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978-1-107-063601-9 - The Enigma of Rabelais: An Essay in Interpretation

A. F. Chappell

Excerpt

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I. THE LIFE OF RABELAIS

*His relations with Voulté*¹

IN the comparatively few facts that research has established it is impossible to trace adequately what happened to Rabelais during this long period of eleven years. Yet uncertainty upon this point renders the student's enquiries vain from the start, for—to make mention of what may prove to be a somewhat important consideration—Rabelais, whom in 1537 Dolet hailed as 'the glory of the healing art,' was afterwards supremely known as the philosophical author of *Pantagruel*². The significance of this change may, it is true, be over-stressed, but when we compare the work done before and after this lapse of time, and when we note that in the interim the author's style had been transformed, that a definite purpose had been adopted, and that discussion rather than narration came to engross his attention, we are driven to the conclusion that some enquiry into those obscure years is necessary for our understanding of the mature worker and therefore of the earlier work itself. In the absence of other certain knowledge what was in fact a mere episode, Jean Voulté's brief and intimate friendship and his violent quarrel with Rabelais, may throw very valuable light upon the question.

¹ The substance of this chapter appeared under the heading 'Voulté's rupture with Rabelais' in *The Modern Language Review* of July, 1923.

² Petit de Julleville, *Histoire de la littérature française*, vol. iv.

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What is ascertainable of Rabelais' life, as far as directly concerns us, can be briefly summarized here. He passed his early years in the monastery of Fontenay-le-Comte¹ busy with Pierre Amy in the study of Greek. Forced by his fellow-monks' persecution to quit this seclusion in 1524, he may well have carried with him considerable resentment against those who had thwarted his congenial pursuit of learning, and ten years later he appears still to have had aspirations to a monastic life of cultured indolence uninterrupted by the irksome duties imposed by the life and the rules of a monastery². In consequence of this hatred of monks he would naturally fall into line with the reformers³, but, though we must infer much from his writings, from his life between 1524 and 1530 no definite evidence in support of his sympathy is yet forthcoming. In the latter year, he matriculated at Montpellier and thenceforward for five years the facts which we know⁴ show that he was busy in the study and practice of medicine and in preparing medical works for publication at Lyons. His pro-

¹ In 1522 and 1534 he was described as a young man, in 1519 as 'frère mineur' of this monastery. See A. Tilley, *François Rabelais*.

² See the Abbey of Thelema in *Gargantua*.

³ Frequent seemingly sympathetic references occur in the early books. In an *attack* on the Parisians he speaks of 'un bon prescheur evangelique,' and 'Sorbone, où lors estoit, maintenant nest plus loracle de Leucece' (*Lutetia*), *G.* 17.

⁴ In University records, Lyons printing, etc. In 1537-8 he became Licentiate and Doctor, lectured and carried out two anatomies on human bodies.

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essional enthusiasm and skill were building up a splendid reputation.

Notwithstanding this, in 1535 (and for the second time) he suddenly abandoned his post in a Lyons hospital without leave of absence, and after a short time the hospital authority appointed his successor. From letters¹ we know that he had accompanied Jean du Bellay to Rome, where he must have been familiar with conditions in the Papal Court which had provoked the luxurious and magnificent Paul III to attempt reforms. The new Cardinal, Jean du Bellay, helped his physician to obtain the letter of absolution (dated Jan. 17, 1536) of which he stood in need, and which allowed him to transfer to another monastery and to practise medicine out of charity employing neither knife nor cautery. He could then return to Lyons with greater security, in spite of the notorious Cardinal de Tournon's having succeeded the benevolent Pomponne di Trivulce as governor of Lyons². It was about this time apparently that he chose to enter the recently secularized Abbey

¹ See *Letters to the Bishop of Maillezais*, and Rabelais' preface to Marliani's *Topographia Romae*. In the *Letters* he notes down political news and gossip; gives interesting facts about the Pope's family; refers pityingly to the houses, churches and palaces that were destroyed to prepare a road for Charles V's entrance to Rome; and to the commission given him by the Bishop for seeds, etc. In asking for a further sum of money he describes his modest way of living.

² In August, 1537, the Cardinal apprehended Rabelais who had been writing 'to one of the greatest rascals in Rome,' and asked for the Chancellor's further instructions.

