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Edited by John O'Brien

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I

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Introduction

Prologue

Most illustrious topers, and you, most precious poxies – for to you, not to others, my writings are dedicated – Alcibiades, in Plato's dialogue entitled *The Symposium*, praising his master Socrates, inconvertibly the prince of philosophers, among other things says he is like the Sileni. (F₃/H₅)

Prologues fulfil a conventional role in early modern works. When they are addressed to a reader, as here, their aim is to explain and justify the work that immediately follows, highlighting its novel features and attempting to arouse the reader's interest and gain his or her sympathy. It is a rhetorical technique known as *captatio benevolentiae*, literally “the capturing of good will.” By those standards, the opening lines of the prologue of *Gargantua* far from fit this pattern, yet they present a set of features characteristic of Rabelais's work as a whole: a narrator who directly hails the reader; that reader addressed in scurrilous terms; a speech that then switches register and makes extensive reference to a classical text. From the threshold of the text – before even chapter 1 begins – the narrator introduces us to a world whose prime features are contradiction, tension, brought about, in this case, by the sudden change of cultural registers, the implicit characterization of the reader, the abolition of authorial distance, and the *rapprochement* between the narrator and his public. The reader is thrown headlong into a literary universe that can easily give rise to bafflement and confusion. It is worth emphasizing at the outset that such tensions are not incidental aspects of Rabelais's writing, but standard components. All conventional niceties governing the relationship between the author and the reader are set aside; and the effect is defamiliarization.

We need to draw a distinction between defamiliarization and alienation as forms of distance separating us from a writer five centuries old. Historical distance inevitably exists between our own time and Rabelais's. And various

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features of his fictional universe, familiar to him and his audience, feel alienating to us: obvious instances are the often bawdy humor, the references to bodily functions, and the extensive use of allusions to contemporary and classical literature of an unusually wide range assuming that the reader is versed in medicine, theology, philosophy, the natural sciences, and politics, as well as history, geography, and all literary genres. The purpose of this *Cambridge Companion* is to help present-day readers overcome that sense of alienation and possibly discomfort or even frustration by providing the practical tools they need to acquaint themselves with an unfamiliar intellectual landscape. However, even when these practical tools are mastered, so that the text no longer seems so alien, the effect of defamiliarization will still be present. Defamiliarization refers to the way a text continues to defeat our expectations, surprises us, outwits us. It refers to the way that a text rewrites the literary or historical elements it inherits or appropriates and makes connections between these elements where no such connections had previously existed. It refers to the way a text takes old, familiar things and reinvigorates them. Defamiliarization takes and breaks our preconceptions, refashions as well as outplays our expectations, and in the process (and *by* this process) sets us down somewhere strange. Unsettling, disconcerting, it opens up new ways of seeing and thinking. It is synonymous with the literary effect. And it is to elucidating that literary effect that this volume is dedicated.

Reading

It is no coincidence that the words “reading Rabelais” occur in the titles of two chapters in this volume and recur directly or indirectly as a theme and a problem in the remainder of the contributions. Reading is to be understood in the widest sense – from the physical act of working through Rabelais page by page attempting to grapple with his inventive language, through questions of interpretation, both specific and general. Every act of reading implies, or ought to imply, the corresponding task of interpretation; deciphering words and meanings is the reader’s perennial duty.

Accordingly, when Floyd Gray opens this collection with a description of Rabelais’s whole output, he is careful to set it firmly in a framework of reading as such. Gray emphasizes the literary and linguistic dimensions of the works he discusses, insisting on the inextricability of words and things, real-life events and their linguistic counterpart. The temptation to split words from things may be strong, yet it is in their intimate and intricate association that their value and purpose lie, Gray argues. And it is their problematic relationship that continues to delight and puzzle, so much so

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that to divorce words from things is to misunderstand the literariness of Rabelais's enterprise. "His writing is carefully, artfully structured to avoid transparency and encourage multiple and often conflicting interpretations," Gray states, for questions of fact and fiction "form part of a complex narrative design that conflates them with deliberate and joyous purpose." He demonstrates that even the prologues – as we have seen – cannot be relied upon to provide solid information about the author's intentions, as they themselves are part of the fictional universe they supposedly introduce and do not constitute evidence independent of it. Structure and plot are similarly unhelpful notions if we search only for determinate meanings; digressions abound, impeding the directional flow that is implicit in the Latin etymology of the word "prose," *prorsa oratio*, forward-directed discourse, the onward thrust of prose writing. Erudition piles up, as a verbal equivalent to the giant theme around which Rabelais focuses his work. Gray is clear that the admixture of the comic and the serious presents the most pressing problem for the modern reader. Two options are equally impossible – to search *only* for the "substantific marrow" (*F4/H7*), or to believe *only* in a world of words, the play of language. It is precisely in the complementarity and tension between these two perspectives that the most fruitful position lies. The double perspective of the comic and the serious is written into the very fabric of Rabelais's literary works: the "prophetic riddle" that closes *Gargantua* is given two contrasting interpretations by the giant and Frère Jean, the first serious and theological, the second comic and parodic. Both characters see the riddle as allegorical, but offer radically different solutions to its meaning. This instance is emblematic of those many episodes in which interpretation and its problems are a fundamental aspect of Rabelais's writing.

