

## INTRODUCTION

Contemporary Rabelais scholarship and criticism has tended of late to become polarized between two methodologies that can be characterized most simply as: (1) a method of interpretation that seeks unity and transparency of meaning, coherence and consistency, founded on historical investigation; (2) a formalism attentive especially to aesthetic structures and to the Rabelaisian text's resistances to univocity and closure.<sup>1</sup> The present study takes these two fundamentally opposed approaches as necessarily complementary and reciprocally corrective, and of particular pertinence to French sixteenth-century texts, frequently interpreted as didactic, moralizing, or propagandistic, thus depriving them of the inherent tensions that are rightfully theirs. Insofar as the sixteenth century was a time of profound conflict – religious, political, epistemological, social – the texts of the period should be allowed to display fully their own conflictual nature.

Mikhail Bakhtin's epoch-making book on Rabelais and popular culture, which appeared in the West at a time when structuralism was flourishing, filled, in part, the need for theoretical models of ironic structure that were not dependent upon the subjective assessment of authorial intention.<sup>2</sup> In recent years, however, Bakhtin's study, which argued for the subversion of 'official' culture by carnivalesque laughter, has been criticized even by those sympathetic to this approach. M. Baraz, in his *Rabelais et la joie de la liberté*, points out the onesidedness of Bakhtin's analyses.<sup>3</sup> As Carlo Ginzburg has written, Bakhtin's evidence for the power of popular culture 'comes to us almost exclusively through the words of Rabelais'.<sup>4</sup> Bakhtin's hypostatizing of popular culture, his paeans of the people as incarnating positive, life-affirming energies smack more of an optimistic Marxist ideology than of persuasive argument. In my view it is reductive to read Rabelais as a dialectic between official and popular culture, in which the former is parodied and subverted by the latter. That view begs many questions, and constitutes a paradoxically static

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reading of the work.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, much that is subversive in Rabelais is not popular, but erudite, evangelical and humanist. Still, despite the shortcomings and distortions of Bakhtin's book, it pointed the way towards a perception of the carnivalesque as a structural principle in Rabelais's work to the point of becoming a paradigm for studies in other authors and periods.

In Bakhtin's later writings, his theory of the dialogic functioning of language in the novel provides the post-structuralist critic with a model of polysemous reading of plurivalent texts that seem to be undermining or otherwise contesting their own ideological or rhetorical authority. Eluding stable meanings, composed of plural, competing voices, the dialogic text asserts its own internal tensions and resists recuperation by a monologic interpretative strategy.<sup>6</sup>

In this study, I shall approach the Rabelaisian corpus and the problems of Rabelaisian irony in a perspective that, I hope, avoids the danger of reducing the text either to a single ideological reading, or to a reading that posits an author having at all times recoverable intentions and meanings to convey. For me, the text is an utterance implying Otherness, the otherness of readers, of other texts, the otherness of the various social, professional, religious, political, economic and intellectual interests at play in Rabelais's time and which are inscribed in the text as so many ideological markers.

Prior to the appearance in the West of Bakhtin's book, Lucien Febvre's *Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle: La religion de Rabelais* was perhaps the single most influential modern study of Rabelais, for it polemically and irrevocably put to rest the view of Abel Lefranc that Rabelais was a proto-atheist, and set Rabelais scholars to serious investigation of the Erasmian and evangelical roots of Rabelais's religious thought.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding, Febvre's thesis that atheism was literally *unthinkable* in the sixteenth century is an assertion that remains unproven. Indeed, Carlo Ginzburg's study of a sixteenth-century Italian miller, Menocchio, provides evidence to the contrary.<sup>8</sup> Ginzburg argues for the notion that high and low cultures were not mutually exclusive and that the direction in which culture moved was not always from that of the dominant milieu to the popular ones. Analogous to that encounter Ginzburg describes 'between the printed page and oral culture that formed an explosive mixture in Menocchio's head',<sup>9</sup> the Rabelaisian text constitutes a space where texts confront one another, where speech, language and writing collide, where the multiple discourses of sixteenth-century society – classical, Christian, biblical, legal, medical, humanist, popular – inscribe the traces of an interdiscursive space of social and ideological conflict.

