

Gargantua's Games

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This lecture is dedicated to the memory of Brother Robert Smith.

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In the first twenty-four chapters of *Gargantua*, François Rabelais describes the birth, childhood and education of the giant whose name is also the title of his book.

Chapter 22 begins as follows:

Then, most lazily mumbling a snatch of grace, he [Gargantua] washed his hands with fresh wine, cleaned his teeth with a pig's foot, and chatted joyfully with his men. Then, when the green cloth was laid out, they brought out plenty of cards, plenty of dice, and enough boards for checkers or chess. There he played:

Flush,
Grand slam,
Trump,
Primiera,
Beggar my neighbor,
Odd man out,
Tarots,
Backgammon,
Shuffleboard,
Hopscotch,
Lawn billiards,
Coddling the hare,
Trudge-pig,
The moping owl,
Gossip, lend me your sack,
Marseilles figs,
The false clown,
Quoits,
Chaw-turd,
Barley-break,
Whirlygig,
Fast and loose,
Pick-a-back to Rome,
Fart-in-throat,
Billy boy, give me my lance,
Frogs and toads,
The greedy glutton,
The pigeon has flown,
Fatass,
Lady, I wash your cap,
Baste the bear,
Cross questions and crooked answers,
Butting rams,
The madge owlet,

Flirts on the nose,
Larks.

After playing well, sifted, passed, and bolted the time, it was time to have a little drink—that was eleven gallons per man—and, right after banqueting, to stretch out and sleep two or three hours on nice bench or a nice big bed, meanwhile to think no evil or speak no evil.

(p.I.22, pp. 50-54. All quotations from Rabelais are identified by book and chapter numbers and by pagination in the translation of Donald Frame, U. of California Press, 1991.)

Now those of you who have read *The Chronicles of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, or at least Book I of it, known as *Gargantua*, will realize that I have seriously misquoted and misrepresented this passage. I only gave thirty-six of the games that Rabelais lists. The true number is 216, three full double column pages in Donald Frame's excellent translation, plus parts of two other pages. There are many such lists in Rabelais' work, but this is one of the longest. What on earth can be the point of such an enumeration? Perhaps in approaching this question, I can also more generally suggest some of Rabelais' strategies, his designs on us, his readers, and some of the reasons that we should cherish his strange but wonderful book.

In reading such a list, or in hearing it read, we feel a mixture of perplexity and pleasure. Where does the pleasure come from? Perhaps we are gladdened at the thought that there can be so many games, real or imaginary, in the world, or that our author can think of so many. Plenitude, copiousness of imagination, is an emblem of the abundance of nature itself perhaps, or at least of human nature, since the games are human artifacts. And if some of the games are imaginary, so much the better. No human, of course, could actually play all these games in a single afternoon; but remember that Gargantua is a giant—Rabelais is telling a tall tale. In fact, there was a lengthy oral and written

tradition about the giant Gargantua in the Touraine, the region where Rabelais lived—a cycle of tales comparable to our yarns about Paul Bunyan or Pecos Bill. Gargantua's adventures (and those of his son, Pantagruel) often have some of the almost surreal, daimonic, out-of-control quality of these folk tales. Paul Bunyan is a hero of sorts, but not a comfortable one; we may not feel for him the normal empathy that we would expect to have for the protagonist of a conventional narrative. Perhaps we're not altogether sure that he is the "good guy," or that he feels as humans do. Such a question can certainly arise about Gargantua, whose pranks include stealing the bells of Notre Dame to use for the neck of his mare, and drowning 260,418 nameless Parisians by casual urination. But as often with Rabelais, this is only cartoon violence. We do not pause to mourn for the drowned Parisians, any more than we fear for Wile E. Coyote when he plunges off a cliff. Gigantism here may be monstrous or hyperbolic, but as we come to learn, it may also be an emblem for the possibilities of humanity, a literalizing of human greatness, power, and freedom. No longer is humanity cowering and subservient, dwarfed by the stature of our ancestors or our God. Instead, we may consider Rabelais as a Renaissance humanist, hyperbolically portraying what Pico della Mirandola called "the dignity of man."

But perhaps I'm waxing hyperbolic myself. The list of games lacks the grandeur and nobility of an epic catalogue—the catalogue of the ships in *Iliad* Book II, for example. There the purpose was not simply to amass a multitude, but to order it. The list of games, by comparison, is a mere heap; the sequence seems arbitrary and the whole effect is grotesque. Though at the outset, the narrator mentioned cards, dice, and board games, many of the games enumerated are of a different kind altogether—hop-scotch and lawn-billiards, for example. Others seem to be children's role-playing games, a kind of

make-believe. Some of them seem to be made up on the spot. We are reminded of the list given by Jorge Luis Borges:

The ambiguities, redundancies and deficiencies recall those attributed by Dr. Franz Kuhn to a certain Chinese encyclopedia called the *Heavenly Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*. In its distant pages it is written that animals are divided into (a) those that belong to the emperor; (b) the embalmed ones; (c) those that are trained; (d) suckling pigs; (e) mermaids; (f) fabulous ones; (g) stray dogs; (h) those that are included in this classification; (i) those that tremble as if they were mad; (j) innumerable ones; (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's-hair brush; (l) et cetera; (m) those that have just broken the flower vase; (n) those that from a distance resemble flies...

("John Wilkins' Analytical Language,"
in *Selected Non-Fictions*, p. 231.)

