves Rome. Violent attack on Rabelais in a work, *Theotimus*, by an important theologian of the Sorbonne, Gabriel Dupuyherbault, whom Rabelais will mock in his *Fourth Book*.

1550 August–October: Rabelais is at Saint-Maur with Jean Du Bellay (convalescent). He meets the Cardinal Odet de Châtillon, who assures him of the royal favour and of his own support.

August: The royal *privilège* for all of Rabelais' works granted in the presence of Odet de Châtillon. Calvin attacks Rabelais in his *Treatise on Scandals*.

1551 The Sorbonne publishes a list of censored books which includes editions of *Pantagruel*, *Gargantua* and the *Third Book*.

Rabelais enjoys two benefices: Meudon and Saint-Christophe-du-Jambet (Sarthe). He does not reside.

1552 January: The *Fourth Book* is printed by Fezandat in Paris; it contains a *Preliminary Epistle* addressed to Cardinal Odet de Châtillon.

March: The Paris Parlement condemns the new *Fourth Book* at the request of the Sorbonne. It provisionally forbids the sale of the *Fourth Book* pending directions from the king.

April: The triumphant entry of Henry II into Metz. Fezandat reprints two pages of the *Fourth Book* to insert a eulogy of the French victories.

October: (Untrue) rumour that Rabelais is in prison.

1553 January: Rabelais resigns his benefices at Meudon and Saint-Christoph-du-Jambet.

Before 14 March: Rabelais dies in La Rue des Jardins in Paris. He is buried in the cemetery of St Paul's Church.

1555 October: Calvin attacks Rabelais in a sermon.

1562 The *Isle Sonante* is published.

1564 Publication of the *Fifth Book*.

The Council of Trent concludes and publishes the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, which places Rabelais at the head of the 'heretics of the first class'.

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# Introduction

## BAWDY, AND INCOMPARABLE

Rabelais has made us laugh for centuries. His name evokes fun, merriment, jests and bawdiness at its best. Yet his laughter is not all on the surface and not always easy to grasp: it leads to a smiling, charitable and tolerant wisdom which accepts and surmounts misfortune. He came to call it pantagruelism. Like Democritus in antiquity, Rabelais deserves the name of Laughing Philosopher.

Dictionaries define his comedy as gross, bawdy and often scatological. It certainly can be, but the *Oxford (New English) Dictionary* is wider in its terms. There *Rabelaisian* means 'an exuberance of imagination and language, combined with extravagance and coarseness of humour and satire'. Admirers of Rabelais can go along with that, but such judgements fall far short of the praise heaped on him. His countrymen never underestimated him. Calvin certainly did not; he read him, though he disliked him and may have feared him. Calvin's successor Theodore Beza both admired him and enjoyed him: he was astonished at the philosophical depths of Rabelais even when he was jesting and wondered what he must be like when he was serious.

Chateaubriand classed Rabelais with Dante, Homer and Shakespeare as a genius who gave suck to all the others. Flaubert placed him beside Homer, Michelangelo and Goethe. Rabelais was read by Francis Bacon, Molière, Diderot, Balzac and dozens of other giants.

We expect to find a taste for him in Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne and James Joyce; but he was enjoyed too by men such as Charles Kingsley, the author of *The Water Babies*. He found his way amongst the Lake Poets, especially in Southey's delightfully rambling miscellany *The Doctor, &c*, in which figure two Lakeland physicians, father and son. Southey's elder Dr Daniel picked up the odd volume of his English *Rabelais* in Kendal. (They were shelved with his *Pilgrim's Progress* and Plutarch's *Morals*.) 'The elder Dr Daniel could make nothing of this book,' Southey tells us, and the younger Dr Daniel, who was about ten years old when he began to read it, understood of it 'less than he could of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. But he made out something.' That younger Dr Daniel 'was by nature a Pantagruelist'. Southey comments that true Pantagruelists are rare. 'Greece produced three great tragic poets, and only one Aristophanes. The French have but one Rabelais.' He held that 'all the greatest poets had a spice of Pantagruelism in their composition', seeing it as 'essential to their greatness'. Homer was a Pantagruelist, especially in his lost mock-heroic poem *Margites*. 'Shakespeare was a Pantagruelist; so was Cervantes.' And Southey concludes: 'until the world has produced two other men in whom that humour has been wanting equal to these, I hold my point established'.<sup>1</sup>

From the start the clergy appreciated Rabelais. His patrons included liberal princes of the Church with Lutheran leanings. (For many Luther meant freedom, joy and laughter.) Centuries later, Trollope's Archdeacon Grantly kept his *Rabelais* locked away in his book-room (safe, he fondly thought, from the eyes of his wife).

Grantly enjoyed him for his witty mischief; others liked his merry pranks. So did succeeding generations from the earliest times, but they often enjoyed him for much more. French revolutionaries tended to think of him as one of theirs. Nineteenth-century free-thinkers were sure he was one of them. (Those who do not like him and dismiss him as sordid include Solzhenitsyn's Soviet Commiss

in *The Cancer Ward*.) His laughing philosophy appeals to the humanity of so many in so many lands. Like Erasmus, Rabelais is a deeply Christian author who is read and enjoyed by readers who do not share his faith and who do not even always recognize it in his writings. His satire of superstition and hypocrisy is priceless. His thought welcomes and embraces the wisdom of the ancient world and the kinds of laughter which lead us to look afresh at the world around us.