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of Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, and so could be present at the dinner given in honour of Dolet's pardon (March, 1537), at which, among the most famous scholars of the time, was the poet Voulté. Of his life thenceforward to July, 1540, however, we know only that he continued his medical work; that he was in the royal suite at Aigues-Mortes (July 14–16, 1538), whence he returned with his patron as far as Lyons; and that on August 13, 1539, he was at Montpellier acting as 'father' to a student. During his long interrupted life in the latter town he must have made the acquaintance of Guillaume Pellicier, the princely and liberal-minded Bishop, whose tastes—like those of Jean du Bellay—lay in diplomacy, in the collection of manuscripts, and in the study of natural history rather than in his episcopal duties¹; and we can hardly doubt that Rabelais found in him a congenial spirit. For their common interests drew from Pellicier three letters² which show that Rabelais resided with Guillaume du Bellay in Turin from July, 1540, and that thence he made exploratory journeys into the Swiss valleys³. Thus in the year which saw Langey's

¹ Rabelais' acquaintance with such Concordat ecclesiastics as the Bishop of Montpellier and the Cardinal du Bellay must have introduced him to Catholicism quite distinct from that of ordinary Frenchmen. If so he could doubtless look upon the beliefs of sincere transmontane Catholics as he describes those of Homenas.

² Dated July 23 and Oct. 17, 1540, and May 20, 1541.

³ There he sought plants for the Bishop. In Jan. 1541, according to a letter of Jean de Boyssonné, he passed through Chambéry; and he may have taken part in G. du Bellay's expedition of enquiry into Waldensian opinions (1540–1).

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troubles and labours finally force him to relinquish the post in which he had done so much for France, Rabelais must have been in fairly constant and close attendance upon his great master, to whose death at St Symphorien there are two well-known references in the romance. We know moreover that Rabelais must have been in Lyons in 1542 in order to supervise the new edition of *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* by Juste¹; and to that period, too, belongs his important letter to Antoine Hullot which shows that he wished to renew his acquaintance with Plato. The next two or three years, however, tell us nothing of his movements; but he certainly held the post of Master of Requests at court for a time, and that would enable him in 1545 to obtain the king's permission to print the *Tiers Livre*, although the official condemnation was to be expected. And the royal imprimatur contains terms so benevolent and so flattering to Rabelais that his hurried flight to Metz, unprovided with funds—to judge from his appeal to the Cardinal du Bellay (February 1, 1546)—has always challenged explanations. Various suggestions have been put forward to account for it; but what is certain is that the family of his patrons had lost power for the time², that Rabelais had personal enemies who were only

¹ In the same year, also, a translation of Rabelais' *Stratagemata* appeared at Lyons. It was an eulogy of Guillaume du Bellay's work.

² In 1545 a secretary of the Cardinal du Bellay was convicted of heresy and burnt at Paris.

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too eager to seize any occasion for revenge, and that he had always alluded slightly in his known works to authorities whose persecutions were becoming bolder. It is not necessary therefore to suppose that he was a confirmed Protestant. Indeed the notorious Cardinal de Tournon had failed to convict his prisoner of heresy in 1537; and when we consider the whole romance we find—even in the post-humous work—that the traces of Protestant sympathy become slighter even than those in *Gargantua*. We might rather expect quite another development, and besides to adopt the opinion that Rabelais held Protestant beliefs would, it will be found, lead us into still deeper difficulties.

For if we briefly enquire into what contemporaries considered to be Rabelais' religious views, we shall find that at a much later date (1550) Jean Calvin claimed that both Desperiers and Rabelais had once belonged to the reforming party until their jests, which blasphemed 'the sacred pledge of eternal life,' had brought upon them spiritual blindness¹. And there can be little doubt that the *Cymbalum Mundi* abounds in matter to justify a charge from which Rabelais' work appears almost free². Indeed, were

¹ Cp. *De Scandalis*: 'Alii (ut Rabelaeus, Desperius et Goveanus) gustato Euangelio, eadem caecitate sunt percussi. Cur istud? nisi quia sacrum illud vitae aeternae pignus, sacrilega ludendi aut ridendi audacia ante profanarant.' No doubt Calvin seized upon the two cases because they were well-known names, but the opinion is noteworthy.

² Except, perhaps, utterances in *Pantagruel*, dealt with later which seem to have escaped notice in that age.

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not ample confirmation forthcoming that he was also guilty of so dangerous an offence, Calvin's denunciation might provoke our question. At the same time in forming a judgment we must not forget that Cop's notorious speech and the 'Affaire des placards' had early torn the reforming movement into two sections, that from 1534 onwards Calvinism had dissociated itself from the moderate reformers whom Calvin was to denounce as half-hearted, and that among the Third Party¹ there had appeared a distinct tendency to return to the bosom of Holy Church. It becomes probable therefore that Rabelais, as a 'reformer,' was rather left behind by advancing Calvinism than that he became an apostate from that creed. Moreover he does not seem to fall into the class of men of letters whose Platonism led them to look kindly on Catholic superstitions for, although up to 1540 he seems to have been a Platonist, after that date he certainly toyed with that philosophy in a contemptuous manner, and had probably rejected it. In point of fact, if we may judge by repeated utterances in his later work, he became almost as hostile to the doctrines of the Church as he was the

¹ Calvin adds an explanation of this phenomenon, in *Excusatio ad Nicodemitas* (1545): 'Tertius ordo ex iis constat qui religionem quodammodo in philosophiam convertunt...sed quieti ac securi expectant donec Ecclesia in tolerabilem statum reformetur: ut autem in eam rem incumbunt, quia periculosum est, adduci nequeunt; quidam etiam eorum ideas Platonicas concipiunt de modo colendi Dei. Itaque bonam partem Papisticarum superstitionum excusant....Hic ordo fere constat ex literatis.'