The implication of any list is that its elements are units, of like kind. The wild heterogeneity of Rabelais' list of games raises the question of what kind. What is a "game," anyway? If an imaginary game is enumerated in the list, does the act of listing it give it existence? And if so, is that act of creation peculiar to games—do we think that an imaginary game is as much a game as a "real" game, or perhaps more so? Is any game "real"? Would the act of listing some other kind or class of beings call its items into existence? What power does the teller of this story implicitly claim to have, and does he really have it? Rabelais, in listing so many games, implies but does not mention yet another game, the one he is playing with us, his readers, and with language itself.

The power exerted by listing and naming is illustrated in another list of Gargantua's activities as a younger child:

He was always wallowing in the mud, getting his nose dirty, Messing up his face, wearing down his shoes at the heel, gaping after flies, and running happily after butterflies...he pissed on his shoes, shat in his shirt, blew his nose on his sleeves, sniveled in his soup and made a mess everywhere...He sharpened his teeth with a clog, washed his hands with soup, combed his hair with a goblet, sat between two saddles with his tail on the ground,...

farted for fat, pissed against the sun, hid in the water for rain,
struck while the iron was cold...flayed the fox, said the
monkey's paternoster, returned to his sheep, turned the sows
out to hay...put the cart before the oxen, scratched himself where
he did not itch, drew worms from his nose, bit off more than he
could chew, ate his white bread first, shod grasshoppers... offered
the gods straw for wheat... ate cabbage and shat leeks...counted
without his host....always looked a gift horse inthe mouth...hoped
to catch larks if the skies fell, made a virtue of necessity, cared as
little about the shaven as the clipped...

(I.11, pp.30-31)

In this enumeration, which I have once again drastically abbreviated, a list of actual forms of toddler mischief somehow metastasizes into a Sancho Panza-like list of proverbial expressions. Some, but perhaps not all of them, seem to be there because they are metaphors for activities that are ill-advised or counterproductive. I think many of the items on the list are there only because they are vividly concrete and nonsensical. The list lists for the sake of listing. Whatever this is, it is not narrative as we usually understand it. Language seems to have taken on a life of its own.

When poets make lists—epic catalogues, for example—they are often lists of proper names: warriors or nymphs, rivers or cities or other place-names. It seems to be the act of a true poet to love exotic, resounding but ultimately meaningless names—think of Whitman or Sandburg or Stevens, rolling out a polysyllabic Native American proper name, tasting it, luxuriating in its sound alone. Rabelais has some of this poetic impulse too—he is one of the greatest French prose stylists, primarily because there is a wild, anarchic energy in his language. Consider the first introduction of one of his main characters:

In the abbey at that time there was a claustral monk named Friar John of the Hashes, young, gallant, frisky, cheerful, very deft, bold, adventurous, resolute, tall, thin, with a wide open throat, well fixed for a nose, a great dispatcher of hours, a great unbridler of masses, a

fine polisher-off of vigils, to sum it all up briefly a real monk if ever there was one since the monking world first monked in monkery...

(I.27, p.66)

The word "monk" is repeated partly in derision—Rabelais, as will become clear, is no admirer of the monastic ideal as we usually think of it, despite being technically a monk himself. More to the point, the sound of the word "monk" becomes a jingle, an incantation, even a sensual act. Rabelais loves words, especially nonsense-words, made-up words, ridiculously long words, spoonerisms, bad puns, and words in resonant, learned-sounding foreign languages. When Gargantua takes the bells of Notre Dame for his mare, the Faculty of Theology sends its oldest sophist, Janotus de Bragmardo, to recover them. Here is an excerpt from his oration, which is generously sprinkled with outrageously bad Latin: "*Omnis clocha clochabilis, in clocherio clochando, clochans clochativo clochare facit clochabiliter clochantes*" (I.19, p.45). Roughly translated: "Every bellable bell, in belling bellery, belling bellishly makes the bellers bell." Of course Rabelais offers no such translation; he expects us to be a learned audience, even as he mocks learning itself.

The same zest for languages emerges in a scene in the second book, known as *Pantagruel*, where we first meet Panurge, who will become the manic sidekick of Pantagruel, the son of Gargantua. Note in passing that the name Panurge is taken, without gloss or explanation, from the Greek word πανουργος, one who will do anything, a rascal or scoundrel. (The same Greek etymologizing is present in many of Rabelais' names—for example, King Picrochole, the villain of Book I, the Xerxes-like figure whose dreams of world conquest trigger the war between himself and Grandgousier, Gargantua's father. Clearly we are expected to recognize that "Picrochole" is derived

from πικρός, “bitter” and χόλος, “wrath.”) When Pantagruel and his companions first meet the mysterious stranger Panurge, he hails them successively with fourteen little one-paragraph untranslated orations in German, in an imaginary language from the Antipodes, in Italian, in Scots dialect, in Basque, in Lanternese (another imaginary language), in Dutch, in Spanish, in Danish, in Hebrew, in Greek, in Utopian (a third imaginary language), in Latin, and finally in French, which turns out to be his native tongue (II.9, pp.163-166). We might think that the linguistic dispersion of the human race, after the Tower of Babel, is no cause for rejoicing; but the sheer profusion of languages, their plenitude, seems to be celebrated here. Panurge, who as his name implies will do or say anything, in any language, and Rabelais, his creator, both take pleasure in the fact of language and languages, for their own sake. Both are profound scholars in their own way, and both are highly irreverent toward scholarship. Even so, there is also a moral lesson: Each of Panurge’s elegant polyglot addresses is to the same effect: “Please, for charity’s sake, give me something to eat and drink.” And each time, his listeners focus on the philology instead of giving him aid. In this scene, Rabelais implies, there is a universal language of physical need that transcends the Babel of linguistic differences among humans. Generosity is simple and unlearned, but it trumps the learning of the wise.