Yet when readers come to him for the first time they are often puzzled. What are they to make of these astonishing books with their extraordinary and fantastical narratives which often push back the frontiers of decency, with their long lists of words and names, their arresting prologues which make the books read like plays and their ability to give to print the allusion of speech at many levels of the social scale? The answer to that question is that the works of Rabelais really are *sui generis*: there is nothing else like them. When Guillaume Budé (the great scholar whom Rabelais admired) needed to define the Greek word *planos* (a kind of wandering trickster such as the Panurge of *Pantagruel*), he simply gestured towards François Villon: 'His name alone is as good as a definition.' For *Rabelaisia* too we might do the same, and point towards Rabelais. He is his own definition. But we can be helped for example by knowing something of Shakespeare. Rabelais and Shakespeare have much in common: they intertwine tears and laughter, comedy and tragedy. Their ghosts walk and their witches cast spells; their peasants are funny; topsy-turvy standards reign during Twelfth Night and Carnival, when reprobates and rogues are sources of fun not indignation, when London youths or Parisian students play outrageous tricks on the pillars of the establishment and their prudish ladies.

The lack of moral censure of the lecherous companions in *Pantagruel* (in, that is, the first of our books by Rabelais) worries some readers. They might meditate on Charles Lamb's defence of Congreve and Wycherly, the seventeenth-century playwrights, against the dulling influences of bourgeois drama: 'We dread infection from the scenic representation of disorder, and fear a painted pustule. In our anxiety that our morality should not take cold, we wrap it up in a great blanket surtout of precaution against the breeze and the sunshine.' Lamb is 'glad for a season to take an airing beyond strict conscience'. He loves, 'for a dream-while or so, to imagine a world with no meddling restrictions'. He then comes back to his cage and to restraint 'the fresher and more healthy for it'. He is 'the gayer, at least, for it'. Those fictional immoralities and freedoms 'are a world of themselves almost as much as fairy land'.<sup>2</sup> Southey's younger Dr Daniel took especial delight in the bottom-wiping chapter of *Gargantua* when he read it as a boy. C. S. Lewis, a sound guide in matters of the bawdy, maintains that it is the Christian theology underpinning Rabelais which best explains the pleasure taken in that chapter. Human beings, unlike other animals, are not at ease with their condition, which they find comic (or in the case, say, of dead bodies, eerie). Something seems to have gone wrong with us. We are the only animals who find our sexuality laughable. Dogs and horses do not. So too for all the natural functions of the body, many of which we consistently hide. Most other creatures do not. So too death (which is often comic in Rabelais). Human beings veil their physical functions, so comedy tugs the veil cheekily aside.

It might be expected that graver sages would dislike Rabelais, but it is not so. Even the sober Dean Inge of Saint Paul's found 'the ribaldry of Aristophanes and Rabelais comparatively harmless'. It was part of his world as a scholar whose intellectual sphere embraced the normative laughter of the ancient world. But Rabelais was no more content than Molière to limit his comedy to ribaldry and slapstick. Molière needed his philosophical *Misanthrope*, Rabelais, his *Third Book*; Molière, his daring *Dom Juan* with its challenging of misused rank and power, Rabelais, the riches of his *Fourth Book*.

To enjoy Rabelais and Shakespeare is to delight in words. Both of them kindle our delight in language. (The volumes which Rabelais himself certainly saw through the press contain nothing but

words: he had no need of woodcuts or illustrations.) Both delight in speech in all its diversity. Both enjoy complex word-play; both use puns seriously and in fun. Rabelais is far more erudite, but Shakespeare ranges more widely. Unlike Shakespeare, however, Rabelais, the erstwhile friar and monk, is simply not concerned to create realistic female characters. Both are at home, though, with popular farces and their often harsh conventions: Rabelais expounds some of his deepest thoughts in chapters presented as farces. The objects of our laughter in a farce on the stage (as in a cartoon on television or in a chapter of Rabelais or a scene in Shakespeare) are getting their comic deserts, often in terms of what would be extreme cruelty if the laughter were drained away and the cruelty taken to be real). But when all is said and done, Rabelais, who changes his comic norms from book to book, must be left to speak for himself (with a measure of help, at times, from his editors).<sup>3</sup>

## RABELAIS THE MAN: WINE AND SCHOLARSHIP

Rabelais studied deeply and travelled far, yet he never cut himself off from his own *pays*. He was profoundly learned in an age which respected erudition, yet he never lost the common touch. He seems to have had a happy childhood in a well-off family in Touraine. The family home was La Devinière near Chinon. He rejoices in the local wine; delights in the local place-names; revels in the peasants, friends and patrons he knew in Touraine. As children we live our lives amidst giants who may seem powerful but erratic and silly. For Rabelais reminiscences of childhood evoke happy memories of them: his great war in *Gargantua* is fought over the castle, fields, streams and ford which lie around the family home. Throughout his books, fantasy intertwines with the real, the personal, the local, the private.

He remained in touch with popular culture (culture, that is, which, at all levels of society, expresses itself in French not Latin). Yet he could never be a 'popular' author appealing to the uneducated masses. He wrote with the art and erudition of a Renaissance scholar. He makes great demands on his readers. Already in his lifetime those demands were accepted: copies of his books quickly made their way into the libraries of kings, convents and cathedrals as well as into more modest book-rooms.

Rabelais is the high-priest of wine happily drunk in good company. Wine in his writings is not usually a symbol of something else, though it can be. For Rabelais (as for David, whose psalms Rabelais had chanted, day in day out, in his convent chapel) 'wine maketh glad the heart of man'. There is a Dionysiac savour about many of his best pages. It is as a famous physician that he linked good wine with the laughter he aroused to make the sufferings of his patients more bearable. He held with the ancients that wine can delight and inspire. As a physician he was sure that (in moderation) it does us good. It can be drunk with delight as a means of quite literally raising our spirits. In his *Fourth Book*, published not long before he died, he presents wine – symbolized by the figure of the Wingéd Bacchus at Amyclae – as a God-given means of lightening our bodies and lifting our minds upwards towards things spiritual.

By then his knock-about giant has changed into a Renaissance Socrates, open to divine promptings. By then readers have discovered that the mechanics of sex, crapulence and gluttony are amusing as part of a wider vision of what men and women are, or may become.