Both the prologue to *Gargantua* and the "prophetic riddle" that closes the same book come under further close scrutiny from François Cornilliat. What he draws from his analysis reaffirms what might be termed the principle of simultaneity rather than succession: drinking involves both the comic and the serious; one has to find interpretive solutions to problems while remaining merry. Such episodes represent a steganographic procedure, a term Cornilliat borrows from Mireille Huchon to indicate the degrees of understanding that different readers may derive from any particular passage or incident. Some will take pleasure in the surface message; others prefer its hidden meanings. In which case, the constituent members of Pantagruel's company of friends seem to embody the dialectic incarnated by Socrates in the *Gargantua* prologue – the combination of seriousness and comedy, high and low matter, exterior and interior. Yet Cornilliat is not content with that neat symmetry.

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In the final section of his chapter, he makes acute points about the responsibility for interpretation. In particular, he demonstrates that the “revelation” afforded by Bacbuc at the close of *Book 5* does not relieve the inquirers of the duty of interpreting for themselves: “revelation will not suspend, but *activate* a duty to understand . . . Whatever interpretation is, it is not a last ‘word,’ a final result, but an undertaking in search of its own understanding” (author’s emphasis). And Cornilliat demonstrates that such understanding becomes progressively harder, not easier, with the antics of Panurge. The Pantagrueline community tolerates his behavior, which nonetheless tends to sully the moral aspect of Pantagruelism, with the result that Rabelais’s vision becomes more difficult to circumscribe precisely because it takes serious account of the human dimension.

No reader of Rabelais can fail to acknowledge the vast numbers of quotations, allusions, and references that abound on every page of his writings. Such boundless learning may frankly be daunting to prospective readers. A good annotated edition of the text is a prerequisite; but the reader also needs reliable information about the nature and workings of Rabelais’s system of references. Neil Kenny provides exactly that. He opens his contribution by a lucid explanation of the mechanics of Renaissance imitation, showing that imitation implicated both writing and reading in a dynamic process of recreation and had a much greater range of reference and practice than the word “imitation” might suggest today. For these reasons, he prefers to describe this process by “intertextuality,” a term that has itself become common currency in criticism since being coined by Julia Kristeva 40 years ago. Kenny usefully reminds us of its advantages, notably that it keeps open the relationship between texts rather than prejudging them by labels such as “source” or “influence.” Intertextuality, furthermore, suggests that texts are received by readers against a backdrop of other texts: the reader understands and recognizes a text or set of texts by placing them within the mental store cupboard that is his or her own experience of literature, philosophy, history, and so forth. As its name implies, intertextuality is a dialogue between manifold fragments, a transaction *between* texts, not a static relationship between a cause and an effect.

Rabelaisian intertextuality falls into two categories, for Kenny: “Ancient” and “Modern.” He surveys the main subtexts, highlighting the complex system of rethinking and rewriting that characterizes our author’s sophisticated handling of all kinds of texts, popular as well as elite. After their nature comes their role, and here Kenny notes two main trends in Rabelais criticism. The first is to view subtexts as keys to an overall interpretation, while the second concentrates on tensions between subtexts. Kenny selects the death of Pan episode in *Book 4* to illustrate the possible intertextual

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approaches to one specific scene. One reading, indebted to Michael Screech, would regard this incident as an allegory of Christ's death and resurrection. Another, inspired by André Tournon, might emphasize that the allusions in this sequence to the classical Greek writer Plutarch throw up more questions than they comfortably answer. In which case, Rabelais could well be drawing attention, at one remove, to issues such as how texts signify, whether their juxtaposition or association is sufficient to ensure their harmonization, and who in the text has the authority to decide what interpretation of the evidence should prevail. This reflexive dimension of Rabelais – investigating or just setting out the problems of its own interpretation – is an acknowledged aspect of this comic writer's work that has been widely analysed over recent decades, and Kenny is entirely right in drawing attention to its prominence and relevance.

