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## Introduction

On 3rd August 1546 (his birthday: he was thirty-seven years old), Étienne Dolet, the great Humanist poet, philologist, publisher and translator, having been tortured, was taken out to the Place Maubert in Paris, within sight of Notre-Dame. Here, he was strangled and burnt. Copies of his books accompanied him to the flames. His crime? Greek. More specifically, he had been found guilty of producing and publishing a translation from Plato which attributed to Socrates the heretical words “After death you will be nothing at all (*plus rien du tout*)”.

His version may have been wrong (or tendentious), but translating from Greek, even if quite accurately, was in those days a dangerous business: it was those last four words in French that sealed Dolet’s fate. Not only did an interest in the Greek Gospels (made available by Erasmus in his *Novum Instrumentum omne* of 1516) provoke doubts about the way the essentially Latin world of Roman Catholicism had interpreted the Scriptures; it even raised the possibility that the wisdom of the Greeks, instead of being merely a pagan preliminary to the greater and more perfect wisdom of the Christianity into which it had been subsumed, might rival and overtake its successor. In its challenge to Latinity, the Greek language itself had a whiff of subversion about it.

A quarter-century earlier, in 1520, the German Humanist Johann Reuchlin had been condemned by Pope Leo X. His crime? Hebrew. Reuchlin was among the first Christian scholars of the time to learn Hebrew, and the first to introduce it into the curriculum of the university, producing pioneering grammars of the language for a Latin-reading audience. In 1510, he had persuaded the Emperor Maximilian of Germany not to burn all the Hebrew books found in the possession of the Jewish communities of Cologne and Frankfurt. This angered the Dominicans who ran the Inquisition, and the subsequent controversy divided Europe, with the Humanists largely siding with Reuchlin. The Pope’s decision signalled the Church’s opposition to the free study of texts in Hebrew (Reuchlin had studied not only the Talmud but also the Cabbala).

“Where they burn books, in the end they will burn people too.” Heinrich Heine’s observation, a hundred years before the Nazi book-burnings and the subsequent Shoah, seems to us to have a terrifying prescience. But it was also a statement of mere historical record: people and books, people *because* of books, had for long been considered flammable material for what Voltaire, in *Candide*, was to call a “nice auto-da-fé”. The tongues of fire (the gift of other languages) granted to the disciples at Pentecost had, as if in some demonic parody, become the flames licking the bodies of people who had “misinterpreted” sacred texts; and this was to become increasingly the case in the religious conflicts that shook Europe after the Reformation.

The burning of Dolet may seem a grim way to introduce Rabelais’s work. After all, everyone knows the meaning of the word “Rabelaisian”: a huge (indeed gargantuan) appetite for food, drink and knowledge, combined with a bawdy sense of humour and a profligacy of linguistic styles. And all these things are indeed present in *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*. But the laughter, the playfulness and the zest for life, even at its most scabrous, spring (as so often) from a certain darkness. It was almost exactly halfway between the condemnation of Reuchlin the Hebraist and Dolet the Hellenist that the first edition of *Pantagruel* was published, at Lyon in 1532. Its publisher, Claude Nourry, gave it the appearance of a legal textbook, set in Gothic characters – probably no more than a good joke, but symptomatic nonetheless of the disguises to which François Rabelais (or, as he anagrammatically called himself, Alcofribas Nasier) was obliged to resort throughout his career. *Pantagruel* was followed, in 1534, by *Gargantua*, a prequel telling the story of Pantagruel’s father. Both drew on the tales of Giants that had been in oral circulation for some time and had recently been printed. But they used these tales as the basis for a satirical attack on the Catholic Church as it reacted to the spread of new ideas (the Reformation and the spread of Humanism). In his later editions of both works (the last came out in 1542), Rabelais found it expedient to mitigate his attacks on the Sorbonne, the French bastion of Catholic orthodoxy, ruled over by its principal, Noël Bédac, a fierce opponent of the Humanists.

