

What Does It Mean To Be Rabelaisian?

by Pierre Beaudry

To be Rabelaisian,* means to be totally outrageous, raunchy, crude in every way, absolutely stubborn in matters of truth, relentless against hypocrisy, and against all forms of popular opinion; but, also, in a more profound way, it means *AXIOM BUSTING*.



At Gargantua's Parisian meals, four men shovel mustard into his mouth. Illustrations by Gustave Doré.

François Rabelais is, without exaggeration, the greatest French writer who ever lived, and represents for French culture what Shakespeare is to English culture, and Cervantes to the Spanish-speaking world; and then again, he might represent a little bit more. A man of the Renaissance, a Platonic humanist, a monk who became a doctor, but most of all, a poet, and writer, who wielded his pen as a weapon for the love and justice of mankind (*agapē*), Rabelais sets the tone, and the stage, for a real revolution in the France of the Sixteenth century, as well as in society as a whole, in any period of history.

Immediately following the groundbreaking work of Joan of Arc (?1412-1431), and the creation of the first nation-state, established by Louis XI (r.1461-1483), for the commonweal of all of the people against the feudal oligarchy, the political enemies of France, led by Venice after the 1509 failure of the League of Cambrai, launched an all-out effort to divide the country, and create a religious war between French Protestants and Catholics. Even the humanist King of France (and friend of Rabelais), Francis I, after having been made captive in

only have been phrased, not by someone who denounced them (for then, the author would have received the gift of dry faggots for such impudence), but by someone who encouraged people to read them, and to abide by them [SEE Box, page 8]. Similarly, unless the truth be told by a drunk, such as a monk under the uncontrollable influence of a poetic frenzy instilled by a divine bottle—thus providing him with the proverbial excuse that the dribbles of a drunk cannot be taken seriously—no man could have escaped the dreaded consequences. And thus, in the Preface of Book III, Rabelais, responding thus to accusations of heresy by his political enemies, warns the reader, that he is simply writing a bunch of “joyous foolishness.”

The Art of Changing Axioms: How To Turn Little People into Giants!

The political aim of Rabelais was to *bust axioms*, and the way to accomplish that was to create giants who would break with all forms of deductive logic. In comparison with the smallness of the feudal man’s thinking, Rabelais’ Renaissance man is a giant of intellectual and moral

*** Ra-be-lai-sian** *adj* 1: of, relating to, or characteristic of Rabelais or his works 2: marked by gross robust humor, extravagance of caricature, or bold naturalism. *Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*

Madrid, was forced to submit to a marriage, by Venetian convenience, to the elder sister of the Hapsburg ruler Charles V of Spain, Eleonore of Austria, in order to accept the Franco-Spanish peace of Cambrai of 1529. Although Rabelais did not join the ranks of the Protestant reformists, he took to task the excesses of the Church of Rome, and constantly held the banner of truth, even at the risk of being accused of heresy. And, indeed, the threat of being burned at the stake was very real in those days.

In January of 1532, only a few months before Rabelais was to publish his first book, *Pantagruel*, a law professor at the University of Toulouse, Jean de Cahors, had been accused of heresy for having criticized the clergy during dinner. He was burned at the stake in June of the same year. “Better to laugh, than to end up roasted like grilled herrings,” declared Pantagruel. This is why, within the cavities of the new language, and within the cracks of the new humanist rules, Rabelais turned reality upside down, and let a few corrosive drops of truth seep through and puncture the thick surface of feudal hypocrisy. For example, his parody of the Decretals, or papal lawbooks, could

standing, who breaks with all of the old rules, all the taboos, all the old habits of a decrepit medieval society, breaking with all types of formalism, and hypocrisy, especially the most pernicious of all, religious hypocrisy. While the Sorbonne theologians based their recruitment to the church on guilt, Rabelais destroyed guilt, and replaced it with laughter. His characters, Gargantua and his son Pantagruel, are therefore quite naturally *giants*, because they are accomplishing a gigantic task proportional to their size. Both of them are the most outrageously loquacious talkers, great eaters, and great pissers, who will overwhelm anyone in their path, with the most powerful weapons of war against littleness: metaphors which they spin and weave without end, sparing no one in their masterful irony, from parody to satire, to gross exaggeration. Their favorite targets are backward monks, manipulative and hypocritical churchmen, scholastic teachers, Aristotelian sophists, lawyers, courtly manners, as well as any ordinary, small-minded individual of Rabelais’ time, or of the past, or even the future, who clung to the feudal disease of oligarchism. Remember, Rabelais was himself a medical doctor.