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The notion of interdiscourse – the ensemble of socially stratified and functionally divided discourses in a social formation – furnishes a useful framework for a renewed discussion of irony to the extent that it supplements the traditional concept of irony as a willed, intentional rhetorical strategy.<sup>10</sup> The relations between interdiscourse and the literary or artistic text entail complex systems of transformation and not mere reflection, imitation or homology.<sup>11</sup> The refractions of ideology that occur in the semiotic structure of texts are what I call the ‘ironic interdiscursiveness’ of the Rabelaisian text.

The attempt to bridge the conceptual and methodological gap between the literary text as an autonomous semiological object and the social and ideological context within which it was produced, is a critical enterprise that may run the risk of committing the act of closure it most seeks to avoid. Thus, a recent analysis of the three ironic genres (irony, satire, and parody) declares with deceptive clarity that satire is *extratextual*; parody *intertextual*; and irony *intra-textual*.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, both satire and parody would be referential whereas irony would be self-referential. These distinctions, while useful for their evident clarity, cannot be more than heuristic, for obviously, as generic categories they are by no means ‘pure’, or mutually exclusive; a single text can deploy all three at once. A model illustration of this polyvalence in Rabelais is the Bridoye episode in the *Tiers Livre* which is simultaneously satiric, parodic and ironic.<sup>13</sup>

Hutcheon’s schema raises further questions. The relationship between a text and extratextual reality is not necessarily exclusively satirical, exclusively mimetic or representational. In fact, the external world of ideological, social, and intertextual referents structures the text in complex ways. While satire, in Hutcheon’s terms, has as its objective the criticism and ultimate reform of social practice, the term satire implies the author’s deliberate self-conscious zeal to criticize and to reform. The fictional text, however, in its autonomous structures, transcends any such direct intervention of an author–reformer. The narrative agency is itself a fictional structure and, as such, cannot be equated with any single individual consciousness. Ironic interdiscursiveness entertains relationships between the text and the world of observable social reality, between itself and other texts, and with its very own textual infrastructures. Conceived as ironic interdiscursiveness, irony, then, is not a function of authorial intention, but of a continual interplay between content and form, ideology and the subversions of the signified effected at the level of the signifier.

The present study constitutes an interrogation on the status of

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ideology in the ironic Rabelaisian text. Because the term 'ideology' is slippery, it is useful to invoke Raymond Geuss's recent classification of three general categories of meanings. Geuss distinguishes three uses of the term: (1) a 'descriptive' sense, which broadly includes the beliefs, concepts, attitudes of a group; (2) a 'pejorative' sense, since it constitutes a 'false consciousness', delusion or doctrine used to confer legitimacy on the existing social order; (3) a 'positive' sense, which, unlike the other two, is neither 'found' nor isolated for criticism, but is to be created or invented, a *vérité à faire*.<sup>14</sup>

Now in a study of late fifteenth-century *rhétoriqueur* poetics, taking 'ideology' in Geuss's second, 'pejorative' sense, Paul Zumthor suggests that the ideological, propagandistic function of such Burgundian court writing as Jean Molinet's *Ressource du petit peuple* (1481) is undermined from within by the nature of literary discourse itself:

L'idéologie en effet ne se confond pas avec le social; elle en est le produit ultime, au sein des groupes qui le vivent: ressortissant, quant à sa constitution première, à l'ordre du désir, elle se voit modelée, à partir de situations concrètes, par le politique, qui en réduit, jusqu'à l'effacer presque dans le discours commun, la marque individuelle. Cette pratique signifiante tend à s'opposer ainsi radicalement à l'Institution dans le moment même où celle-ci fait preuve de la force la plus opprimante: elle éclate, selon les rites propres de son langage, en pulsions, en instants de jouissance qui s'infiltrant dans ce dire, y introduisent une étrangeté 'inquiétante'.<sup>15</sup>