Some delicious country foods were highly perishable: most entrails especially had to be eaten soon after the slaughter. In mid-winter a great many animals had to be culled so as to leave enough fodder for the ones to be kept. So country folk enjoyed mid-winter feasts of tripe as the February cull met the wine of the last autumn's *vendange*. Rabelais delights in those cherished intervals of merriment

brought round by the rolling year with its Twelfth Night indulgences and Shrovetide revels. Even the lofty Pantagruel of the *Fourth Book* takes grateful pleasure in rare stately banquets. He presides over companionable feast celebrating a longed-for change in the weather. Only the idle belly-worshippers treat their whole lives as though there were nothing else in the world but Twelfth Night feasts and carni-valesque debaucheries. And they are trounced for it in the *Fourth Book*.

## RABELAIS THE MAN: MEDICINE, LAW AND OTHER STUDIES

From the outset medical men liked Rabelais. The earliest extant allusion to *Pantagruel* in print is found in a lecture delivered before the medical faculty at Nantes on 7 August 1534. The lecturer, an Italian physician, contrasts the modest contents of a proper enema with the enormous compound prescribed by a rival, more worthy, he thinks, of the giants in those recent books of *Pantagruel* enjoying such a success.

That Rabelais was a physician everyone knows. That he was a student of the law is less known. Law was his first love. He counted amongst his earliest friends in Touraine André Tiraqueau, a great legal scholar. Legal men and women may still feel a certain complicity with Rabelais. He can think like a lawyer: his *Third Book* was constructed by a man who knew his Roman Law inside out (and its glossators too). He can still arouse laughter even in his most legal mode. But not always: few readers today can laugh their lonely way unaided through the chapters on Mr Justice Bridoye in the *Third Book*. Yet, with a little help and effort, smiles, laughter and sudden guffaws can again break through.

As a young man Rabelais joined the Observantines (the stricter branch of the Franciscans). He read theology. He was ordained a priest. He must have studied Bonaventura, the glory of his Order. At the same time he developed a solid acquaintance amongst distinguished Touraine 'humanists' (scholars who gave pride of place to the 'more humane' writings of Greece and Rome). For humanists everywhere elegant Latin stretched from before Cicero and Seneca right up to Jerome in the fourth century (and even, exceptionally, to Bernard of Clairvaux in the twelfth). As for the study of Greek, it included almost everything written in that fluent tongue: Plato of course; Aristotle too, but also Aristophanes and Lucian amongst the laughers, the medical authorities Hippocrates and Galen, Plutarch the moralist, the New Testament and all the Greek theologians (including many disliked by Rome). Several humanists aspired to learn Hebrew, often very successfully. (Rabelais knew at least something of that tongue.)

Rabelais was hounded by his Franciscan superiors who disapproved of his studying Greek. (Greek encouraged dangerous thoughts.) He shared that ordeal with his learned friend Pierre Amy. In his *Third Book* Rabelais recalls how Pierre Amy had consulted Homeric and Virgilian 'lots' (which involved opening pages of Homer and Virgil and seeking guidance from selected lines of verse). He was led to renounce his vows and flee. Rabelais, however, had behaved more prudently: great folk intervened for him and he was transferred quite legally to the Benedictines.

Already, as a Franciscan, Rabelais was corresponding with Guillaume Budé, the leading French student of Greek and a towering legal authority. He found a generous patron in his local bishop, Geoffroy d'Estissac, who supported him even when he had abandoned his new Order to become a physician. After living in Paris (irregularly for a professed monk), he quickly graduated in medicine Montpellier.

He retained mixed memories of his short Benedictine phase. In many ways he remained a Franciscan rather than a monk. (Franciscans are mendicants not monks.) Nevertheless his Frère Jean,



one of the greatest comic characters of all time, is a Benedictine, often simply called 'The Monk'.

The break Rabelais made with the religious life was final. His two surviving children, François and Junie, were eventually legitimated (1540) by the Vatican bureaucracy. They bore the surname of Rabelais. He also fathered a son called Théodule, 'Slave of God'. The child was dandled on the knees of cardinals. He died in infancy. Rabelais, working as a physician with few outward signs of his religious vocation, was in Church law an apostate, a traitor to his vows. That was ingeniously put right. His champion in such matters was his patron Jean Du Bellay, the Bishop of Paris, who, despite (or because of) his Lutheran sympathies, was made a cardinal in 1535. Rabelais wrote and submitted to the Vatican a *Supplication for his Apostasy*: thanks to Jean Du Bellay, who knew how to thread skilfully through the labyrinthine ways of the Vatican bureaucracy, he duly ended up a secular priest (1536), living in the world and permitted to practise his 'art' (his medicine), though, as a man in holy Orders, forbidden to shed blood whilst doing so.

From 1536 he was 'Dr' Rabelais or 'Father' Rabelais, widely known and respected for his knowledge of medicine and law.

## RABELAIS AND HIS PATRONS

Rabelais had several patrons, clerical and lay. All were liberal thinkers. Some at least had Lutheran sympathies. Even before *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* he was supported by powerful protectors. Geoffroy d'Estissac helped him from the early days. Then he was favoured by Jean Du Bellay and his brother, the statesman Guillaume Du Bellay, the Seigneur de Langey. Rabelais served them both in turn as their private physician. He accompanied each of them to Italy more than once. He was with Langey on 9 January 1543 when he died near Roanne on his way home from the Piedmont. Langey was his hero, praised as such in the *Third* and *Fourth Books*. Dr Rabelais was with Jean Du Bellay (now Bishop of Le Mans) when he completed his *Fourth Book* of 1552.