Rabelais caricatured everything in a most extravagant manner, creating paradoxes, anomalies, contradictions, inversions; he turned banal promenades into fantastic voyages, changed ordinary daily actions into universal events of historical significance; in a word, he had the highest, and raunchiest sense of the simultaneity of temporal eternity of any writer in history.¹ For instance, it was Gargantua who, by simply pissing in the streets of Paris, baptized the city, and gave it its name in laughter; that is, “*Par ris!*!”² [SEE Box, facing page].

In other words, as a doctor, and as a humanist, Rabelais’ job was not only to cure bodies, but also diseased minds—the pessimists, the worried, the malcontents, the sterile spirits—and to turn those little people into giant Renaissance ones. Rabelais also organized the powerful, such as his protector, Cardinal Jean du Bellay, with whom he attempted to stop the King of England, Henry VIII, from creating a split with the Church of Rome. In this way, Rabelais was a direct heir of Erasmus, who was one of his closest associates. In fact, in a letter to Erasmus, Rabelais stated that he considered Erasmus to be “his father.” Erasmus had himself gone after the Sor-

bonnard theologians, whom he called a “surprisingly supercilious and insufferable species of individuals.” [Erasmus of Rotterdam, *In Praise of Folly*]

Even the names of Rabelais’ characters are gigantic. For instance, when Gargantua came into the world, he cried out “Drink, Drink, Drink!,” whereupon his father, Grandgousier (“Great gullet”), decided to name him “Quel grand tu as” (“What a big [gullet] you have”). Similarly, “Pantagruel” means “thirsting for everything.” Rabelais explains that, “Panta in Greek means ‘everything,’ and Gruel, in the Agarene language, means ‘thirsty.’”³ This relates to biblical times, when, according to the Renaissance version of the Acts of the Apostles, a little imp named Pantagruel had the nasty function of pouring salt into the mouths of drunkards. So, Rabelais transformed this little devil into a humanist giant, and transformed the thirst for wine, into a thirst for truth and knowledge. But, laughter is the best thirst-quencher of all, which is why, for Rabelais, cognition is the perfect marriage of wine-drinking and jollity.

Through his mastery of metaphor, his “fabulations and confabulations,” Rabelais also claimed to have properly practiced his medical arts according to Hippocrates, as he said by comparing his treatment to “a combat and a farce played with three characters, the sick, the sickness, and the doctor.” Thus, when the doctor acts in a creative, cognitive, enthusiastic way, the sick person will acquire the power to change and cure himself “by transfusion of the spirits serene or tenebrous, aerial or terrestrial, joyous or melancholic, of the doctor into the sick person. As Plato and Averroes practiced.”

An Economic Policy for The General Welfare

During Rabelais’ lifetime, the French kingdom was divided between the oligarchical interests of the family of the Duke of Guise, on the Catholic side, and the family of the Duke of Bourbon, on the Protestant. In 1562, after the death of Rabelais, the massacre of Wassy triggered a terrible religious and civil war which was only momentarily stopped by the 1598 Edict of Nantes. Both sides of the conflict were manipulated, from behind the scenes, by the Venetian party’s oligarchical interests.

However, contrary to the Venetian intent of breaking up the French nation into a multitude of fratricidal principalities—the usual “divide and conquer” tactic—Rabelais had his own vision for a growing national economy, in the footsteps of the commonwealth policy of Louis XI. It is Panurge who develops Rabelais’ conception of the self-development of the economy for the welfare of all the people, by means of a sort of *parity price*

‘The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel’

François Rabelais (1494-1553) is said to have written his major works by dictation during his meals. Here is the menu: His first book, *Pantagruel* (1532), celebrates the “horrible events and fearsome deeds of Pantagruel, King of the Dispodes, son of the great giant Gargantua, composed by master Alcofribas Nasier” (an anagram for François Rabelais). Its great success led the author to plan a much-expanded agapic symposium. His second book, which tradition now places at the beginning of the histories, is *Gargantua* (1534), named after the father of Pantagruel, whose aversion to warfare, and love of peace, betray an attitude of religious tolerance. Book III (1546) describes the adventures of Pantagruel and his companion Panurge, and Book IV (1552) contains the famous story of Panurge’s sheep, and the rich satire on the Papacy and its administrative regulations (Decretals). The final, posthumously published Book V (1564) celebrates the extraordinary voyages to the Kingdom of Quintessence, and to the Oracle of the Bottle. *Bon appetit!* —PB

policy between lenders and debtors, modeled on the “purification process” of the production of blood in the human body.⁴ That *parity price* implies that the producer is owed a fair price for his product, plus a small margin of profit; that is, precisely the policy that results in purging the system of all the shit accumulated by the physical equivalent of deductive linear axioms.