Wes Williams offers a cultural-historical perspective on many of the issues that have engaged our attention up to this point. His topic is Rabelais's bestiary, encompassing the exotic and the monstrous, natural history's equivalent of the comedy of giant size that is a thematic constant in Rabelais's work. At issue in the deployment of animals (dogs, camels, whales . . .) is their signifying function: is the monstrous part of nature, beyond nature, or against nature? This debate has particularly concentrated on the whale (Physeter) episode in *Book 4*, the monster that de-monstrates . . . what, exactly? As the Renaissance understood monster theory, the whale would have been ripe with narrative, ready to unfold its story and significance to the discerning interpreter. The problem is its position in the larger tale of these early modern travelers, Pantagruel and his companions: it is hard to see what the whale betokens, other than the fact that it is a whale, a "work of nature" but not self-evidently a portent, despite Panurge's attempt to link it to biblical antecedents (Leviathan) and classical (Perseus and Andromeda). (Kenny's examination of the problematic clash of subtexts, and the significance which can be derived from them, is fully instanced here.) And even though Pantagruel kills the monster, Williams argues that the giant resists assimilation to the stock myths of epic heroism that would have acted as the standard interpretive yardsticks for such encounters with the monstrous.

It is only when the whale is dead that it becomes subject to the discourses of medicine and money, or metamorphoses into another novelty, an item brought home from abroad to be exhibited in a trophy room as part of a secure, comfortably domesticated species of knowledge (ever-expanding, of course, as trophy collections must be, to give the sense, or the illusion, that knowledge is also on the increase). What Rabelais's text does, for Williams, is to keep in permanent tension the numerous othernesses that Pantagruel

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and his friends encounter, and the knowledge that is derived from them by a Western culture of dissection and display: the monster de-monstrates a culture's way of dealing with it by fixing it in a show case, exhibiting it in a museum, relegating it to an epistemic system. Our knowledge stands in place of the Other; our representations supplant the monstrous real. And it is precisely because Rabelais re-enacts this process with increasing regularity in *Book 4* that we are constantly faced by the question of how our interpretive communities tackle the monster in our midst, the otherness we cannot control.

Contexts

Williams's chapter forms the conceptual lynch-pin between contributions that broadly deal with reading and interpretation as puzzles in their own right, and those which focus on historical material, generally identifiable as offshoots of humanism. Rabelais's social and literary background can be gathered from the Chronology in this volume and is further reflected prismatically in those chapters that deal with his intellectual, political, and religious context. Three such chapters fall into this category and they share some common emphases. The founding in 1530 of the Royal College (later to become the Collège de France) and the impetus it gave to humanism is one such emphasis; entwined with it are Rabelais's mockery of the Sorbonne, at that time the Paris Faculty of Theology, his attacks on superstitious religious practices, and his sympathy for the moderate movement of Reform associated with the names of Guillaume Briçonnet and the king's sister, Marguerite de Navarre. Of paramount importance also is the influence of Erasmus (1466/9–1536), the great Dutch humanist who was the author of – among other things – *Praise of Folly* and the *Adages*, and whose presence can be detected in everything from allusions to his works to a shaping part in the theological outlook of Rabelais's works.

The first of the three contextualizing chapters, by Marie-Luce Demonet, tackles Rabelais's humanism, "humanism" being defined here as "humane letters" originally taught by a *umanista*, a tutor of the Greek and Latin Classics. Demonet is careful to set Rabelais firmly within his historical and chronological setting, drawing out his political and religious commitments as part of his intellectual dynamic. Struggles with the Sorbonne, the spread of Reformist teachings in Paris and the central French provinces, and the endeavor to stabilize Gallican principles comprise the backdrop to Rabelais's intellectual evolution, and Demonet stresses the continuation of medieval forms of thinking and writing alongside humanist discoveries:

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Aristotelianism is coupled with a renewed interest in Cicero and Pliny; Epicureanism, Skepticism, and Cynicism are added to Platonism and Stoicism; above all, the encyclopedism of Gargantua's letter to Pantagruel and the anti-Abbey of Thélème, both of which represent large-scale programs trying in varying degrees and with variable success to give voice to the strain of ambitious humanism endorsed by Rabelais. By the time of *Book 3* and particularly of *Book 4*, Rabelaisian humanism becomes expressly more combative, with explicit attacks on both Calvin and, contrariwise, the temporal power of Rome. The mixed nature of Rabelais's writing receives emphasis in Demonet's account, with the presence of antiquity balanced against the attraction of enduring forms. Thus Marot rubs shoulders with Erasmus, and medieval adventure stories with narratives imitated from Lucian and Menippean satire; farce and burlesque supply as much material as *The Dream of Poliphile*, while scatological neologisms as well as biblical Hebrew enrich Rabelais's polyglossia.