Since we are now entered on the subject of Rabelais’ view of learning, I should certainly mention that the list we began with, the list of Gargantua’s games, is actually given in condemnation of Gargantua’s idleness, to show that his education is being neglected. The young giant is naturally possessed of many intellectual virtues, but it seems that they are misdirected. We get an early glimpse of his natural curiosity and

desire to learn: At the age of five he embarks spontaneously, with the energy of a Bacon or a Faraday, on a course of experimentation whose object is the discovery of the perfect ass-wipe. After a long list of candidates tested and rejected, Gargantua announces proudly that the softest, warmest and most delightful thing to wipe your ass with is the downy feathers of a young, live goose. This discovery delights his father, but in the following years Gargantua's potent intellect is left to fust unused. A sophist named Thubal Holofernes proves unequal to the task of the education of a noble youth. The two lists I gave, of games and other proverbial activities, are both given as evidence of the waste of the young giant's time. So his father the King engages a true humanist tutor with the appropriate Greek name of Ponocrates—"the power of work." We then get an enthusiastic seven-page description of the best educational regimen, both in music and gymnastic. Not an hour of the day is to be wasted. Even at dinner, Gargantua and his tutor discuss the origins and properties of everything they are served, complete with a citation of pertinent passages from "Pliny, Athenaeus, Dioscorides, Julius Pollux, Galen, Porphyry, Oppian, Polybius, Heliodorus, Aristotle, Aelian and others" (II.23, p.56). The concern for education is passed on to the next generation: In *Pantagruel* there is a famous letter to the hero from his father, Gargantua, setting forth his own omnivorous zest for learning and his wishes for his son to feel the same. Referring to his own education, Gargantua says:

The time was still dark, and smacking of the infelicity and calamity of the Goths, who had brought all good literature to destruction; but, by God's goodness, in my own day light and dignity has been restored to letters...Now all branches of learning are reestablished, languages restored: Greek, without which it is shameful for a man to call himself learned; Hebrew, Chaldean, Latin; truly elegant and correct printings are now customary, which were invented in my time by divine inspiration...The whole world is full of erudites, of very learned

teachers, of very ample libraries; and in my judgment, neither in Plato's time, nor Cicero's, nor Papinian's, were there such facilities for study as we see now...As for the knowledge of nature's works, I want you to devote yourself to that with care: let there be no sea, stream, or spring, whose fish you do not know: all the birds of the air, all the trees, shrubs, and bushes of the forests, all the herbs of the earth, all the metal hidden in the bowels of the depths, the precious stones of the Orient and Southern Hemisphere: let nothing be unknown to you.

(II.8, pp. 160-161)

The vaunting and exultant spirit of the Renaissance seems to breathe forth, completely unironically, in this passage, perhaps the most famous in Rabelais' work, although not necessarily the most typical. The book as a whole seems to be a medley of different genres—by turns a mock epic, a romance, a satire, a folk tale-- but one genre to which it clearly alludes here is the humanist treatise on the education of the ruler. The tradition starts with Plato's *Republic* and Xenophon's *Cyropaideia*, both recently rediscovered in the grand retrieval of classical texts. It continues with books as varied as Machiavelli's *Prince*, Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince*, Sir Thomas More's *Utopia*, *The Book of the Governor* by Sir Thomas Elyot (from whom the twentieth-century poet Thomas Stearns Eliot claimed he was descended). Castiglione's *The Book of the Courtier*, and a book called *The Schoolemaster* by Roger Ascham, tutor to Queen Elizabeth I. All of these works, in different ways, exhibit a vivid confidence in the power and possibility of human learning. The trope of educational reform is used as a way both to hand down the received tradition and to rethink it. Young Gargantua, having fallen initially into the wrong hands, must be rescued from a rigid but perfunctory scholastic education. What we might call the "progressive" aspect of Rabelais's humanistic educational prescriptions is taken up again by Montaigne, in his chapter "Of the

Education of Children,” and we can thence trace its effects all the way to Rousseau, to Dewey, and to our own curriculum.

It’s always hard to tell when Rabelais is being sincere, or what he really cares about; but I want to claim that the right kind of education is very close to his heart. He himself had made the wrong move of entering the Franciscan order in his youth. Not only did the austerity of the corded Friars disagree with him, but at this time and place, at least, they were actively hostile to the new learning and the Greek and Latin texts that conveyed it. It was not necessarily safe to be a Humanist in early sixteenth century France—several of the greatest scholars fell victim to the Inquisition. After Erasmus published a commentary on the Greek New Testament, the priestly scholars of the Sorbonne caused a law to be passed forbidding the teaching of the Greek language anywhere in France. Rabelais was later able to disengage himself from the Franciscans and throw in with the Benedictines, who were more tolerant of his intellectual adventurousness, up to a point. Even so, he seems to have drifted away from the Church more and more, as he found powerful patrons and won the favor of the King himself. He took all knowledge for his province, even the carnal kind: In middle age he studied and practiced medicine—a more earthy and secular occupation—and he seems to have fathered several illegitimate children.