The economic question opens up with the issue of

Panurge’s debts: “ ‘But, asked Pantagruel, when will you be out of debt?’ ‘At the Greek Kalends,’⁵ replied Panurge, ‘when all the world will be content, and you will be your own heir. God forbid that I should be debt-free. For then I shouldn’t find anyone to lend me a penny. A man who leaves no leaven over night will never raise dough in the morning. Always owe something to someone. Then there will be prayers continually offered

How Gargantua repaid the Parisians for their welcome . . .

Some days after they had finished their refreshments, Gargantua went to see the sights of the town, and everyone stared at him in great wonder. For the Parisians are such simpletons, such gapers, and such feckless idiots that a buffoon, a peddler of indulgences, a mule with bells on its collar, or a fiddler at a crossroad will draw a greater crowd than a good preacher of the Gospel.

The people so pestered him, in fact, that he was compelled to take a rest on the towers of Notre Dame; and when from there he saw so many, pressing all around him, he said in a clear voice:

“I think those clodhoppers want me to pay for my kind reception and offer them a solatium. They are quite justified, and I am going to give them some wine, to buy my welcome. But only in sport, *par ris*.”

Then, with a smile, he undid his magnificent codpiece and, bringing out his john-thomas, pissed on them so fiercely that he drowned two hundred and sixty thousand, four



Gargantua rests on the towers of Notre Dame.

hundred and eighteen, not counting the women and small children.

A number of them, however, were quick enough on their feet to escape this piss-flood; and when they reached the top of the hill above the University, sweating, coughing, spitting, and out of breath, they began to swear and curse, some in a fury and others in sport (*par ris*), “Carymary, Carymara! My holy

bart, we’ve been drenched in sport! We’ve been drenched *par ris*.”

Hence it was that the city was ever afterwards called Paris. Formerly it had been named Leuce-tia, as Strabo tells us in his fourth book; which in Greek signifies white place. This was on account of the white thighs of the ladies of that city. And since at this re-christening all of the spectators swore, each by saints of his own parish, the Parisians, who are made up of all nations and all sorts, have proved by nature both good swearers and good men of law, also somewhat overbearing. For which reason Joaninus de

Baranco in libro de copiositate reverentiarum, considers that they derive their name of Parrhesians from the Greek, in which language the word signifies bold of speech.

—from *Book I, Chapter 17**

* Excerpts reprinted from *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. by J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1955), by permission of the publisher.

up to God to grant you a long and happy life. Through fear of losing his money, your creditor will always speak well of you in all company.’ ” [Book III, Chapter 3]

Panurge devised a very ingenuous system of exchange between lenders and debtors, that created a perfectly harmonious generative process throughout the national economy; so much so, that the very idea of debt became Panurge’s fundamental “trump card”—precisely when it was used for investment in the expanded reproduction of

labor. The metaphor used is the circulation of the blood in the human body, where debtors and lenders become mutually interchangeable. “Thus they become debtors who previously were lenders. In the left ventricle the heart so subtilizes it [the blood—PB] that it is called spiritual, and then sends it to all the members through its arteries, to heat and ventilate the rest of the blood in the veins. The lungs never cease to refresh it with their lappets and bellows, and in return for this service the heart

How, by virtue of the Decretals,* gold is subtly drawn out of France into Rome

I would gladly pay for a dish of the best tripe a man could guzzle,” said Epistemon, “if only we could coltate with the originals those terrific chapters, Execrabilis, De multa, Si plures, De Annatis per totum, Nisi essent, Cum Monasterium, Quod dilectio, Mandatum, and certain others that draw a hundred thousand ducats and more every year out of France into Rome.”

“That’s no small sum, is it?” said Greatclod. “Still it doesn’t seem to me a very great one when you consider that the most Christian realm of France is the Roman court’s sole nurse. But can you show me any books in the world, books of philosophy, medicine, law, mathematics, polite literature, or even—God help me—of Holy Writ that can extract as much? No, not one. Pooh, Pooh! You won’t find a speck of this aurifluous energy in any of them, I promise you. And yet these devils of heretics won’t read them and learn them. Burn them, nip them with pincers, slash them, drown them, hang them, impale them, break them, dismember them, disembowel them, hack them, fry them, grill them, cut them up, crucify them, boil them, and roast them alive, the wicked Decretalifuge, Decretalicide heretics. Why, they’re worse than homicides, worse than parricides, these murderers of the Decretals, the devil take them.