He stood at the height of his reputation in the 1540s and early 1550s. He was encouraged and protected by his kings (not always effectively: French kings were not in all things above the law). Both François I and Henri II gave him fulsome *privilèges* (legally enforceable rights as an author). Quite exceptionally they covered not only books published or ready to be so, but books yet to be written. Over his *Fourth Book* of 1552 Rabelais was positively courted by Cardinal Odet de Châtillon. That cardinal was a member of a powerful trio, nephews of the great statesman Anne de Montmorency, the Constable of France. Two were openly won over to the Reformation: François d'Andelot and Gaspar de Coligny, the Admiral of France. Some ten years after the death of Rabelais, the Cardinal Odet de Châtillon too dramatically showed his colours. He fled to England and became an Anglican. From there he issued – on what authority? – letters of marque, licences (such as Elizabeth granted to Francis Drake) permitting corsairs legally to harry enemy shipping. Odet de Châtillon lies buried with honour in Canterbury Cathedral.

In 1546 Rabelais was graciously permitted to dedicate his *Third Book* to Marguerite d'Angoulême the Queen of Navarre, the liberal, mystical, platonizing, evangelical sister of François I. (An author in her own right, she was a protector of evangelicals, even of some disapproved of by her royal brother.)

Earlier, on 30 December 1532, while physician in the Hôtel-Dieu, the great hospital in Lyons, Rabelais seized an opportunity to write to Erasmus. It was a matter of sending to him a manuscript of Josephus on behalf of Georges d'Armagnac, the princely Bishop of Rhodéz. Rabelais was at pains to demonstrate his grasp of Greek, the key to so much wisdom and knowledge. In his carefully



calligraphed letter he hails Erasmus not only as his spiritual father but as his mother too, a mother to whose nurture he owed more than he could ever repay. Rabelais had then published little: it was not a fellow author that he wrote to Erasmus but as an admirer of a sage who had changed his life. Erasmus had already influenced him as a man and was soon to influence him just as deeply in his writings. As an author his debt to Erasmus was to become immense. Erasmus showed that worthwhile things could be achieved outside the cloister. He showed how Christianity could be further enriched by the writings of the ancients. He knew how to laugh and he held medicine in high esteem. Rabelais became the kind of humanist doctor who risked his life for his patients during the plague: the kind of physician whom Erasmus could admire.

## LAUGHTER AND BOOKS

Rabelais drew upon the world around him for his smiles and laughter, but he also drew heavily upon all his learned disciplines, law and medicine included. Those who urged Henri II in the 1540s to persuade Rabelais to write a sequel to his *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* were ‘the learned men of the Kingdom’. William Hazlitt, the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century critic and essayist, captures a vital aspect of Rabelais’ art when he imagined him

with an eye languid with an excess of mirth, his lip quivering with a new-born conceit, and wiping his beard after a well-seasoned jest, with his pen held carelessly in his hand, his wine flagons and his books of law, of school divinity, and of physic before him, which were his jest books, whence he drew endless stores of absurdity; laughing at the world and enjoying it by turns, and making the world laugh with him again for the last three hundred years, at his teeming wit and his own prolific follies. Even to those who have never read his works, the name of Rabelais is a cordial for the spirits, and the mention of it cannot consist with gravity or spleen!’<sup>4</sup>

It is a pleasing picture but a partial one. All his special fields required sound Latin, but Rabelais was also at home with the culture of those who knew nothing but French. One of the works he most often evokes is *Maître Pathelin*, a French farce laughing at lawyers which was performed at Court by Songe-creux, a great comic actor. Rabelais was also at home in the world of student farces and the tumultuous world of the Latin Quarter. He knew what bawdy songs were sung in college, town and royal palace. He delighted in the pranks associated with Tyl Eulenspiegel or the François Villon of legend. In *Pantagruel* he can show that he had read More’s *Utopia* but also enjoyed the talk and jests of simple folk in town and country.

Anyway, not all the tomes that he read in Greek and Latin were grave and solemn. A major influence on him was Lucian, the late Greek mocker whom Erasmus too had taken as a model. Works of that grinning Greek (the joy of many a subtle writer) were being translated into Latin by well-known scholars and so made widely accessible. Erasmus translated some. So did Thomas More. So did the wise and tolerant Melanchthon, the Lutheran Preceptor of Germany. And so did Rabelais, while still a Franciscan. (His translation has been lost.) Already called the French Democritus, Rabelais became the French Lucian. Lucian is strongly present in each of his works. Yet for some critics of his day (despite Erasmus, Melanchthon and the like), even to admire Lucian suggested more than a hint of atheism: had not Lucian mocked Christians in his dialogue *The Passing of Peregrinus*?

Rabelais also became acquainted with the laughter found in ancient Greek or Latin comedies and Latin satires. He accepted (with most who wrote about laughter, many of whom were medical men) that laughter is the ‘property of Man’. Laughter is an activity that humans share with no other

creature. It is 'proper' to them. It defines the human being. It divides mankind from all the rest of creation. When Rabelais calls someone an *agelast* (a sad sobersides, a non-smiler, a non-laughter) the judgement is harsh and dehumanizing. For both his kings Rabelais was worthy of the highest accolade as defined by the Roman poet Horace: he 'mixed the useful and the sweet'. He is 'sweet' (enjoyable) but also 'useful' (a sound moralist).<sup>5</sup> Rabelais is a moralist in the French sense, often more inclined to paint folly than to inveigh against it (though he can do that too). He is a moralist who shows up human follies with humour, and who commends virtue in ways that make us want to go on reading him.

Such an author cannot be ignored, for he often stirs up great controversies. Rabelais was troublesome from the start. Each book of his at once provoked a storm for, besides his many admirers he had powerful enemies who would willingly have burnt his books (and him as well). It required courage to take on the Sorbonne (the main body of French theologians), the Vatican and the many who opposed his ideas and those of his patrons. None of his books quietly glided into prominence. *Pantagruel* was no sooner published when would-be censors impotently condemned it. When *Gargantua* was being written, Paris was in turmoil over heresy, with religious riots firmly suppressed. Rabelais had to flee from Lyons to Italy in January 1535. After the *Third Book* (1546) he fled to Metz, then a free German city. Censors tried to suppress his *Fourth Book* of 1552. They failed, but rumour suggested (wrongly, it seems) that he was in serious trouble. In 1562, the Council of Trent put him on their *Index of Forbidden Books* as a 'heretic of the first class'. But he went on being read. And discreetly published too, openly abroad, or in France under false addresses. (Molière assumes that his audience has read him.)