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avowed critic and enemy of Calvinism. We may be certain that he remarked the evidence of reaction which culminated in the Truce of Nice, and, if that be so, we must admire the tenacity of purpose with which he continued on his course. That alone would sufficiently explain the frequent dangers into which he plunged. There could be no middle course at that time; he who was not with the reactionary authorities was opposed to them, but whether the views to which he obstinately adhered were religious in their nature, nothing but close enquiry can reveal. And Voulté's life and the causes of his quarrel with Rabelais do provide a starting point from which we may begin the search.

A student and later a lecturer in the College of Guyenne, and from 1534 to 1536 in the Faculty of Toulouse, Jean Voulté¹ became a close associate of Dolet's friend, the liberal Jean de la Boyssonné, and of Gripaldi, the eminent jurist whose championing of free enquiry brought upon him both Calvinist and Catholic persecution. The law school of Toulouse being then a stronghold of the reactionaries, it is significant that under Boyssonné's influence the young lecturer renounced his legal career in favour of letters, and furthermore, having visited Lyons in 1536, that he there formed sincere friendships with Dolet and Rabelais. These facts must point to a certain measure

¹ See R. C. Christie, *Etienne Dolet, a Martyr of the Renaissance*, for further details.

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of liberalism in the young poet,—it is possible through the study of Plato,—which, even if it were but the enthusiasm of a youth, appears strange when we consider that within two years, and at a time when reaction was triumphant, Voulté suddenly quarrelled with his friends, returned to the practice of the law in Paris, and was destined to find favour in the reactionary court circles. The few remaining years of his life, for he was assassinated by a personal enemy in 1542, are obscure, but does not that fact too seem to suggest that he had abjured his former errors and returned to the bosom of the Church?

Inspired with eager admiration, Voulté had hastened to defend the author of *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, whom he had heard stigmatized as a madman: ‘Someone has affirmed,’ he cried, ‘that thy heart, O Rabelais, has been afflicted with madness, when indeed ’twas humour mingled with thy invention. I hold that he lied who said thy works ring with madness. Say, Rabelais, dost thou indeed sing so? He was a Zoilus armed with mad iambs, for thy writings breathe out not insanity but jests¹.’ Such a view of the early books was probably shared by most

¹ Qui rabie asseruit laesum, Rabelaese, tuum cor,
adjunxit vero cum tua Musa sales:
hunc puto mentitum, rabiem tua scripta sonare
qui dixit; rabiem, dic Rabelaese, canis?
Zoilus ille fuit rabidis armatus iambs;
non spirant rabiem, sed tua scripta jocos.

Ad Rabelaesum (*Joannis Vultei Epigrammatum lib. iv*, Lyons, 1537). The charge of madness might well refer to the wildly extravagant writing in *Pantagruel*'s judgment, *P.* pp. 42–3.

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contemporaries, as also possibly by Montaigne, but it would help to confirm our theory of Voulté's inclination towards liberalism. There can be little doubt that to the poet's mind Rabelais' ridicule of the representatives of the past and his monstrous laughter suggested no deeper meaning than the free jests of Erasmus and Marot; and it must be remembered that it was the author himself who later constantly read profound wisdom into his early merriment, and who therefore has somewhat confused our vision of him. At that period contempt for the older age bound together reformers and men of letters, and probably it attracted the young poet to the side of the founder of Pantagruelism. Very soon, however, when sympathy and other circumstances had contributed to make them intimates, Voulté detected and denounced what was and is Rabelais' real distinction, what in fact differentiates clearly between him and his reforming associates. In a semi-jocular poem the poet expresses emphatic disapproval of his friend's insatiate thirst for knowledge, and that knowledge of a seriously dangerous kind¹. We picture Rabelais with an appeal for information ever on his

¹ Scire cupis qui sim, qui vivam, quoque parente
sim natus, quae sit patria, quique lares.
Scire cupis nomenque meum, nomenque puellae,
scire cupis vitae quod genus ipse sequar.

Nil non scire cupis; sed dum cupis omnia scire,
non satis et nimium scire, Rabella, cupis.

Ad Rabellam (*Joannis Vultei inscriptionum libri duo*, Paris, 1538).