“As for you, my good people, if you wish to be called

good Christians and have that reputation, I beseech you with clasped hands to believe no other thing, to have no other thought, to say, undertake, or do anything, except what is contained in our sacred Decretals and their corollaries: the fine Sextum, the magnificent Clementines, the splendid Supplementaries. What deific books! So you will be glorified, honoured, exalted, and rich in dignities



A gigantic copy of the Decretals.

and preferments in this world. You will be universally revered and dreaded, and preferred, chosen, and selected above all others. For there is no class of men beneath the cope of heaven in which you will find persons fitter for all undertakings and affairs than those who, by divine foreknowledge and eternal predestination, have applied themselves to the study of the holy Decretals. Should you wish to select a bold commander, a good captain and leader of an army in time of war, a man capable of fore-

* A Decretal is a papal letter relating to questions of ecclesiastical administration or discipline. A Decree is a papal letter concerning constitutional matters of canon law.—PB

gives them of its best blood through the pulmonary artery. In the end, it is so refined in the *miraculous network*, that it later becomes the material of the animal spirits, which endow us with imagination, reason, judgment, resolution, deliberation, ratiocination, and memory.” Thus, Panurge discovers that the more you create creditors, for the improvement of the productive sector, the more the economy will grow by providing the condition for the human mind to become creative. The under-

seeing all difficulties, of avoiding all dangers, of leading his men boldly to the attack, and gaily into battle, of taking no risk, but always winning without loss of life and turning his victories to good account, then, believe me you must take one who knows the Decrees. No, no, I mean the Decretals.”

“That was a big gaffe,” said Epistemon.

“Should you wish in time of peace to find a man fit and capable of undertaking the government of a republic, a kingdom, an empire, or a principality; of maintaining the Church, the nobility, the senate, and the people in riches, friendship, concord, obedience, virtue, and dignity, believe me, you must choose a Decretalist. Should you wish to find one capable, by means of his exemplary life, his rare eloquence, and his holy admonitions, of rapidly conquering the Holy Land without bloodshed, and converting the unbelieving Turks, Jews, Tartars, Muscovites, Mamelukes, and Sarabovites, then, believe me, you must choose a Decretalist. . . .

“Why, God’s blessed the Decretals. I’ll tell you a great secret. The Universities of your world generally bear on their crests and coats-of-arms a book, sometimes open, sometimes closed. Now what book do you think it can be?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Pantagruel. “I’ve never read a word of it.”

“Why, the Decretals, of course,” proclaimed Greatclod, “without which all of the privileges of all of the Universities would decay. I’ve taught you something there! Ha, ha, ha, ha!”

Here Greatclod began to belch, fart, laugh, dribble, and sweat. He handed his great, greasy bonnet with its four codpiece-like corners to one of the girls, who placed it on her head in great delight, having first kissed it most lovingly. For she took this as a sign and promise that she would be the first to marry.

“Hurrah,” cried Epistemon, “Hurrah! *Hoch! Trinken wir!* Let us drink! That was an apocalyptic secret.”
—from *Book IV, Chapter 53*

lying question becomes: Are the lenders good because there are more borrowers, or are the borrowers good because there are more lenders? What is the arithmetics of this? What causes goodness in the economy?:

“Lord bless me,” said Panurge, “now I come to think of it, when you twit me with my debts and creditors you’re challenging my trump card. Why, by that achievement alone I thought I had earned respect, reverence, and awe. For— notwithstanding the universal opinion of philosophers, who say that out of nothing, nothing is made—although I possessed nothing and had no prime substance, in this I was a maker and creator.”

“And what had I created? So many good, fine creditors. Creditors are fine, good creatures—and I’ll maintain that to everything, short of the stake. The man who lends nothing is an ugly, wicked creature, created by the great ugly devil of hell. And what had I made? Debts. Rare and excellent things! Debts, I say, exceeding in number the syllables resulting from the combination of all of the consonants with the vowels; a number once computed by the noble Xenocrates. If you judge of the perfection of debtors by the multitude of their creditors, you will not be far out in your practical arithmetic.” [Book III, Chapter 3]

That is the crucial cognitive discovery. Indeed, if anyone wants to understand economics, all he needs is a good heart!