## THE BOOKS IN TURN

### *Pantagruel*

Each of the books has its own very distinct personality. Behind each one lie other books besides Lucian. Behind the first book, *Pantagruel*, there lies an anonymous little French chapbook, *The Great and Inestimable Chronicles of the Great and Enormous Giant Gargantua*. (Rabelais' own *Gargantua* came later.) Rabelais draws on it for his own 'chronicle' of funny giants, and also on Pulci's *Morgan Maggior* and on the curious tales told by Merlin Coccaïe (Folengo) in his *Macaronics* (verse written in a fusion of Italian and Latin). Rabelais also found his way into a work then available only in Hebrew, *The Pirkei of Rabbi Eliezar*, many of whose laughs derive from Old Testament stories. It supplied him with some of his best Scriptural fun, above all with the giant riding astride Noah's Ark and guiding it with his feet.

Before Rabelais, *Pentagruel* (as he was sometimes spelt) was a sea imp who shovelled salt into the throats of drunkards to increase their thirst. 'Pentagruel,' men said, 'had them by the throat'. Rabelais, writing towards the end of a dreadful four-year-long drought, turned that imp into a Gallic giant. He is now as huge as the legendary Gargantua. *Pantagruel's* name now is cheekily derived from *Pan*, all, and *gruel*, thirst!

*Pantagruel* is a Renaissance book of Twelfth Night and Mardi Gras merriment, when men and women in Court, town and village laughed for a while at their dearest beliefs. (Drunkenness is fun for a Twelfth Night Toby Belch: it is not so in normal times for a Michael Cassio, nor, indeed, for a Falstaff.) *Pantagruel* finds some of its best laughter in the Bible. *Pantagruel* is at times a sort of

Shrovetide Christ, a comic parallel to the Jesus of Scripture.

*Pantagruel* is also an amused parody of tales of chivalry. A book of legal laughter, too. (The very title-page of *Pantagruel* in its first edition is done up to look like a Latin law-book.) It also had its say on education. More boldly, it laughs at *Magistri Nostri* ('Our Masters' as the theology dons were proudly called). Such laughter greatly increases in the second edition. In several pages *Pantagruel* is strikingly evangelical in tone. Rabelais laughs at the rights and privileges claimed by the University of Paris. (French kings did not always like those entrenched freedoms.) He trod on a great many toes, but his enemies had to work within legal constraints. No record of any legally enforceable condemnation of *Pantagruel* survives from the time of its first success. But in 1533 the Sorbonne had taken measures against *The Mirror of the Sinful Soul*, a committed, evangelical poem by Marguerite de Navarre, the king's sister. With the help of his troops the king soon put a stop to that! The Reverend Dr Jean Leclerc, trying to excuse his conduct, made reference to a mix-up with 'obscene' books: *Pantagruel* and *The Forest of Cunts*. Rabelais tacked bitter laughs against such censoring hypocrites on to the end of *Pantagruel*. He made wry remarks about them in *Gargantua* too, referring back to *Pantagruel*. The only surviving copy of the first edition of *Pantagruel* bears clear signs of a censor's pen. *Pantagruel* contains jokes about Scripture which horrified some. (Tastes were changing towards a sustainedly solemn treatment of Holy Writ.) Rabelais had dared to laugh at institutions such as the Sorbonne which could do him harm. He soon felt it wise to cut out or tone down some of his boldest gibes. Later editions of *Pantagruel* (and of *Gargantua* too) suffer for that prudence; that is why it is the text of the first editions of them (with later variants) that are translated here.<sup>6</sup>

## *Gargantua*

*Gargantua* (early 1535 or autumn 1534) forms a marked contrast with *Pantagruel*. *Pantagruel* pretended to be a popular chap-book: *Gargantua* is afraid of being taken for one. *Pantagruel* revels in allusions to tall tales of chivalry: *Gargantua* evokes Plato from its very first lines. *Gargantua* is presented in its Prologue as a book which resembles Socrates. Both are *sileni*, a term drawn from Silenus, the jester of the gods, the gross, ugly old devotee of Bacchus. *Sileni* are presented as little graven images with a god to be found hidden inside them when they are opened up, or as pharmacists' boxes decorated on the outside with grotesques or, say, an ugly old flute-player. But open them up and look within and you find something precious, something divine. So too for Socrates and for *Gargantua*. Socrates, called a *silenus* by Alcibiades, hid divinely prompted wisdom within his ugly exterior. *Gargantua* may well look ugly on the outside, printed as it was in old-fashioned gothic type yet, inside, it treats of 'the highest hidden truths and the most awesome mysteries touching upon our religion as well as upon matters of State and family life'. By referring thus to the *Sileni* Rabelais is, from the outset, underlining his debt to Erasmus. With another echo of Erasmus, *Gargantua* is likened to *Pythagorean symbols*. Superficially such symbols appear to be odd and ridiculous, yet – like *Gargantua* – they contain within them 'precepts for right living.'<sup>7</sup>

In *Pantagruel* the ideal education produced a bookish scholar with his head crammed full. In *Gargantua* we are shown how a young giant, reduced to laughable insanity by paternal ignorance, crapulous old crones and dirty, syphilitic dons from the Sorbonne, can be turned into a Christian knight, cultured and healthy, trained to excel in the arts of peace and war. *Gargantua* touches on politics, including mockery of the dreams of world conquest of the Emperor Charles V. (His capture and ransoming of François I at the defeat of Pavia in 1525 still haunted the French nobility.) *Gargantua* – partly as a reply to a rash little book which laid down the meanings of colours in heraldry.