This may be as good a time as any to address the issue of Rabelais’ obscenity. The story of the search for the perfect ass-wipe may have caught your attention, or the somewhat raunchy names of several of the enumerated games. Rabelais sometime seems to exhibit an inexhaustible, childish joy in the portrayal of the sheerly physical—interestingly, at least as often in excretion as in sexuality. I have observed that for some

readers of his books, scatology and other kinds of explicitness can be a significant stumbling block. Isn't he being merely nasty—rubbing our noses in it, as it were? I'm not sure that I can undertake a full-scale defense of Rabelais on this score, and as an aficionado of scatological humor, I'm not even sure that I want to. But here are a few observations: Rabelais' world is a comic world, a carnival world, as his great modern critic Mikhail Bakhtin has shown. Carnival, etymologically, means "farewell to flesh"—not only to meat-eating, at the beginning of Lent, but to many other kinds of fleshly activity; and we value more that which we must forsake. The carnival world is characterized by inversion—the rule is misrule. Kings are reduced to beggars, and beggars are temporarily crowned king. This comic world is also a comic-book world, crude and exaggerated. Whatever truth it has is true only in context, and by a kind of necessary contrast with its opposite. I think that Rabelais would have heartily approved of a children's book published in 1993, whose title was an incontrovertible truism: *Everyone Poops*. On its first appearance the book aroused a firestorm of protest: Yes, everyone does, but what is the point of dwelling on it? Rabelais might answer this way: The point is to elicit that very response. If you are among the dainty-minded, perhaps you need to examine your own motives for seeking to deny your own physicality. It is not a particularly safe thing to do; the physical world has its way of taking its revenge on those who deny its importance. In this way as in so many others, Rabelais is a provocateur. One of the games that the book *Gargantua* plays with its readers is to make them self-conscious about their responses to it.

Another physicality much celebrated by Rabelais is the heroically excessive consumption of alcohol. Notionally at least, wine is a venue for the intersection of the

physical and the spiritual—not only a sacrament but a source of wisdom. Early on in the *Gargantua*, just before the birth of the hero, a whole chapter is devoted to phrases used by drinkers to urge each on; Frame translates its title as “The Palaver of the Potted.” There is also, throughout the *Chronicles*, a lot of very enthusiastic eating, overeating, farting, and belching, as well as much talk about sexuality (though very little of it actually happens within the story). In short, one of the master images of the *Chronicles* is physical metabolism. I want to claim that Rabelais uses it partly as a metaphor for cognitive activity: intellectual intake, processing and output, learning, reading, interpreting, writing. I have used the word “omnivorous” in describing his zest for learning; that such a usage is still common—we devour books and drink in learning—shows that the metaphor is not strange to us. The chronic allusiveness of Rabelais’ book—perhaps exceeding even that of Montaigne—shows his intellectual metabolism at work, processing what he reads. It is an ancient trope, reaching back at least to Plato, to refer to one’s own books as “children,” attempts to perpetuate oneself in a bid for a qualified kind of immortality. But we might think of a book as a less glorious kind of bodily product: Montaigne ironically refers to his chapters as “excrements” (III.9, “Of Vanity,” near the beginning). Perhaps the scatology of Rabelais is playing a similar game with us. Even excrement has its uses after all, not only for catharsis but as a means to future fertility.

We can see the metaphors of eating and drinking in the Author’s Prologue to Book I, which I have distributed to you as a handout. [The text is appended.] I want to spend a little time on this Prologue, which seems to me to anticipate many of the themes of the whole work. The speaker is presumably M. Alcofribas Nasier, Abstractor of the

Quintessence, the anagrammatic pseudonym Rabelais used for the first two books of his *Chronicles*. In reading Rabelais, as in reading Chaucer, Cervantes and many other storytellers, we must be wary of identifying the *persona* of the narrator with the actual author. He addresses us at the outset as “Most illustrious topers” and “most precious poxies.” We are “topers,” drinkers, consumers both literally—since he later urges us to read with the book in one hand and the bottle in the other—and metaphorically, according to the metaphor of metabolism. We are “poxies” perhaps because of the book’s occult curative powers. (The prologue to Book 4 will spell out this metaphor more fully; we remember that Rabelais was in fact a physician.) Despite this earthy beginning, the first paragraph plunges immediately into an ostentatious classical allusion—appropriately, to Plato’s *Symposium*, where there is truth in wine, and where the highest things may be talked of in the midst of pleasure and laughter. But as we will see, the Prologue, like the rest of the book, will continue to employ allusions to Plato and other classical authors, in ways that will turn to be more and more suspect. In the same way that Socrates resembled a Silenus, so too does Rabelais’ book: grotesque and misshapen on the outside, but containing within itself divine and precious wisdom. The “outside” is identified in the third paragraph with the title, by which the book should not be judged. The juxtaposition of lofty learning and earthy physicality is perfectly summed up by such titles as *On the dignity of codpieces* and *On peas with bacon cum commento*. (Both titles appear again in Rabelais’ work, the first in Chapter 8 of Book I and the second in Book II, in a long list of the titles of the books supposedly in the theological Library of St. Victor in Paris [II.7]. A few—but only a few—of the other titles in the list refer to actual works.)

The word/flesh duality of the titles corresponds to the two possibilities the Prologue discusses: If the story the narrator is about to tell has a higher, spiritual significance—like the allegorical meanings some readers found not only in Scripture but in Plato, Homer and Ovid as well—then patience and learnedness are needed to extract it; we must burn the midnight oil, as it were, puzzling it out. But if it does not point beyond itself to some precious marrow of meaning contained within, we can simply enjoy it as itself, as a fiction, an ephemeral entertainment. The description of Socrates by Alcibiades seems to privilege the claim of a higher significance; we should disregard the rough and grotesque exterior of the Silenus-like Socrates in order to view the valuable content inside.

