

ABOUT SOME CHARACTERS OF RABELAIS. REALITY?

MYSTIFICATION?

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Last December, at our annual meeting in Chicago I read a paper on "Literary Onomastics on the work of Rabelais;" of course it would take volumes to study and dissect the Five Books of François Rabelais, for not only was he a Renaissance man, but the Renaissance Man himself.

I would say without exaggeration that the Five Books are a complete encyclopedia, for they present the full aspect of life in every respect, and touch to such subjects as: linguistics, foreign languages, history, geography, philosophy, education, gastronomy, the art of war, law, religion, to cite only few of the topics....

In my previous paper, last year, I had entered a series of explanations of Rabelais' techniques in the choice of his characters' names. Today I will speak about some of his "personnages" and present different viewpoints of who they were. Did they exist? Were they the result of his inextinguishable imagination? But first I will give you a synopsis of the Five Books.

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According to a letter of Dr. Paul Reneaume, M.D., from Blois, GARGAMELLE (the mother of Gargantua) should be the mother of Francis I, and GARGANTUA (son of Grandgousier) should be Francis I, king of France, as for GARGANTUA's mare, the mistress of the king: Madame d'Etampes.¹

Sir Thomas Urquhart of Cromarty, Scotland, had in 1653 published his translation of the two first books of Rabelais. However, it was not until 1694, thirty-four years after the death of Sir Urquhart that the other books were published posthumously by a Frenchman from Rouen, Pierre-Antoine Le Motteux, who had emigrated to England after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Le Motteux published and completed the translation found in Urquhart's papers.² The "Key" affirmed that GRANDGOUSIER was Louis XII, GARGANTUA, Francis I and PANTAGRUEL (son of Gargantua), Henry II, but the author added quickly: "We discover none of Louis II's features in king GRANDGOUSIER, who does none of the actions which history ascribes to that prince; so that the King of Siam or the Cham of Tartary might as reasonably be imagined to

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be Grandgosier as Louis XII; as much may be said of GARGANTUA, and PANTAGRUEL, who do none of the things that have been remarked by historians, as done by the King Francis I and Henry II of France."³

According to Le Motteux about his historical identifications, he departs from PANURGE (friend of Pantagruel) as the base. He says:

"We find these four characters in Panurge:

1. He is well skilled in the Greek, Hebrew, and Latin tongues, he speaks high and low Dutch, Polish, Spanish, Portuguese, English, Italian, etc.
2. He is learned, understanding, politic, sharp, cunning, and deceitful in the highest degree.
3. He publicly professes the popish religion, tho' he in reality laughs at it, and is nothing less than a papist.
4. His chief concern, next to that of eating, is a marriage, which he has a desire, yet he is afraid to contract, lest he should meet with his match, that is a wife even as bad as himself."⁴

Le Motteux is making allusion to Jean de Montluc, bishop of Valence (France) and brother of Blaise de Montluc, the author of the Commentaires.⁵ But about the other main personages' identification Le Motteux says:

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"History assures us, that Montluc, bishop of Valence, ow'd his advancement to Margeret de Valois, queen of Navarre and sister to King Francis I. She took him out of a monastery, where he was no more than a jacobin-friar, and sent him to Rome, whereby he was raised to the rank of ambassador, which was the first step to his advancement.

Thus PANTAGRUEL should be Anthony de Bourbon, duke of Vendosme, King Henry the IV's father, and Louis XIV's great grandfather. He was married to Jeanne d'Albret, the only daughter of the said queen Margeret, and of Henry d'Albret, King of Navarre, after the death of the said Henry d'Albret, whom I take to be GARGANTUA. Consequently his father John d'Albret, King of Navarre, excommunicated by Pope Julius III and deprived of the best part of his kingdom by Ferdinand, King of Aragon, should be GRANDGOUSIER.⁶

...PICHROCOLE is doubtless the king of Spain, who deprived John d'Albret of that part of Navarre, which is on the side of the Pyrenees (Pyreanean) mountains that is next to Spain..the word Pichrocole is made up of two, ΠΙΚΡΟΣ (bitter), and ΧΟΛΗ (choler), bile or gall, to denote the temper of that king, who was nothing but bitterness and gall. This doubtly fits Charles V; first with relation to Francis I; against whom he conceived an immortal hatred, and to Henry d'Albret; whose kingdom he possessed...⁷

As for brother Jean des Entommeures, Le Motteux assures that "the monk is not Cardinal of Lorraine; but not other than Odet de Coligny, Cardinal of Chatillon."⁸

However we are warned against Le Motteux's "discoveries," who, as a Huguenot, sees in Rabelais and in

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most of his main characters if not Protestants at least friends of the reformed faith.

The Catholic Jean Bernier does not share the same viewpoints of Le Motteux. To him GRANDGOUSIER is neither continuously Louis XII, nor GARGANTUA, always Francis I. Hence in the second chapter of the Third Book, he suddenly recognizes Francis I in PANURGE.⁹

In the chapter IX of Gargantua, in which Voltaire will discover evident allusions to the livery of the kings of France, Bernier does not see any relation with any king at all.¹⁰

The confusion grows progressively as we read the Jugement. Thus

"The PANURGE of the chapter IX of Pantagruel is neither the Cardinal d'Amboise, nor the 'Connestable' de Montmorenci, whatever say the 'Contemplatifs'..., even less the kings Francis I and Henry II, even not the Cardinal du Bellay, master of our Lucien(...) it is a name made at pleasure to signify an illustrious wretch, and miserable by its fault, so much one has seen in any epoch these lazy stubborn debauchee, of whom one could have done some good, if they had accepted to submit themselves to the rules and make good use of their talents..."¹¹

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However he does not refute all the arguments of his predecessors and he accepts "la Grand Jumant" (the Great Mare) as being the duchess of Etampes. The RAMINAGROBIS is the poet Guillaume Cretin.¹²

A point, however, remains to be debated: is it really necessary to dig a well towards China and not to meet the bottom, in order to discover who were in reality the main personages or secondary true life characters of Rabelais' work? To complicate a reading, that was already hard to follow because of the mystifying verve of the author, by trying to identify the personages of this portrait gallery of the Renaissance takes away some pleasure from the reader, but human nature is thus made that even if we would succeed in locating these characters in history, still there would be enough doubt in some scholar's mind to question, contradict, destroy and reconstruct in order to succeed (do we ever completely succeed?) in getting through the last trace of the "substantial marrow."

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NOTES

¹Letter B.N., ms. fr. 24514; pub. Ed. Le Duchat, T. III. p. 214.

²Marcel de Grève, Etudes Rabelaisiennes, Tome V, Droz, Genève, 1964, p. 48.

³Op. Cit., p. 49.

⁴John Hart, Rabelais' work, 5 vols., in 12^o published by Ozell, London, 1701, pp. 38-39.

⁵Marcel de Grève, p. 51.

⁶Ibid.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Ibid.

⁹op. cit., p. 54.

¹⁰Jean Bernier, Jugement et nouvelles observations sur les oeuvres grecques, latines, toscanes et francaises de Maître François Rabelais D.M. ou Le Veritable Rabelais réformé. Paris, Laurent d'Hory, 1697, in 12^o., p. 148.

¹¹Marcel de Grève, p. 55.

¹²Ibid.