In the Rabelaisian text, the giants Gargantua and Pantagruel, for example, are generally taken to represent the norms and values that constitute the 'ideology' (in Geuss's first and second senses) of the Rabelaisian corpus – an ideology at once royalist and evangelical, in opposition to the Sorbonne, Parlement and Catholic orthodoxy. I propose to explore fissures in the text where ideology and irony produce counter-discourses that problematize the text's ideological stance. By 'counter-discourse' I mean an alternative contestation of what appears to be a hegemonic discourse both in the novel and in the world outside the text.<sup>16</sup> The intersection of discourse and counter-discourse is productive of a 'positive' ideology (in Geuss's third sense) that is, properly speaking, that of the Rabelaisian text.

While traditional methods of research, e.g., the locating of textual 'sources' and the inferences which such spotting of sources allows one to make concerning the 'meaning' or 'sense' of the text, are indispensable, it will not do simply to spot these sources, and then to infer the significance of the text on the grounds of ideological content alone. One crucial difference between such positivist or neopositivist

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scholarship, and the approach that is being implemented here rests on a distinction between content, on the one hand, and the discursive and enunciative interrelationships that contaminate or complicate the functioning of content in textual structures.

This study, then, has as operating principles the following:

- 1 Every element in the text, whether it may be related to content or form, participates in the production of meaning, and is part of a single semiotic system ('comic' or 'serious' texts contaminate one another).
- 2 The literary work is actualized by the interaction of the text and a reader. The text cannot be divorced from the enunciative act by which the former is not monologic but dialogic.
- 3 Irony is that tension a reader perceives arising from the intersection in the text of conflictive discourses. These conflicts may be between ideological content and formal elements, between the ideological discourse of a source text and its functioning in the new context in which it is placed, between implicit extratextual norms of the social and intellectual reality outside the text and the rewriting the text proposes.

Since I have found the plurality of the Rabelaisian text resistant to a single totalizing critical approach, I have drawn upon a number of methodologies – historical, structural, sociocritical, deconstructive, psychoanalytic, dialogical – each of which has its contribution to make. In the chapters that follow, the particular critical emphasis is a function of its pertinence to the problems posed by the text. My discussions of the four canonical Rabelaisian texts make no claim for being exhaustive studies of each book.<sup>17</sup> I have been selective insofar as my approach has led me to investigate chapters and episodes I have found particularly problematic and open to interdiscursive analysis. My objective has been to reveal some of the 'loopholes' in the Rabelaisian text that allow it to carry on an unending dialogue with readers.

For the convenience of readers who are not Rabelais specialists, translations of extended or particularly difficult quotations of Rabelais have been provided and follow immediately the quoted passages. Except in those cases where no modern translation exists (the 1548 Prologue of the *Quart Livre* and Rabelais's correspondence), I have used the translation by J.M. Cohen published by Penguin Books, which agreed to grant me permission to use the Cohen translation at a reduced fee. My own initials are appended to my translations and, exceptionally, when modifications have been made in Cohen's version.

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*Romantic Review*, and *Yale French Studies* for allowing me to include revised versions of material originally published in their journals. I should like to take this opportunity to acknowledge two more personal debts: to my friend and colleague Daniel S. Russell for all our good conversations through the years, and for his constant support and encouragement; to my wife, Sandra Schwartz, my severest critic and closest reader.

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## 1

*PANTAGRUEL***‘Alcofrybas Nasier’**

Rabelais’s text is engendered by an ambiguous fictive persona – an anagram of the author’s name – that deliberately hides and reveals his identity, that defines the author as both self and other.<sup>1</sup> This narrative voice is and is not that of the author, is and is not that of a fictional persona, is and is not a function or agency wholly inside the text. The peculiar doubleness of this voice articulates the Rabelaisian text as a challenge to the reader’s expectations formed by venerable traditions of reading and interpretation. The enunciative strategies of Alcofrybas throw into question the status of textual and ideological agencies that impose their dominance on the individual subject. On the contrary, Alcofrybas forces the reader to assume greater responsibility for his own reading. The duality of the narrator/author implicates the reader in a parallel duplicity. The reader is both a fiction (the ‘fictive reader’ inscribed in the text) and an activity outside the text (the empirical reader whose complicity and resistance constitute the act of reading). He is constantly being made aware of his role as the narrator’s active partner in a dialogic enterprise that asserts the right to hermeneutic otherness in opposition to the hegemonic discourse of *auctores* and the ‘ideological state apparatus’ (Sorbonne doctors, lawyers and judges, Parlement, Church, schools).<sup>2</sup> The prologue to *Pantagruel* (1532) inaugurates the function of the Rabelaisian narrator to install this otherness in the experience of reading.