The reference to the *Republic* in the third paragraph is more equivocal. In Plato's version, Socrates' characterization of the dog as a philosopher is already a joke, but at least it refers to the socially useful function of the dog. In performing his assigned task of guarding the house, he barks at those visitors he does not recognize, thus proving that all dogs by nature desire to know. Rabelais' dog, however, shows his philosophic nature in performing a merely appetitive, private, metabolic function. And after all the labor of breaking the marrow bone, the speaker of the prologue asks us, "What is the hope of his endeavor? What good does he aspire to? Nothing more than a little marrow." It sounds here as if our expectations, and those of the dog, have been frustrated. The forbidding exterior of the bone did not hold the golden images of the gods after all. But wait—there is another inside to the marrow, even after its extraction from the bone. It may not look like much, but it is exceptionally delicious. And if we are willing to wade through two formidable passages in Galen—sort of an intellectual version of the bone's tough

exterior—we discover that marrow is the most nutritious food in nature. But it is still food for the body, not the soul. Ironically, the image of the philosopher-dog offers only a fleshly reward.

Paragraph 5, however, gives us the allegorical significance lurking behind the literary image of the marrow, that is, “abstruse doctrine,” “lofty sacraments and horrific mysteries.” In passing we get a brief allusion to yet another Platonic dialogue, this time the *Meno*, in the phrase, “in the certain hope of being made more astute and brave by the said reading.” “Certain hope” in itself sounds a bit conflicted. We remember that at *Meno* 86B, Socrates does not confidently assert that we will be made better, braver and less useless by actually searching for what we do not know; but he will fight, in word and deed, to defend the claim that we will be made braver and better by supposing it is necessary to search. The process of reading “these exquisite books” may be more open-ended than we hoped; perhaps we should not have expected that “abstruse doctrine” and “horrific mysteries” would offer us any closure or enlightenment. But are they even there to be found? In the very next paragraph, the prologue veers back in the opposite direction with no explanation or excuse: “Do you believe in all good faith that Homer...ever thought of all the allegories with which he has been calked...? ...If you believe it, you come nowhere near my opinion by either hand or foot...” What happened to the marrow we were meant to search for inside the bone? “These were as little thought of by Homer as were the sacraments of the Gospel by Ovid.” It seems that Homer’s precedent, not Plato’s, will now be decisive for the speaker of the Prologue. The beginning of paragraph 7 manages to confuse us completely: “If you don’t believe that, on what grounds will you not do so with these merry new chronicles, although, while dictating

them, I had no more thought of it than you...?" If you don't believe what? Aren't there too many negatives in this sentence? And even if the author had no deep meaning in mind, are we thereby absolved of the need to look for one? Do wine and oil never mix?

Paragraphs 7-9 seem to dismiss the possibility of a higher spiritual sense. But in Paragraph 10 we get yet another reversal:

Demosthenes was reproached by one sourpuss claiming that his orations smelled like the clean up rag of a filthy dirty oil-seller. Therefore interpret all my deed and words in the most perfect sense; hold in reverence the cheese-shaped brain that is stuffing you with these fine idiocies, and, as best you can, always keep merry.

"The most perfect sense" reminds us of the "perfection" of the marrow in Paragraph 4. Surely "perfection" must imply greater refinement or a higher degree of spirituality? But here we seem to be told not to look beyond the merry surface, on penalty of being pretentiously learned, like Demosthenes. Wine, not oil, was expended in this work's composition. The book is no longer like a Silenus whose inside belies its outside. The frolicsome title is a true indicator of the content; the robe does make the monk. But the injunction to "interpret all my words and deeds in the most perfect sense" still sounds like a plea for a reading that, as St. Augustine would say, furthers the reign of charity. Once again, at the prologue's end, how we are to interpret what we read is made both a theme and a problem.

Has the Prologue in any way settled the question of how we are to read the book? I claim that it has raised the question and left it open. Phony, ostentatious learning is lampooned in this passage, but true and fully assimilated learning is needful in order to read it at all. In appearing—at least at the Prologue's end—to disclaim any deep

intention for his book, may Rabelais not be practicing a little reverse psychology?

"Don't put beans in your ears." "Don't look for deep significance in my story." Or in

Mark Twain's words:

Persons attempting to find a motive in this narrative will be
prosecuted; persons attempting to find a moral in it will be
banished; persons attempting to find a plot in it will be shot.

It's appropriate that I quote from *Huckleberry Finn*, because it, like *Tom Jones*, *Don Quixote* and *Gargantua* (a book which I believe Fielding, Twain and Cervantes all knew and loved), certainly does have a motive, a moral and a plot. One of the motives of all four books is to make us more self-conscious about how we read, and how we interpret what we read. The theme of interpretation is always cropping up in Rabelais' work. In *Gargantua*, we see it again almost immediately after the Author's Prologue. In Chapter 1, we are told that the genealogical records of Gargantua were unearthed in a farmer's field, in a "huge, stout, big, gray, pretty little moldy book smelling more but not better than roses," which the narrator was able to decipher by "practicing the art by which one can read invisible letters, as Aristotle teaches." In addition to the genealogies, the volume contained a treatise entitled "The Antidoted Frigglefraggles," a long poem in *ottava rima*, with many initial letters of lines omitted, as if the rats had nibbled at the manuscript. The poem is, so far as I or any commentator I know of can tell, entirely gibberish. What is the purpose of its inclusion? Who knows? Perhaps to make us laugh, at others who might think it means anything or at ourselves once we realize it doesn't. Perhaps to knock us off kilter right away, to destabilize the reader.