Rabelais had been a personal friend of Étienne Dolet, though they seem to have fallen out when Dolet pirated Rabelais’s work; and Reuchlin is mentioned as the victim of churchly obscurantism in *Pantagruel*. Rabelais

too was fascinated by Greek and Hebrew, the “original” languages of Scripture that lay behind the Vulgate, sensing that they contained meanings that countered received theological opinion. But he was also obsessed by languages as such – languages ancient and modern (he was obliged to change monastic orders when his Franciscan superiors confiscated his classical Greek textbooks), real and imagined (Utopian, Antipodean, Lanternlandish), written and spoken (his works were read aloud to François I by the Bishop of Mâcon, and orality in all its forms permeates his texts). French itself is, in his books, a whole Babel of languages, including a great number of regional dialects.

There is a joyousness in this linguistic expansiveness, but it coexists with an undertone of anxiety, based to a great degree on the uncertainty of meaning between and within these languages. And Rabelais is no liberal: he includes vast numbers of styles, idioms and languages, but this does not mean he endorses them. Many are held up for ridicule, and punished. The student from Limoges who has been studying in Paris and tries to ape the hifalutin jargon of the Latin Quarter (*Pantagruel*, Chapter 6) is condemned to death by thirst – a parched, dry death, though admittedly not as bad as being burnt at the stake. And, in works often lauded as celebrations of both “high” and “low” culture, many languages seem to be absent. By and large, for example, women in these two books rarely speak: the mothers of both Gargantua and Pantagruel exist almost entirely to give birth to their progeny, and then they die, and the Parisian lady courted by Panurge (*Pantagruel*, Chapter 22) is given a stilted, frigid discourse.

Rabelais is lucid about the way exclusion is inherent in language even at its most generous. As it reaches out to hold us in its embrace, it is simultaneously pushing us away; we use it, but it refuses just to be used; we say something, and then look back quizzically at our utterance, which was so often not quite what we meant (as if we ever did mean one thing). Hence the many occasions on which Rabelais corrects himself, insisting that he’s desperate to get it right. This is partly a reflex to the atmosphere of suspicion in an era (like Rabelais’s, and like ours) when every statement could be scrutinized for the underlying attitudes it might be seen to convey. But it also highlights a more general problem about both the inscrutability of reference (what does a text mean?) and the unknowability of its addressee (who is it for? how will they interpret

it?). A welcome may sound like the slamming of a door; shared jokes may depend on (or conceal) in-jokes exclusive to a narrow elite; every communication risks being an excommunication.

The prologue of *Gargantua*, for example, begins by imposing stringent entrance requirements on its readers. To two categories, and to these two categories alone, are his writings dedicated: boozers, and those riddled with the pox (a relatively recent disease in Europe). No doubt we can interpret at least the first of these in an allegorical sense (the intoxication of the spirit, as well as that of spirits...), but (why) should we? In Chapter 2, he presents us with the opaque enigmas of the ‘Antidoted Babble-Bubbles’, a rhyming riddle of great antiquity discovered in a bronze tomb in Rabelais’s own part of Touraine. The beginning of the document has been gnawed away by the creatures of time; what is left is an example of the genre known in French as *coq-à-l’âne*. It happens to sound even more Rabelaisian in English: “from cock to ass” (i.e. “from rooster to donkey”); less scabrously, *coq-à-l’âne* involves skipping from one subject to another, often in rhyme but without any obvious reason. The ‘Antidoted Babble-Bubbles’ talk about licking a slipper and curing a cold with the perfume of a turnip; they mention St Patrick’s hole (and other holes) and various Olympian deities who do a tetchy walk-on turn, and we end up with an apocalyptic prophecy of Nostradamus-like indeterminacy. All very confusing. But the gentle reader quickly pops on a pair of hermeneutic spectacles and ponders the deep meaning that may lie beneath this superficial nonsense. Is the gentle reader right to do so?

The Prologue says both “yes” and “no” to this. Rabelais/Alcofribas bids us remember Socrates, compared by Plato to Silenus: repulsive and ridiculous on the outside, but full of goodness within. Maybe the text we are reading is like Silenus. On the outside, we have the Renaissance equivalent of knob jokes, farts, potty humour and flatulent booziness, but it contains “a heavenly and priceless drug”, that “substantific marrow” sought by the most philosophical of beasts, the dog. But before we enthusiastically launch out into our learned exegeses, Alcofribas, without warning, pulls the rug away from under our feet. Do you really think – he asks – that Homer or Ovid wanted in their texts to convey the allegorical (and often moralistic) meaning that has been read into them by centuries of commentators? If you do, you’re a fool, a “Brother Boobius”. But if you *don’t*, then why does Rabelais himself suggest

that readers go beneath the surface to disinter a meaning that is not at first apparent? We must interpret, and yet our efforts to do so will be mocked by the text.