– devotes space to topics dear to the aristocracy: heraldry, emblems (then growing into a cult), the true and rational meanings of colours, the education of princes, the avoiding of war whilst prudently preparing for it, and the fighting of battles. Plans are laid for an ideal lay abbey, housing the rich, young, elegant and well-born sons and daughters of the nobility. Protected from the wickedness of the world, they live their lives free from what Saint Paul calls ‘the yoke of bondage’. (But ideal freedom allows for great conformity in Thélème, as it did for the Stoics.)

After his uproariously mad education the young Gargantua is purged of insanity by Dr Rabelais and brought up in tempered freedom. The education he is given may have been first conceived as a model for the sons of François I; released in 1530 from their restraint in Madrid as hostages of the Emperor Charles V. (They had been held as pledges for their father’s ransom.) The king, fearing that their sense of princely independence might have been compromised, was determined to have them educated in freedom. Rabelais shows (a little late perhaps, in print) how ideally it could be done.

The reformed Gargantua raises fewer laughs: he was far more laughable as a boy giant obsessed with his hobby-horses and his bum. Rabelais accepted the maxim ‘Contraries juxtaposed to contraries shine forth more clearly’. The education of the giant is such a juxtaposition. The young giant delights in suave ways of wiping his bottom: the reformed giant goes modestly to the jakes with his tutor, cleansing body and soul together. From then on it is Frère Jean, ‘the Monk’, who arouses our laughter. He represents the triumph of the constructive deeds of even the coarse-mouthed over purely passive verbal piety. He is eventually revealed as acting out a parable: he comforts the afflicted and succours the needy. And he guards the Abbey vineyard. What matters is not verbiage but right actions. Merely verbal piety turns prayers into magic spells. As a Franciscan Rabelais had learnt from Saint Bonaventura that justification lies partly with grace and partly in our free-will. Much depends on what we do. God’s grace must not be received in vain. That is a recurring theme for Rabelais.<sup>8</sup>

*Gargantua* appeared during a long period of social unrest. Already in 1532–3, riots in Paris had been provoked by the preachings of evangelical clerics supported by Marguerite de Navarre and other great persons. Was the mob egged on by placards posted up by *agents-provocateurs* disguised as masked revellers and acting for the Sorbonne? It would seem so. But worse was to come. On the night of 17–18 October 1534, densely argued placards were posted up in Paris. We now know that they had been printed in Neuchâtel for followers of Zwingli, the Zurich reformer. The Roman Mass was attacked in them as idolatrous. Suppressed, they appeared again (13 January 1535) when the royal reaction stunned the kingdom. Men and women were burnt. Printing was forbidden. A public act of expiation led by François I suggested that the enemies of liberalism had won. Yet within weeks the king, urged on by the Du Bellays, kept Noël Bédard, the fiery and illiberal Syndic of the Sorbonne, under restraint and invited Melanchthon to Paris to discuss reform with selected theologians. (Melanchthon was every moderate’s favourite Lutheran. He was invited to England too by Henry VIII.) Unfortunately he was forbidden to leave German lands, but for a while the Du Bellays had triumphed. *Gargantua* is markedly favourable to the causes of the Du Bellays and to the eirenic teachings of Melanchthon. But before any invitation was sent to Melanchthon, Rabelais felt obliged (in January 1535) to abandon his post as physician in the Hôtel-Dieu in Lyons and to flee from France. Laughter in *Gargantua* is not aroused by a man living an uneventful and comfortable existence.

### ***The Third Book of Pantagruel***

Over ten years were to pass before Rabelais was persuaded to publish his *Third Book* (1546). It is dedicated to the enraptured ‘spirit’ (or ‘mind’) of Queen Marguerite de Navarre, who was a deeply

religious woman, both mystical and evangelical. (Rabelais treats her as a contemplative whose mind, caught away to Heaven in rapture, has to be tempted back to earth in order to witness the joyous deed of his new book.) The *Third Book* is his masterpiece of philosophical comedy.

In form and matter it is an elegant, learned, comic Renaissance work. It too has a book behind it: Lucian's *To One Who Said to Him 'You Are a Prometheus in Words'* in which Lucian defends his fusion of dialogue with comedy: before him, dialogue was the domain of philosophy not laughter. Rabelais quotes him and follows him. The *Third Book* begins as a comic, philosophical dialogue between Pantagruel and Panurge. For the first twelve chapters, nobody else is present. Both characters are fundamentally changed: Pantagruel is now a giant in wisdom, Panurge, an ageing fool, progressively driven deeper into melancholy madness by his yearning to take a wife and his terror of being cuckolded, beaten and robbed if he does so. The stage is set by Panurge's ingeniously perverse praise of debts and debtors. The rest of the book too is taken up with monologue, dialogue and sometimes with comic exchanges like those heard between actors on the trestles in farces such as *Fathelin*. It is a feast of rhetoric and dialectic, twin subjects of study in Renaissance schools and colleges.

The framework of the book owes much to legal doctrines about how to deal with 'perplex cases' – legal cases where the law reaches an impasse. The advice of Roman Law is to follow two intertwining courses: to consult acknowledged experts and harmonize their opinions; and then, when (in the technical legal phrase) 'there is no other way', to seek counsel from dice, divination and lots. Rabelais runs through the gamut of methods of divination and of Renaissance wisdom and knowledge, all of which, as he expounds them, are wreathed in smiles or shot through with the sudden glory of laughter. It is all the more amusing in that a decision to marry or not should not be a 'perplex case' (as Thomas More remarked elsewhere with a smile). Panurge ought to make up his own mind about marriage.

But there are such things in law as truly 'perplex cases': cases which defy a clear, rational decision; cases where the law itself is clear but its application is not. The *Third Book* reveals how to deal with them in accordance with Roman Law and Christian simplicity.