There is a similarly long and portentous poem at the end of Book I, symmetrically framing the *Gargantua* by imposing another interpretive task on the reader. The Chapter (number 58) is entitled "A Prophetic Riddle." It is not quite the same as the

"Frigglefraggles," however. Here we are given what sounds like an apocalyptic annunciation of the dire torments that the round earth will suffer at the end of days, to try the faith of the true Christian elect—including deluges of waters, violent blows to the globe itself, and the darkening of Heaven's light. At the poem's conclusion, Gargantua and Friar John have a brief exchange on the meaning of the poem. Gargantua claims that it is all about "the continuance and upholding of divine truth." The monk, however, gives a contrary interpretation: The poem is about a tennis match: the deluge of waters is the perspiration of the players as they inflict blows on the round globe, the tennis ball. Heaven's light is darkened at the end of the day, when the game is suspended by the coming of evening. The first book leaves us exactly there, and we are not told which is the "true" interpretation. What would it mean for either reading to be "true"? Would Rabelais' book be better if he privileged one reading over another, the sacred reading over the earthy, trivial one, or the other way around?

I want to adduce one more example of the way Rabelais continually makes interpretation both a theme and a problem. Chapter 38 of the *Gargantua* was particularly loved by Brother Robert Smith, who taught me how to begin to read this crazy book. It recounts how, during the Picrocholine War, six pilgrims are frightened by the battle and take refuge in a garden, hiding "between the cabbages and the lettuce." Gargantua arrives with his army; and feeling in need of refreshment, the young giant goes into the garden and takes greens to make himself a salad. The hapless pilgrims are carried off in his hands, deluged when he washes the greens, and swallowed whole, like the prophet Jonah. But they manage to find safety in the recesses of Gargantua's teeth and avoid being washed down by an enormous draft of pinot noir. Prodding his gums with their

staffs, they cause him to dislodge them and spit them out; they then endure several other tribulations, including near drowning by another of Gargantua's ruinous urinations and being caught in a wolf net. Once they finally escape, the six pilgrims reflect on their experience and find that all their torments had been predicted, point by point, in Psalm 124, which they proceed to quote in the Vulgate version and gloss from one phrase to another.

Here the "text" to be interpreted is the pilgrims' physical experience, and the interpretation is furnished by another text, that is, the Holy Scriptures. But in order to find clarification, the pilgrims must be willing to read the psalm in a certain way. Should it matter to them, or to us, that the psalm seems to speak of the experience, not of these six pilgrims but of the children of Israel? Does one interpretation exclude another? There is a longstanding hermeneutic tradition that the Bible can have different meanings on different levels. As the old rhyme puts it,

*Littera gesta docet;
Quid credas allegoria;
Moralis quid agas;
Quo tendas anagogia.*

In translation: The literal sense teaches deeds, the allegorical sense teaches what to believe, the moral sense teaches how to act, and the anagogical sense teaches where we are tending toward. This fourfold tradition, grounded in the interpretive practices of St. Paul and St. Augustine, among others, allows us to take episodes in the Hebrew scriptures as both historically true and prophetically referring to episodes in Christ's life, while simultaneously applying to our own moral lives. A whole system of Biblical typology emerges: For example, when Moses strikes the rock with his staff and brings

forth water, he foreshadows the piercing of Christ's side by the spear, bringing forth life-giving blood. Things can both be themselves and simultaneously symbolize other things. Clearly this possibility of multivalent meanings is the basis for using scriptures as a kind of fortune-telling tool, as Augustine does at the climax of his conversion narrative in the *Confessions*. We might ask ourselves if it is also the basis of our taking any book seriously and appropriating it for our own purposes.

If the pilgrims' interpretive method has such a distinguished and sacred history, how can we cope with Rabelais' Chapter 38, which appears to ridicule it? The pilgrims are miniaturized in a way that might seem to belittle them intellectually; but to themselves, they are full-sized, their tribulations are genuinely terrifying and their deliverance is genuinely miraculous. They are the normal-sized humans; their stature, we have to admit, is the same as our own. Nonetheless, we are invited to look at them through the eyes of a giant, and the portrayal gives them a charming daintiness, a bit like Gulliver's Lilliputians, but presented far more sympathetically. It is instructive generally to compare Swift's use of scale with that of Rabelais. Swift's portrayal of both the tiny people of Lilliput and the giants of Brobdingnag maintains a very consistent and precise set of ratios in comparing each race to Lemuel Gulliver. Though the reader's eye may be directed to see in different ways, no character changes size. The giants of Rabelais, on the other hand, seem to have a bewildering mutability, as if the author felt free to change the scale at will and without announcement. Compare the episode of the pilgrims in the salad with another near the end of Book 2. Here, in Chapter 32 (p. 238), the narrator claims to have climbed into the mouth of Pantagruel, whom we might expect to be of roughly the same size as his father Gargantua. Inside his mouth, the narrator finds a

whole new world, with its own sun and moon, and with such large cities as Larynx and Pharynx, mountain ranges, meadows, fields, country villas, tennis courts, and so forth. He enjoys himself so much that he stays inside there for four months.