Laughing and Drinking Are The Proper Characteristics of Man

Thus, Rabelais makes metaphorically clear, and in the funniest way, that the principle of *agapē*, love of mankind, requires that humanist political leaders must master the science of economics through the art of metaphor, and must drink wine to loosen themselves up, in order to better laugh at their own blockages and shortcomings; but also, most importantly, to make them access the cognitive principles of discovery which are required to replace the leaders of the Venetian ship of fools. Rabelais’ choice of the Socratic/Platonic method over the Aristotelian categorical system is the crucial case in point for the education of his giants, Gargantua and Pantagruel.

Rabelais, who was a practicing doctor in Lyon, used moderate wine-drinking as a curative means of eliminating diseases of tension, and he believed, also, that laughter—here, no limits were prescribed—had a similar curative effect, on both the soul and the body. Rabelais gave the highest priority to jokes as a curative means of solving the problems of the mind. This is why, in a warning to the reader, Gargantua emphasized that, “Laughter is the proper characteristic of man.” Laughter, wine, and

dirty jokes became political weapons in the war against the pervasive disease of oligarchism. This is also the reason why the priestess of the Oracle of the Holy Bottle, Bacbuc, will even go so far as to say, that, “Drinking is the proper characteristic of man” [SEE Box, facing page]. From that vantage point, Rabelais prescribes a very effective cure. And if the cure is not effective through laughter, Rabelais will grab the dogmatic theologian, or the Aristotelian fool, by the collar, and blow in his face ten thousand truths, until his wine breath, mixed with olive oil and garlic, convinces his opponent that he has no choice but to change.

A Crusade Against The Sorbonne Aristotelians

The biggest spoof on Aristotle and the Sorbonne scholastic theologians is found in the visit of Panurge to the Queen Entelechy,⁶ the spiritual daughter of Aristotle who is still alive after more than 1,800 years. This old bag Entelechy lives in the Isle of Quintessence⁷ which represents the paragon of Aristotelianism.

Rabelais’ text is riddled with names of commentators on Aristotle during the Renaissance, who treated the question of Entelechy as the fixed notion of perfection. Rabelais describes how Queen Entelechy is fed only meals made up of abstractions, and of all the forms of reasoning taken from the scholastic teachings of the Sorbonne University of Paris: “She had nothing for dinner, except a few Categories, Jecabots (abstractions), Eminins (truths), Dimions (images), Harborins (concepts), Chelimins (dreams), Second Intentions, Caradoth (terrifying visions), Antithesis, Metempsychosis, Transcendental Anticipations.” [Book V, Chapter 19] Rabelais wrote these names in Hebrew, just so that the Sorbonne theologians, who had rejected the teachings of Greek and Hebrew, would be forced to look up their meanings. But, Panurge, who is not a scholar, and who claims to be from “simple folk,” does not understand the Sorbonnard subtleties of language, as, for example, the difference between Entelechy meaning “perfection,” and Endelechy, meaning “enduring.” However, Panurge picks up on the ambiguity of the language, and warns the reader. “I’ll be damned if he isn’t flattering those devils”; and then the Queen’s spokesman makes the crucial point: “Aristotle, the first paragon of all of philosophy, was the godfather to the Queen, and rightly and properly called her Entelechy. Entelechy is her true name, and anyone who calls her by any other—can go and shit himself! Anyone who calls her by any other name errs by the whole breath of Heaven.” [Book V, Chapter 19] Here Rabelais is very subtle, because the phrase, in French, is

The Priestess Bacbuc leads Panurge into the presence of the Holy Bottle

There the noble priestess Bacbuc made Panurge kneel down and kiss the edge of the fountain, and then ordered him to get up and perform three Bacchic dances around it. After this she commanded him to sit down between two stools, with his arse on the ground. Then she opened her book of ceremonies and, whispering in his left ear, made him sing an old Athenian vintage song, which goes as follows:

Bottle! whose Mysterious Deep
Do’s ten thousand Secrets keep,
With attentive Ear I wait;
Ease my mind, and speak my Fate.
Soul of joy! Like Bacchus, we
More than India gain by thee,
Truths unborn thy Juice reveals,
Which Futurity conceals.
Antidotes to Frauds and Lies,
Wine, that mounts us to the Skies.
May thy Father Noah’s Brood
Like him drown, but in thy Flood.
Speak, so may the Liquid Mine
Of Rubies, or of Diamonds, shine.
Bottle! Whose Mysterious Deep
Do’s ten thousand Secrets keep,
With attentive Ear I wait;
Ease my mind, and speak my Fate.*

When this song was sung, Bacbuc threw something in the fountain, and suddenly the water began to boil fiercely, as the great cauldron of Bourgueil does when there is a high feast there. Panurge was listening in silence with one ear, and Bacbuc was still kneeling beside him, when there issued from the sacred Bottle a noise such as bees make that are bred in the flesh of a young bull slain and dressed according to the skilful method of Aristaeus, or such as is made by a bolt when a cross-bow is fired, or by a sharp shower of rain suddenly falling in

* Poem translation and illustration from *The Works of Mr. Francis Rabelais*, Vol. I, Privately Printed for the Navarre Society Limited (London: 1653).

summer. Then this one word was heard: Trink.