**The prologue to *Pantagruel***

According to Bakhtin, the *Pantagruel* prologue is a devastating parody of the Church, ecclesiastical methods of persuasion, the Church’s exclusive claim to truth, its redemptive mission, its epistemology, and its power built on intolerance and fear.<sup>3</sup> Bakhtin’s Marxist populism led him to make large claims for the opposition to Church doctrine and methods of popular culture in the form of ‘the

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language of the lower body'. The text, however, effects a continual overturning of bipolar opposites. It refuses this hypostatization and such a one-dimensional uni-directional dialectic. It is to an extremely sophisticated reader that this text is addressed: in fact, it is the superstition of popular religion that is being held up to ridicule (e.g., the naive belief in St Margaret to soothe the pain of women in childbirth). Discourses from different levels interpenetrate and subvert one another, crossing and destroying hierarchies in both directions.

The prologue alludes to extratextual realities and to discursive formations associated with the evangelical pre-Reform movement in France in the first third of the sixteenth century. The Bible, ultimate textual authority, legal authorities, the *Grandes chroniques*, other books, and Alcofrybas's book itself are serially invoked, constituting an overarching thematic of textuality presiding in the prologue to *Pantagruel* within which there are bi-polar oppositions: belief/disbelief; truth/falsehood; the oral word/the written word; the *Chroniques/Pantagruel*; the *Chroniques*/the Bible. These polarities constitute a structural matrix in which the narrative instance borrows from the contemporary reader's social, cultural and political setting certain ideological markers which are inscribed in the text, and which orient its reading. Through intratextual irony and intertextual parody, the narrative instance takes upon itself these ideological structures, only to deconstruct and subvert them.

In recent years, much critical discussion of the *Pantagruel* prologue has centred on Alcofrybas Nasier's extravagant praise of the *Grandes et inestimables chroniques*, the anonymous chapbook published at the 1532 Lyons fair:<sup>4</sup>

Très illustres et très chevalereux champions, gentilz hommes et aultres, qui voluntiers vous adonnez à toutes gentillesses et honnestetez, vous avez n'a guères veu, leu et sceu les *Grandes et inestimables Chroniques de l'énorme géant Gargantua*.<sup>5</sup>

Most illustrious and most valorous champions, noblemen, and others, who gladly devote yourselves to all gentle and honest pursuits, you have recently seen, read, and come to know *The Great and Inestimable Chronicles of the enormous Giant Gargantua*.  
(Cohen, p. 167)

Indeed, the prologue centres about the *Grandes chroniques* and not Rabelais's own book.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the facts of the mystery shrouding the circumstances of publication of the *Grandes chroniques*, its intertextual functioning in Rabelais's first prologue is incontrovertible.<sup>7</sup>



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The entire first half of the prologue – devoted to a hyperbolic encomium of the *Grandes chroniques* – borrows the discursive formations appropriate to the domain of religion, faith, the Bible. The dialogic principle is at work not only with respect to the relationship between narrator and reader, but also with respect to the internal structures of the text. Thus, the extravagant praise of the narratee (*tres illustres, tres chevalereux champions, bien dignes de grande louange, memoire sempiternelle*) is subverted by markers of disapproval (*alors que estiez hors de propos; comme vraves fideles les avez crues tout ainsi que texte de Bible ou du saint Evangile*). In the succeeding paragraphs, the theme of the usefulness of the *Chroniques* to cure toothache and the pox is mockingly compared to the relief of women in labour when they have the life of St Margaret read to them, and thus consists in a deprecation of the whole theme of the text's beneficent usefulness, whereas the comparison of the *Grandes chroniques* with *Pantagruel* would seem to be in earnest. This, in turn, is overturned by the concluding paragraph, where curses invoking all kinds of repugnant physical acts or maladies, in the event the reader *not* believe, undermine the thematic of health, medicine, exploiting the language of faith and belief, of truth and falsehood, in order to perform a reversal of these hierarchized dichotomies.