This episode is brilliantly analyzed by Erich Auerbach in one chapter of his great critical work *Mimesis*. I cannot do justice here either to the complexity of the episode or to Auerbach's treatment of it; I only want to use it to illustrate the way the physical stature of the giants is subject to continual revision. Clearly, Pantagruel in this chapter is far bigger than Gargantua in the chapter of the pilgrims in the salad. Both, however, are far bigger than the Gargantua who seems to be able to associate on equal terms with normal-sized human beings like Friar John, or the Pantagruel who sails in a normal-sized ship in Books 4 and 5. It cannot be the case that the size of Gargantua is simply irrelevant; so much is made of his gigantism that we are positively invited to wonder how big he is, and what his size represents. But once again, we are given no stable and comforting viewpoint from which to look at him. At one moment a giant can be a whole parallel universe, and we are left wondering if we as humans are microcosms, containing multitudes and mirroring all possible outer experience within ourselves. At the next moment, the same giant is only slightly larger than ourselves. Size itself becomes another treacherous signifier. If indeed it points beyond itself, we might expect to find moral or intellectual greatness in Grandgousier, in Gargantua or Pantagruel; and indeed, sometimes they behave with admirable piety and magnanimity. But then there are the other, more disquieting episodes. Changing scale is another game that Rabelais's book plays with the reader.

It should be clear why Rabelais is now fashionable again, among the post-modern theorists of textuality, to use their trendy word. The stories of Gargantua and Pantagruel continually call attention to themselves as texts, in need of interpretation. Even the choice not to interpret, to read only for amusement or for escape, is itself an interpretation. The interpretive choices we make tell us as much about ourselves as about the book we are reading. The wildly various history of the interpretation of Rabelais' own book would delight him, I think. Early in the twentieth century he was being hailed as a precursor of the Enlightenment, frankly pagan, at best a Deist, an apostle of Reason. Later in the twentieth century it was claimed that he was a reforming evangelist and a crypto-Protestant—even though he was roundly vilified by his archenemy, John Calvin. Later still, he was seen as a man of his own time, a sincere (if somewhat anticlerical) Catholic. His book is put in the tradition of late medieval folk literature and then characterized as a severely classical epic, an imitation of the *Aeneid*, or an oddly prescient anticipation of modernism, a grotesque experiment whose style was taken up by Sterne, Joyce and Nabokov. Sometimes he is funny or ribald, at other times pious and sincere, sometimes genuinely and deeply learned, at other times dry and almost unreadable in his mockery of false or pretentious learning.

Which Rabelais is ours? We are free to choose. The problem of interpretation becomes, for Rabelais, another occasion for the reader to affirm his human freedom by exercising it. The intent of the *Chronicles* is made explicit near the end of Book V, in a passage I especially want to claim as genuinely Rabelaisian. In response to the puzzling Oracle of the Bottle, the priestess Bacbuc tells Panurge and his friends, "You yourselves be the interpreters of your own undertaking"(V.45, p.710). In the same way, the

Protestant reformers of the Church claimed the right to interpret the Scriptures themselves, guided by the spirit. But the necessity and the difficulty of interpretation are inescapable, whether the text is Scripture or a very secular fiction like *Gargantua*, or even the text of Nature itself.

The great image of freedom at the end of *Gargantua* is the Abbey of Thélème (from the Greek θέλημα, "will" or "free will"), with its motto *FAY CE QUE VOULDRAS*, "DO WHAT THOU WILT" (I.57, p.126). The Abbey, which Gargantua builds to reward the trusty Friar John, stands monastic discipline on its head. It is a haven, without walls, for beautiful and noble young men and women, who are free to leave at any time. While they are there, they are not governed by vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience—rather they are free to marry, they are to "be rich and to live at liberty." They are not governed by hours or clocks or bells, but by their own pleasure and good sense. True worship consists not of slavish adherence to an externally imposed regimen, but in liberal and generous living, taking pleasure in God's gifts. Human fallenness can be redressed, and the goodness of human nature can be restored, through the right application of reason and the right kind of education; as Virgil says to Dante at the top of Mt. Purgatory, "Henceforward take thy pleasure for thy guide" (*Purg.* XXVII.131).

The power of the closing image of the Abbey, whose way of life is lovingly described for six chapters, is then qualified in the first book's last chapter. I have already described the "prophetic riddle" which can be read either as a terrifying description of the persecution of the elect or as a description of a tennis match. The riddle is actually found on a bronze plate, at the foundations of the Abbey of Thélème. If the Abbey stands for our interpretive freedom, there seems to be a problem or an enigma at the very basis of

that freedom itself. The solution of the enigma is dichotomized by Gargantua and Friar John into two possibilities, one serious and one playful. There is also a playfulness in the interplay of the two possibilities, one of which is literally a game, a game of tennis.

It was not an accident that I began with a list of Gargantua's games. Game and play are central to Rabelais because it is his free playfulness as a writer that opens a space for our free interpretation. In making our own hermeneutic choices, we are obliged to become more self-conscious about the activity of reading. The playfulness of the text also keeps us off-balance, and therefore alert, as we continually adjust to the changes of tone, of narrative mode, of allegorical level. We must remain nimble; as soon as we lapse into any interpretive routine, the book forces us to reevaluate what we thought was the right way of reading. As readers, we are invited to play the narrator's game; but every game has rules, and part of this game is to figure out, at any given moment, which game we are playing and what its rules might be.

"Seriousness" is a hallowed word for us at this college; we consider it a term of highest praise, and justly so. But playfulness is not inevitably opposed to seriousness. The seemingly paradoxical Latin phrase *serio ludere*, "To play seriously," exemplifies an ideal of Renaissance thought that has not lost its value. For Nicholas of Cusa, for Marsilio Ficino and the Neoplatonists, for the Humanists More and Erasmus (one of whose disciples was Rabelais), the highest seriousness could be attained only through playfulness. Perhaps the irony of Socrates is another example. Rabelais teaches us always to be learning, but to wear our learning lightly and with laughter, so that we can learn better. All work and no play makes Johnnie a dull student. The playfulness of

Rabelais often seems to be anarchic, grotesque and bewildering; but bewilderment may be a cousin of the wonder in which philosophy begins.