Rabelais is indebted throughout to both André Tiraqueau and Guillaume Budé, the summits of French judicial studies. The *Third* is the most difficult of the four books. For many it is also the most rewarding. Its comedy is complex and profound. Such a book cannot please everyone: Rabelais tells us that his public found its 'wine' – here, its more easily accessible comedy – little but good. They preferred it to be plentiful and good. He took the hint.

### ***The Fourth Book of Pantagruel***

After the *Third Book* Rabelais, despite his royal *privilège*, prudently slipped away to Metz, a free city, a Lutheran city. Life for him there was marked by a degree of poverty. He had made more enemies, kept powerful friends, and gained more. And in Metz he was already reading Lutheran books destined to enrich his art and thought.

The *Fourth Book* has a puzzling history. In 1548 a shorter *Fourth Book* appeared, clearly unfinished and misshapen. It has a well-written Prologue, which is not that of the 1552 *Fourth Book*. It ends up in the air, in the middle of a sentence. Most striking of all, it does not sport its royal *privilège*. To fill up his space the printer padded out the book with old woodcuts drawn from stock. Had he somehow got his hands on an incomplete manuscript of Rabelais' future book? Was it printed without the author's knowledge or consent? It might seem so. But it remains a puzzle.



The *Fourth Book* of 1552 is a very different matter. The Rabelais of the full *Fourth Book* has greatly profited from his reading, some of it gleaned in Italy and in German lands. In Italy, with the Seigneur de Langey, he had read the works of Celio Calcagnini, who was long judged the best mythographer of the Renaissance. Unfortunately he wrote in Latin, so his myths are now all but unknown. His *Works* were a mine for Rabelais (and many others). Under his direct influence Rabelais was inspired to invent and develop myths which stretch across the world and into the heavens. He now begins to talk of his books as ‘pantagrueic mythologies’. But even when plunged into works of erudition, Rabelais never overlooked more popular writings. For his *Fourth Book* he borrowed from a little work which had appropriated some of his characters, and tells of a sea-voyage, of Chidlings and of a giant Bringuenarilles. Thanks to Rabelais it has earned its modest place in literary history.<sup>9</sup>

Rabelais already showed in *Pantagruel* his admiration for Plutarch’s *Moral Works*. Some twenty years later they come fully into their own in the *Fourth Book*. Several of the most profound pages Rabelais ever penned were written with his Plutarch open before him. Especially important is *The Obsolescence of Oracles*; important too are *The Oracles at Delphi*, with *On Isis and Osiris* and *On the ‘Ei’ at Delphi*.

Another very different work also contributed much. In Metz Rabelais read a strongly satirical work by Martin Luther, *Of the Papacy of Rome, Constructed by the Devil*. It mocks an idolatrous respect for the Vatican and for papal power, buttressed as it is by the Decretals, edicts issued on the sole authority of popes. Some of the Decretals were already known to be forged. (They had misled Thomas Aquinas.) Luther also tells how zealous, generous boobies are sneeringly called ‘Good Christians’ by the unbelievers who, for him, dominate the papal Curia.

Rabelais transmutes Luther’s bleak satire into the pure gold of the moral laughter which dominates the episode of the *Papimanes*. Far away on their island, isolated in zealous and intolerant ignorance, they innocently, gullibly, cruelly – and maniacally – worship the very objects of Luther’s mockery. They worship the wrong god and venerate the wrong scriptures.

Cardinal Odet de Châtillon and others had hoped to persuade Henri II to break with Rome in 1551 and to set up a national Church of France, not unlike the Church of England. He met Rabelais and, assuring him of his own support and of that of his king, persuaded him to write under his protection. Safe at last, Rabelais could write as he dared. And in the *Fourth Book* – a book protected by a Royal *privilège* and proudly prefaced by an Epistle to the Cardinal Odet de Châtillon in person – he dared a great deal.

Another book to influence him was Plato’s *Cratylus*. Before he had studied the *Cratylus* Rabelais worked within the standard linguistic ideas of Aristotle: to speak is natural, but no language is natural. Except for onomatopoeias, words are sounds on to which meanings have been arbitrarily imposed. For Plato in the *Cratylus* words are more complex. Onomatopoeias, for Plato as for Aristotle, convey their sense in their sound, but the ‘true’ meaning of some words is to be sought in their etymologies. (Etymology involved seeking out the *etymon*, the word’s *true* meaning.) In the roots of at least some words lie half-veiled truths.

Platonic ‘ideas’ dwell as *paroles* (‘words’) in the heavenly Manor of Truth. At long intervals some of those words drip down like catarrh on to our snotty world. When they do so, they contain divine revelations. And they will providentially do so ‘world without end’ – until, that is, the ‘end of the age’. Some authors would have made heavy weather of such profundities: Rabelais turns them into part of a laughing venture of discovery. We discover areas of mystical truth. We learn how mankind must cooperate with grace. And all this in a comic book, with Dionysiac laughter never far away.

Love links Heaven and earth but our fallen world is driven by Signor Belly, by fear of hunger. We are conducted to the Manor of Truth, and then to the Manor of Virtue, where our guide is a famous myth from Hesiod which tells how the upward path is laborious, rough and stony, yet Virtue, once reached, dwells in smooth and pleasant uplands. The elevating powers of wine are praised. The ways of an inspired Pantagruel and of a self-loving, squittering Panurge are contrasted. Pantagruel becomes a Renaissance Socrates, divinely guided in his wisdom. In the purest comic tradition Panurge remains unchanged, cheekily fixed in his filth and folly. He now remains for ever where Gargantua the boy giant once was: delighting in the products of his anus. And the book, like its predecessors, ends up in the air.