Two areas call for special comment. The first relates to the place of women. Demonet shows that the Rabelaisian attitude toward women stems from the many-sided traditions he inherited. Medieval misogyny was enshrined in high-culture works such as the *Romance of the Rose* as well as in more popular satires and farces. The Christian tradition, with its idealization of the Virgin and contrasting distrust of the woman as temptress, also had a crucial role to play, and to this can be added legal restrictions on women deriving from Roman Law. The limited role played by women in Rabelais's work has received extensive critical attention and Demonet reviews the evidence for his supposed antifeminism by contextualizing contemporary debates associated with the names of Cornelius Agrippa, Jean Bouchet, André Tiraqueau, Thomas Sebillet, and de Billon. The last two used *Book 3* as the focus for their own contrasting reactions and it is indeed in Panurge's quest that most discussion of women is to be found, particularly in the influential speech of Rondibilis. On the other hand, as Demonet shows, women and female themes are positively colored at key moments in Rabelais: in Thélème, in the use of allegorical characters such as the Chitterlings that puts into question gender polarities, and in the women Rabelais counts among his readers and to whom he dedicates his works. Demonet makes the important point that the views of the narrator or his characters are not simply to be equated with those of Rabelais himself: the biographical fallacy still haunts Rabelais studies and it is especially important to keep such distinctions in mind in such a sensitive area as gender.

The second tradition has a special place for Demonet: classical Cynicism. Diogenes the Cynic, a pupil of Socrates, assumes prominence in *Books*

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3 and 4, and a link is made in the prologue to *Book 4* between Diogenian Cynicism and Pantagruelism, both expressly and indirectly, through the anecdote of Diogenes rolling his barrel during the siege of Corinth. Demonet's point is that Rabelaisian fiction and the Pantagruelism it sustains are themselves back-to-front ventures, undertaken "in a way paradoxical to all philosophers" (*F404/H503*) and yet, like Diogenes himself, creative of their own brand of philosophical ideal and wayward humor. Rabelais's humanism provides him with exact analogies for his own topsy-turvy universe.

In the prologue to *Gargantua*, Rabelais claims that his work contains "some very lofty sacraments and horrific mysteries, concerning [our religion as well as] our political state and our domestic life" (*F4/H7*; translation corrected). Edwin Duval tackles the first of these topics, religion. He regards Rabelais as an Erasmian Christian humanist, someone who took a moderate line between rejection of Catholic beliefs and practices not directly authorized by Scripture and refusal to side with the new orthodoxies of the Reformers. Duval is candid that while this general position is easy to delineate, it is much harder to draw out of Rabelais's work a consistent theological stance, owing to the changing outlook of the writer and his reaction to circumstances, as well as (not least) his comic perspective. The general lineaments are nonetheless clear. In *Pantagruel*, for instance, it is what is left unsaid that is crucial in religious terms. Thus Gargantua and his son both put their faith in God alone, implicitly dispensing with the paraphernalia of priests and the intercessionary power of the Church; communication with God is direct and unmediated. This point comes across clearly even though religion is not the main concern of the book, and its outlook is shared by the *Almanachs* for 1533 and 1535 which "defin[e] Rabelais's religion as a profoundly skeptical form of Christianity indifferent to things that transcend human experience and hostile to metaphysical speculation of all kinds."

Gargantua extends and deepens Rabelais's hostility to two specific groups and practices: the Sorbonne (the Parisian Faculty of Theology) and monasticism. Rabelais's depiction of "Sorbonicoles" (Sorbonne theologians) culminates in the masterly portrait of Janotus de Bragmardo, in which the theologian's own inept command of language obstructs the very message he is struggling to put across; the building blocks of communication are all in place, but no clear and coherent communication takes place. In this scintillating vignette, Janotus is undermined by the very words that create him on the page, and the deft portrayal – undercutting what it presents – makes Rabelais's satire of the Sorbonne even sharper. Only the portrait of Grosbeak in *Book 4* will achieve the same acuity and memorability.