Author's Prologue [to Book I, *Gargantua*]

[1] Most illustrious toppers, 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, incontrovertibly the prince of philosophers, among other things says he is like the Sileni. Sileni were in olden times little boxes, such as we see nowadays in apothecaries' shops, painted on the outside with merry frivolous pictures, such as harpies, satyrs, bridled goslings, saddled ducks, flying goats, harnessed stags, and other such paintings imagined at will to set everyone laughing (such was Silenus, master of good old Bacchus); but inside they preserved fine drugs such as balm, amergis, amomum, musk, civet, precious stones, and other valuables.

[2] Such he said was Socrates, because, seeing him from the outside and estimating him by his external appearance, you wouldn't have given a shred of an onion peel for him, so ugly in body was he and ridiculous in bearing, pointed nose, glance like a bull's, face of a madman, simple in manners, rustic in clothing, poor in fortune, unlucky in women, inept for all offices of the commonwealth, always gibbering, always dissembling his divine learning, but, on opening the box, you would have found inside a heavenly drug beyond price: superhuman understanding, wondrous virtue, invincible courage, matchless sobriety, certain contentment, perfect assurance, incredible disesteem for everything on account of which humans so lie awake, run, labor, sail, and fight.

[3] To what purpose, you may well ask, does this prelude and essay point? It's inasmuch as you, my good disciples, and few other unoccupied madmen, reading the merry titles of certain books of our creating, such as *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel*, *Tossaint*, *On the dignity of codpieces*, *On peas with bacon cum commento*, etc., too easily judge that inside there is nothing treated but mockeries, tomfooleries, and merry falsehoods, seeing that the outward sign (that is the title) is commonly received without further inquiry as derision and jest. But it is not fitting to assess the works of humans so lightly, for you say yourselves that the robe does not make the monk, and a man may wear a Spanish cape who in courage has no relation to Spain. That is why you must open the book and carefully consider what is expounded in it. Then you will recognize that the drug contained inside is of quite other value than the box promised, that is to say that the matters here treated are not so foolish as the title above claimed.

[4] And, even in case in the literal sense you find these matters rather jolly and corresponding to the name, you should not stop there, as the Sirens' song, but interpret in a higher sense what peradventure you thought was said casually. Did you ever pick a lock and swipe some bottles? Son of a bitch! Call back to memory the way you looked. Did you ever see a dog coming upon some marrow bone? That is, as Plato says, Book 2 of *The Republic*, the most philosophic animal in the world. If seen one you have, you were able to note with what devotion he watches it, with what care he guards it, with what fervor he holds it, with what prudence he starts on it, with what affection he breaks it, with what diligence he sucks it. What leads him to do this? What is the hope of his endeavor? What good does he aspire to? Nothing more than a little marrow. True it is that this little is more delicious than the much of all the others, because marrow is the food elaborated to perfection by nature, as Galen says, *ijj Facu. natural.*, and *xj De usu parti.*

[5] After this example it behooves you to be wise enough to sniff out and assess these exquisite books, to be light footed in pursuit and bold in the encounter; then by careful reading and frequent meditation, break the bone and suck out the substantific marrow—that is to say what I mean by these Pythagorean symbols, in the certain hope of being

made more astute and brave by the said reading; for in this you will find quite a different taste and more abstruse doctrine, which will reveal to you some very lofty sacraments and horrific mysteries, concerning both our political state and our domestic life.

[6] Do you believe in all good faith that Homer, writing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, ever thought of all the allegories with which he has been calked by Plutarch, Heraclides Ponticus, Eustathius, Cornutus, and what Poliziano stole from them?

[7] If you believe it, you come nowhere near my opinion by either hand or foot, which affirms that these were as little thought of by Homer as were the sacraments of the Gospel by Ovid in his *Metamorphoses*, as a certain Friar Booby, a real bacon-snatcher, has tried to demonstrate, on the chance that he might meet up with folk as crazy as he, and, as the proverb says, a cover worthy of the pot.

[8] If you don't believe that, on what grounds will you not do so with these merry new chronicles, although, while dictating them I had no more thought of it than you, who peradventure were drinking as I was? For in the composition of this lordly book, I neither wasted nor ever employed any more or other time than that which was established for taking my bodily refection, that is to say eating and drinking. And indeed that is the right time for writing these lofty matters and this profound knowledge, as Homer well knew how to do, the paragon of all philologists, and Ennius, father of the Latin poets, as Horace testifies, although one boor said that his songs smelled more of wine than of oil!

[9] One no-good says as much of my books; but shit on him! The fragrance of wine, how much more appetizing, laughing, inviting, heavenly, and delicious it is than that of oil! And I shall glory as much in people's saying about me that I have spent more on wine than on oil as Demosthenes did when they said of him that he spent more on oil than on wine. To me it is due honor and glory to be called and reputed a good fellow and jolly companion, and in that name I am welcome in all good companies of Pantagruelists.

[10] Demosthenes was reproached by one sourpuss claiming that his orations smelled like the clean up rag of a filthy dirty oil-seller. Therefore interpret all my deeds and words in the most perfect sense; hold in reverence the cheese-shaped brain that is stuffing you with these fine idiocies, and, as best you can, always keep merry.

[11] So now rejoice, my loves, and merrily read the rest, all for
the ease of your body and advantage of your
kidneys! But listen, you donkeypricks
(may boils and blains rack you!),
remember to drink to me
in return, and I'll
drink to you all
on the spot.

(translated by Donald Frame; paragraph numbers have been added.)