All four books by Rabelais sport with signs. Signs and gestures may be real (natural) or conventional. From *Pantagruel* onwards Rabelais laughs at those who confuse self-evident, natural signs (such as pangs of hunger, messing one's trousers, as well as cocking a snook and suggesting coitus with one's fingers or pinching one's nose whilst pointing at someone) with signs which have conventional meanings. Conventional signs have to be learnt. They are understood only by those who know the conventions. The last book that Rabelais sent to the printers before he died ends with signs: Frère Jean des Entommeures is ready to make *entommeures* (mincemeat) of his foes: his very name is a sign of his bravery. The long-delayed laughter of Pantagruel is a sign of his wisdom and humanity. That Panurge has messed himself again is a sign of his servile fear, and the faeces which he delights in are signs of perhaps diabolical error.

### ***The Fifth Book***

Rabelais died little over a year after his *Fourth Book* of 1552. But his name sold supposititious books something he complained of during his lifetime. In 1549 some pages had been passed off as a *Fifth Book of Pantagruel*. (Rediscovered in 1900, it convinced *The Times* for a while.) New books continued to be published under his name after his death. One is the *Isle Sonante* (the *Ringling Isle*) of 1562. Most but not all of it is included, with some variants, in another, which purports to be the *Fifth and Last Book of Pantagruel* of 1564.

It is essentially the *Fifth and Last Book* of 1564, not the *Fifth Book* of 1549, which has for centuries been printed together with the other four in the works of Rabelais. (There is also an incomplete manuscript of it, not in the hand of Rabelais, which gives variant readings.) Some think this *Fifth Book* is based on papers left by Rabelais at his death. (No such papers have been found. Not one page. Not one line. But authors' manuscripts were not often treasured then as they are now.) Others think it has nothing to do with Rabelais, that none of it bears his hallmark, and much of it certainly does not. That is my judgement. At all events, the complete book cannot be by Rabelais as it stands. More than a hint of its arranger (and part author) is given at the end of the first edition. There we find a poem signed NATVRE QVITE.

NATVRE QVITE is an anagram of Jean Turquet. Jean de Mayerne, called Turquet, was a doctor from a solid Piedmontese family. (French was the language of many in the Piedmont, long the citadel of religious reformers.) One Turquet – of the same family – eventually came to England to escape religious persecution, and became a well-known London physician.

The *Fifth Book* is religiously aware, with 'reformed' tendencies. It displays a knowledge of medicine. It also moves into the domain of the transmutation of metals, and of curiously mystical themes more obscurantist than profound. But, by Rabelais or not, it has been printed with the authentic

works of Rabelais from the sixteenth century onwards.

Other great authors drag along a train of doubtful works. It may not matter much, but it can. An authentic play by Shakespeare is not likely to be interpreted in the light of a doubtful one. In the case of Rabelais, however, it matters a great deal. Ever since 1564 readers of Rabelais have been presented with copies of his works which include a book, published a decade after his death, which claims to round off his writings. It brings the heroes back to Touraine. It tells of the end of the quest for the 'Word' of the Dive Bouteille, of that 'Sainted Bottle' dwelling in a mystical Never-never Land. Some read back into the four Books the often cryptic meanings they find in the *Fifth*. For them, Rabelais' last word is essentially *Trinck* (Drink!), the 'Word' of the Dive Bouteille. And here *Trinck* risks turning the real, soul-uplifting wine of the wingéd Bacchus of the *Fourth Book* into something other: quest for something symbolized by wine – knowledge, say, or even enlightenment. The *Fifth Book* is included in this translation, but its various endings leave the reader with a very different savour from that of the end of the *Fourth Book*.

## RABELAIS, SCRIPTURE AND HUMANIST FUN

Rabelais was a learned scholar and readers expect to be impressed. In parallel, at a popular level, restaurants named *Gargantua* or the *Moutons de Panurge* lead readers of Rabelais to expect to find in him a delight in lashings of rich food and wine. They often do, though habitual gorging and swilling may be greeted in Rabelais with wry laughter, even at times with indignation. An occasional banquet Shrovetide revels and rustic stuffing of tripe in mid-winter are a delight and presented as such: idly spending the livelong year on gluttony and crapulence is another matter, as the *Fourth Book* makes crystal clear through its sometimes remarkably bitter comedy.

What does surprise many is the importance of Scripture in the four Books, Scripture exploited for both serious and comic ends. Yet Rabelais was an ordained priest. He lived much of his adult life amongst churchmen. Erasmus brought both the Bible and Greek thought alive for him. Clement of Alexandria had taught generations that what the law was to the Jews philosophy was to the Greeks: Old Testament religion and Greek thought were both inspired tutors. Rabelais accepted that, but his own Erasmian theology was in happy harmony with Dionysiac elements. Erasmus had no sympathy for them; nor did he appreciate 'monkish' jokes derived from Scripture twisted out of context. Rabelais did.

In *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* especially we find plenty of what is traditionally called 'monkish' humour. Monks, men living closely with other men, often cut off from women and concerned year in year out, with the daily round of liturgy, psalms and Scripture, turned to liturgy and Holy Writ, for comfort, certainly, but also for their jests, some of them remarkably coarse. 'Unto thee I lift up' is the incipit of two psalms: it is also a 'monkish' term for the rampant penis. 'Charity,' we are told, 'cover a multitude of sins' (I Peter 4:8). So does a monastic frock. Christ on the Cross called out, 'I thirst.' So does the tipsy cleric in *Gargantua*. For pages at a time *Pantagruel* is, in the spirit of Shrovetide, a parody of Scripture with plenty of Mardi Gras humour. Rabelais' wider comedy remained anchored in his grasp of the gulf which separates words from deeds, bums from minds, rhetorical nonsense or smooth-speaking hypocrisy from positive action.

Moral comedy needs its triggers to be clear, well-defined or intuitively grasped. Once that is so, literally anything can be turned into subjects of laughter: no topic is too awesome. To leave everything to prayer is lazy, and can be turned into a subject of laughter. To blubber instead of working hard is



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