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Monasticism benefits from the opposite kind of portrayal: Frère Jean “condemn[s] his institution through his divergence from it.” In truth, as Duval goes on to point out, the monk is an ambivalent figure and far removed from the one-dimensional characters who are elsewhere the object of Rabelais’s satire. Duval recognizes that simultaneity of presentation, once again, rather than uniformity of characterization, is at stake; the monk, like his friends the giants, embodies the twofold drive towards seriousness and laughter. It comes as no surprise that this anti-monk is chosen to run an anti-monastery, Thélème, which is underpinned, Duval stresses, by Pauline and Erasmian principles. The monastery’s principle of Christian freedom stands in sharp contrast to Panurge in *Book 3*, whose very dress – a Franciscan habit and an earring – points to his enslavement to the letter of the law and his consequent inability to liberate his will by an act of Christian freedom.

The last of Rabelais’s indubitably authentic books links religion with politics again. Rabelais here dramatizes, in comically satirical form, the antagonisms that divided the Europe of his time into warring confessional creeds: Fastilent, the Chitterlings, and the Council of Chesil all constitute recognizable religious allusions – to Catholics, Protestants, and the Council of Trent, respectively. The last of these dominates the European religious scene from the 1540s through the 1560s: this council of the Roman Catholic Church, so called from the Italian town of Trente where it met, promotes the Counter-Reformation, a response to the Protestant Reformation. These changed religious circumstances are written into the fabric of Rabelais’s work, and in *Book 4*, Duval argues, he attacks two specific targets: the temporal power of the Popes, and the Catholic Mass, contrasting the elaborate ritual of the Eucharist with the direct prayers Pantagruel utters during the storm at sea episode.

Duval emphasizes, in conclusion, that while many critics have noted Rabelais’s Erasmian leanings, few have pointed out that religion in his works is linked to political, social, and ethical considerations, rather than explored for its own sake. This is an outlook very much concerned with the human community in the here and now, and the comic vitality to which religious discussion is connected in Rabelais is itself a crucial element in binding that community together.

Ullrich Langer investigates one important aspect of the political world of the first two books in his contribution on the king’s political education. In order to distinguish between legitimate kingship and tyranny and to set out the virtues the king was expected to possess, Langer selects as his emblematic reference-point Gargantua’s letter to Pantagruel, which is read in line with the Renaissance notion that the son ought to outshine his father. Charity is also a particular injunction for princes (as when Pantagruel befriends

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Panurge), and the quirky demands of Pantagruel's entourage demonstrate that they are to be regarded as a group of friends rather than a crowd of flattering courtiers. Similar princely characteristics are displayed during Pantagruel's battle with Werewolf: adopting prudent measures, invoking the help of God, listening to the advice of counsellors, rewarding those who help, and punishing opponents. Even when Pantagruel comically shelters his men from a rainstorm under his tongue, we can see this gesture as an expression of the prince's prudence, Langer argues.

Gargantua likewise supplies plentiful evidence of political education. Once again, war is the test case, as Grandgousier and Gargantua (the good humanist princes) are contrasted with the tyrant, Picrochole. Although the cause of the dispute is trivial (an argument over bread), it betokens larger issues of justice and right conduct for which Langer fills in the background. The precepts of classical moral philosophy are supported by Christian theology, and both stand in contradistinction to the choleric Picrochole, whose very name, meaning "bitter bile," signals his immoderate nature devoid of prudence. Emblematic here is chapter 33 where Rabelais points up the comic disparity between the mighty empire Picrochole builds in his imagination (based on the empire of Alexander the Great), and the tyrant's own petty status as the lord of a local manor near Rabelais's actual place of birth, La Devinière. Langer concedes that the comic outlook of Rabelais's work distorts or relativizes the moral dimension. Thus if Frère Jean is the recipient of royal liberality in the shape of the Abbey of Thélème, he shows himself to be a less than model Christian in the joy he takes in slaying Picrochole's soldiers in the vineyard of the Abbey of Seuillé. At every stage in Rabelais's writing, high moral seriousness is likely to be waylaid by comic anarchy, leaving the reader with the interpretive dilemma of how to account for such disjunctions of character, theme, and tone.

Play and purpose

The term "Rabelaisian," in its standard dictionary sense, is one familiar to all: "joyously coarse or gross" (*Webster's*), "extravagance and coarseness of humour and satire" (*OED*). Schematic as such definitions inevitably are, they do highlight a valuable point: Rabelais is about laughter. Barbara C. Bowen and Richard Cooper take up that perspective, from complementary angles. The former underlines, at the very outset, how limited the common or garden view of Rabelais is, and how much it omits: the writer's thinking about religion, monarchy, government, and education, to name only the most obvious areas. Quoting a range of authorities from Horace to Erasmus and More, she also makes the crucial point that the modern dichotomy