“By God almighty,” cried Panurge, “it’s broken or cracked, I’ll swear. That is the sound that glass bottles make in our country when they burst beside the fire.”

Then Bacbuc arose and, putting her hands gently beneath Panurge’s arms, said to him: “Give thanks to Heaven, my friend. You have good reason to. For you have most speedily received the verdict of the divine Bottle; and it is the most joyous, the most divine, and the most certain answer that I have heard from it yet, in all the time I have ministered to this most sacred Oracle. Get up, and let us examine the chapter in whose gloss this great verdict is interpreted.”

“Let us go,” said Panurge, “in Heaven’s name. I’m no wiser than I was last year. Enlighten us; where is the book? Turn it over; where is the chapter? Let us see this merry gloss.”

Bacbuc’s interpretation of the Verdict of the Bottle

Bacbuc threw something into the basin, and the water immediately ceased to boil. Then she led Panurge back to the middle of the large temple, where the fountain of life played. There she pulled out a huge silver book shaped like half a hogshead or the quart book of Sentences. This she dipped into the fountain, and said to him:

“The philosophers, preachers, and doctors of your world feed you with fine words through the ears. Here we literally take in our teaching orally, through the mouth. Therefore I do not say to you: Read this chapter, understand this gloss. What I say is: Taste this chapter, swallow this gloss. Once upon a time an ancient prophet of the Jewish nation swallowed a book, and became a learned man to the teeth, Now you must immediately drink this, and you will be learned to the liver. Here open your jaws.”

Panurge opened his mouth wide, and Bacbuc took the silver book—which we thought really was a book, because of its shape, which was that of a breviary. But it was a true breviary and natural flask, full of Falernian wine, which she made Panurge swallow.

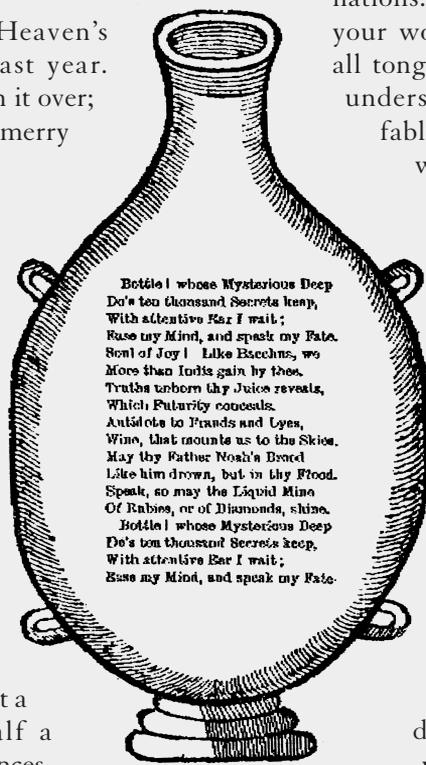
“That was a notable chapter,” said Panurge, “and most authentic gloss. Is that all that the verdict of the thrice-great bottle intended to convey? I like it very well indeed.”

“That is all,” answered Bacbuc, “for Trink is a ponomphaean word. It speaks oracles, that is to say, in all languages, and is famed and understood by all nations. To us it signifies: Drink. You say in your world that sack is a noun common to all tongues, and that it is rightly and justly understood by all nations. For, as Aesop’s

fable has it, all human beings are born with a sack around their necks, being by nature needy and begging from one another. There is no king under the firmament so powerful that he can do without other men’s help. There is no poor man so proud that he can do without the rich, not even Hippias the philosopher, who could do everything. And if one cannot do without a sack, even less can one do without drinking. So we maintain that not laughter but drinking is the proper lot of man. I do not mean simply and baldly drinking, for beasts also drink. I mean drinking good cool wine. Note, my friends, that by wine one grows divine; there is no surer

argument, no art of divination less fallacious. Your Academics affirm this when in giving the etymology of wine they say that the Greek *oinos* is like *vis*: force or strength. For it has the power to fill the soul with all truth, all knowledge, and all philosophy. If you have noticed what is written in Ionic characters above the gate of the temple, you may have understood that the truth lies hidden in wine. The Holy Bottle directs you to it. You must be your own interpreters in this matter.”