The comparison providing the framework of the prologue is grounded in a contradiction. While comparing his book to the *Chroniques*, Alcofrybas underlines their essential difference. First, the *Chroniques* has no prologue in which a complex relationship is established with a fictive reader. The tone of the work is neutral, and little or no attempt is made to elicit an active response from the reader, who is envisaged, if at all, as a passive listener. At rare moments, however, second-person discourse is suddenly flashed against the flat third-person narration: 'Adonc vous eussiez veu venir les parisiens tous à la foule qui le regardoyent & se mocquoyent de ce que il estoit si grant' (sig. B2v) ('Then you would have seen a crowd of Parisians looking at him and making fun of his size').<sup>8</sup> Such a rare moment as this when the narrator addresses the narratee in the second person is the only suggestion of the presence of a narratee. The phrase 'vous eussiez veu' is being used to establish a certain visual credibility, to suggest that the narrative is a virtual eye-witness account. Rabelais himself uses the phrase in the second chapter of *Pantagruel*.<sup>9</sup> Although the author of the *Grandes chroniques* did not expect literal belief in his fiction, he made, apart from the occasional use of this phrase, little attempt to engage the reader's scepticism or credulity, or to draw the reader's attention to the paradoxical nature of the literary text.

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Rabelais's narrator's concern, on the other hand, is to incite the reader to respond actively to the text. He establishes from the start a relationship with a fictive reader defined as a reader of the *Grandes chroniques*. This sets in motion an ironic tension between the fictive, rustic readership of the *Chroniques*, with whom the real reader is being invited to identify himself, yet, at the same time, from whom the real reader must inevitably distinguish and distance himself.<sup>10</sup> These ideological subversions are effected by the disjunction set up between the fictive identification of Rabelais's readers as readers of the *Grandes chroniques*, on the one hand, and, on the other, the real reader's degree of willingness to enter into this fiction, at the same time that he is being made aware, through rhetorical exaggeration, of the grotesque dimensions of the fiction he is being asked to enter. This process of identification thus also involves a complement of distancing. The real reader must invoke his critical judgment at the same time that he suspends his disbelief.

The references to Scripture which were modified in later editions are of great importance to an understanding of the Rabelaisian narrator's ironic relation to the fictitious and the implied reader.<sup>11</sup> The triple comparison Alcofrybas makes between the *Chroniques*, *Pantagruel* and the Bible was perhaps the most striking substantive feature of the prologue in its earliest version: 'et comme vrayes fideles, les avez creues [tout ainsi que texte de Bible ou du saint Evangile]'. This ambivalent comparison was apparently too risky in 1542; Rabelais deleted it and replaced the bracketed phrases by the adverb *gualantement*, which deemphasizes the scriptural comparison, but contrasts incongruously with *comme vraye fideles*, since fidelity or faithfulness hardly fits with gallantry.<sup>12</sup> This alteration completely changes the focus of the text. The earlier version might be construed to mean that the readers of the *Chroniques* were as naively credulous as devout readers of the Old and New Testaments. It could also simply mean that they foolishly took fiction for truth. In the later version, the comparison between the chivalrous champions and the true faithful no longer possesses a common middle term – either the fault of credulity in the fictitious reader, or the claim to truth in the text – and the phrase *comme vrayes fideles* is no longer linked to the chivalric and secular context of the sentence in which it is placed. Notwithstanding, the parallels between Scripture and comic literature are maintained throughout and are a constant theme in the prologue in the 1542 version.

In the ensuing lines, the religious parallel is made more, not less, explicit in the 1542 text. Alcofrybas hyperbolically urges the reader