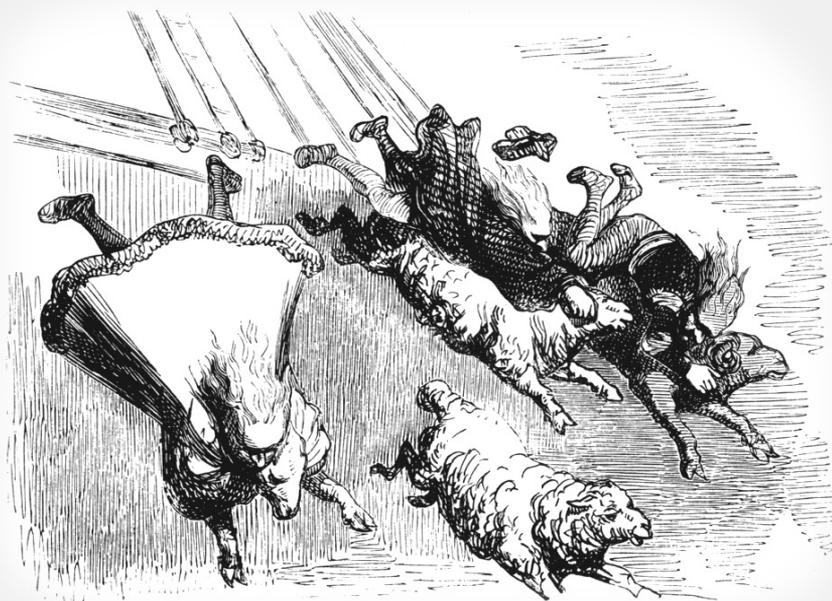
—from *Book V, Chapters 45 and 46*



Panurge drowns the Dealer and his sheep in the sea

All at once—I don't know how; things happened so swiftly that I hadn't time to watch them—Panurge without another word threw his crying and bleating sheep out into the sea. Then all the rest of the flock, crying and bleating on the same note, began to fling themselves into the water after him, one after another. In fact they all jostled one another to be the next to leap after their companion. It was impossible to keep them back. For, as you know, it is the nature of sheep to follow the leader, wherever he goes. Aristotle says, in fact, in his ninth book *De histor. Anim.*, that the sheep is the stupidest, silliest animal in the world.

The dealer, in his alarm at seeing his sheep perish by drowning, tried to prevent them and held them back with all his might. But it was useless. They all jumped into the sea, one after another, and were drowned. Finally Dingdong clutched hold of one great, strong ram by the fleece. He was up on the forward deck, and thought that if he could hold this one back he would save the rest. But the ram was so strong that he carried the dealer overboard with him in much the same way as the sheep of Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, carried Ulysses and his companions out of the cave. Dingdong was drowned, as were the rest of the shepherds and drovers, who seized the sheep, some by the horns, others by the legs, and others by the fleece,



Dingdong plunges in along with his sheep.

and were dragged into the water also, where they perished miserably. . . .

When the ship was rid of the dealer and his sheep, Panurge asked: "Are there any other sheepish souls left? Are there any followers of Thibault the Lamb or Reynauld the Ram, who are sleeping while the others graze? I'm sure I don't know. That was an old trick of war. What did you think of it, Brother John?"

"Anything you do is good," replied Friar John. "I can only find one fault with it. I think it was the old custom in war, on the day of the battle or assault, to promise the soldiers double pay for that day. If the battle was won, there would be plenty to pay them with. If it was lost, it would be disgraceful of them to claim the money, though those runaway Swiss from Gruyere did so after the battle of Cerisoles.

Well, to be consistent you ought to have deferred payment till the end. Then the money would have stayed in your purse."

"I had some shitten good fun for my money!" answered Panurge. "Why, that joke was worth more than fifty thousand francs. But let us sail on. The wind is favorable. Listen to me, Brother John. No man ever did me a good turn without getting a reward, or at least an acknowledgement. I'm not an ungrateful man, I never was, and never will be. And nobody's ever done me a bad turn without being sorry for it, either in this world or the next. I'm not such a fool as that."

"You're damning yourself like an old devil," answered Friar John. "It is written: *mihī vindictam*, etc.—Vengeance is mine. It's breviary stuff, that is."

—from *Book IV, Chapter 8*

so loose and fluid that it could slip into a totally different meaning. In point of fact, the French “s’aïlle chier, qui autrement la nomme! Qui autrement la nomme, erre partout le ciel,” could also mean, “go take a shit, as someone would otherwise call her! That which otherwise names her, goes on here and there through the entire breath of Heaven.” Which one do you think Rabelais really meant?

The Terrible Consequences Of Being a Sheepish Soul

Any introduction to Rabelais would not be complete without identifying Brother John, who, along with Panurge, are the two constant companions of our friendly giants, especially in *Gargantua*, and in Book III, and who are very close to the heart of Rabelais, Brother John for his courage, as well as for his determination to reform the dirty monkey business of his time. This Brother is the instrument used by Rabelais to go after the corruption of the church, the parasitical plague of false monks and mendicant orders that plagued Europe during this period. Bear in mind that Rabelais’ books were sold like hot cakes at each of the four yearly fairs at Lyon, and that Lyon was the international crossroads leading to northern France, Belgium, Switzerland, Italy, and central Europe. From that vantage point, Rabelais was getting his works distributed to the greatest possible number of people. This is how Rabelais’ laugh was heard throughout the entirety of Europe.

And then, there is Panurge, who is just as noisy and tumultuous as Brother John, less courageous, but more cunning. Rabelais took a great deal of Panurge’s character from the Italian “giant” story of the Macaronis (1517), written by de Folengo. For example, as the Italian story goes, the grandchild of Charlemagne, Balde, is accompanied by the giant Fracasse and his companion, the cun-

ning Cingar, who throws the sheep of an insolent merchant into the water to teach him a lesson. This is the precursor of the famous “sheep of Panurge” in Book IV [SEE Box, facing page], the terrible catastrophe of the sheepish souls who follow popular opinion, who adopt the politically-correct views one must be seen adopting, in order to be accepted within one’s social milieu.

Thus, to be Rabelaisian, means to be totally outrageous, raunchy, crude in every way, absolutely stubborn in matters of truth, relentless against hypocrisy, and against all forms of popular opinion; but, also, in a more profound way, it means *axiom busting*. For example, see how this is done in the juicy story of how Paris got its name. The aim is not to be outrageous for the sake of being outrageous. Rabelais provides the reader with a method to free man from mediocrity, a method that every Platonist has used throughout history, and which consists in going to war against the mediocrity of deductive logic, and releasing those powers of reason which are developed through the individual’s re-cognition of discoveries of principle. Leibniz called this the *Art of Invention*; that is, you don’t know what curve you are going to discover, but you know what property is required to construct it. The same principle of discovery applies to the Rabelaisian giant: you don’t know where you are going to end up, but you know how to get there. You don’t know what will make you a genius, but you know what will destroy the disease of mediocrity.

From the vantage point of this method, the humanism of Rabelais concerns every one of us today, in every country of this globe, in any period of history. A new Renaissance will be assured of its victory, on the day when all the citizens of the world take to heart the warning of Rabelais about the terrible ending of the “sheep of Panurge,” and heed the call to participate in his hearty laugh, and choose to become, indeed, Rabelaisians.

1. “Simultaneity of eternity” being the LaRouchean phraseology; see, for example, Lyndon H. LaRouche, Jr., “The Truth About Temporal Eternity,” *Fidelio*, Summer 1994 (Vol. III, No. 2).
2. I.e., “For laughs.”
3. Except where otherwise noted, all the texts of Rabelais in this article are taken from François Rabelais, *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. by J.M. Cohen (New York: Penguin Books, 1955).
4. Rabelais’s metaphor for economic circulation of the blood in the body is taken from Plato’s *Timaeus*, 81a, in which the harmonic circulation and purification process of the blood is presented as a microcosm of the harmony of the celestial sphere, and in *The Republic*, Book X, 616c-d.
5. During the Roman empire, the month was divided into three parts: the Kalends, the Nones, and the Ides. The Kalends period was

- reserved for the payments of debts. However, the Greeks did not have Kalends as a division of their month. So, the postponement of a debt to the Greek Kalends, meant that it would never be paid.
6. “Entelechy”: Aristotelian/scholastic term for the “perfectly actualized.”
7. “Quintessence” (“Fifth essence”): Aristotelian/scholastic term for the material substratum of the heavens, differing in its essential being from the four elements (earth, air, fire, and water) out of which the sublunary world is composed. In the Middle Ages, the term was used to signify “purest essence,” with a pejorative connotation of a chemical extract or concentrate derived by magical treatment. Rabelais ridicules the Sorbonne professors’ claim to discover the “essence” of things by speculating to the *n*th degree of abstraction, as opposed to grasping what he calls the “substantific marrow.”