Rabelais was particularly aware of two areas of human culture in which interpretation of texts is both essential and fraught: theology and law. The court case between Sir Fartsniff and Sir Kissarse in *Pantagruel* is often read as a satire on the law (it is reminiscent of the attack on the law's delays in *Great Expectations*) and it does, here and there, allude to legal formulae, as well as constituting an exemplary case of Erasmus's adage about two deaf men disputing before a judge who is even deaf than they are. But although it has the exaggeration proper to satire, it does not have its steady focus; it is too alarmingly unrestrained for that, and swells into a grotesque, surrealistic panorama of sixteenth-century life in which everyday items in all their concrete opacity disport promiscuously to produce a frenzied scene from Brueghel or Bosch. The world gets out of hand: the result resembles those nightmares of early puberty when the growing body seems to be turning into an unruly giant. Here as elsewhere Rabelais is figuring, as it were, a pubescent language – French as a stropic, anxious, unpredictable, hormonal teenager, experimenting with drink and drugs (“heavenly and priceless” or not), trying out identities, pretending to know things (and learning rather a lot in the process), shrugging “*whatever*” when getting it wrong, both aping and rebelling against the adult world, the texts that are already there, the inherited scripts and prescriptions that are often written in another language, obscure and tantalizing.

So Rabelais's texts grow, but never entirely grow up. They repeat themselves in a set of virtuoso variations on a core set of themes. In many ways *Gargantua* is *Pantagruel* 2.0. It has the same basic narrative: the hero is born, the hero is educated badly, i.e. scholastically, and then more humanistically; he travels, he meets a friend and companion – Panurge, Frère Jean – he is faced with riddles and enigmas, he is forced to go to war. Within this basic narrative framework, the texts shrink or (mainly) swell. As Rabelais revised his works between 1532 and 1542, he was forced to censor himself (so as not to run too many risks from the Church authorities, and not to offend the King), so he cut and deleted; but he also added, especially to the lists (of games, of books...). In *Gargantua*, Rabelais seems to mock the imperial ambitions of the Holy



Roman Emperor Charles V, whose motto was “*plus outre*” (“further”, or simply “more”). The excitement we feel on reading, in Chapter 33, of the vast horizons opening up to Renaissance exploration is tempered by the realization that this world is viewed by the villain Picrochole as a mere space for his own self-aggrandizement: it exists to be invaded.

The same ambivalence towards this bad infinite, this drive to encompass “more” (even when it is not more power or more land but more knowledge that is being absorbed), affects Rabelais’s wonderful and scary lists. Their encyclopedic euphoria is checked by a sense of comic futility. The list of the games played by the young Gargantua is a good example: all these games, such fun to play, induce a painful exhilaration. (I have in turn played fast and loose with Rabelais’s list of games, for various reasons, but mainly to register the sense of sheer panic – a word coming from the Greek for “all” – that such lists can induce.) Some of the lists have a cloacal feel to them. Mallarmé thought that everything in the world existed to end up in a book; the catalogue of arse-wipes invented by young Gargantua gives rise to the suspicion that everything in the world can equally well serve as the equivalent of loo paper, something to be smeared with shit. And though he claims (*Pantagruel*, Chapter 5) that Accursius’s glosses bemedded the original clarity of Roman Law, he gleefully piles up (mockingly? seriously? both?) his own anal-pedantic bibliographical references, in the crabbed scholarly shorthand of the time. (The notes that I have added – all too Accursian, no doubt – are discreetly placed at the end of the book, where the reader can safely ignore them.)

Even when Rabelais inverts the scale of values of the “old” world he is mocking, the result can be uncertain. It is easy to laugh, for example, at the decadent jargon of late scholasticism, but the positive values that Rabelais sometimes seems to be putting forward can be equally fragile and perplexing. His utopian educational project, Thelema, a kind of reversal of the old abbeys, is less of a blueprint than it might seem. This anti-abbey is too mechanical in its negation of the values of medieval monasticism. Poverty, chastity and obedience are replaced by Bright Young Things in posh clothes disporting themselves in a kind of Summerhill-cum-Oxbridge-sur-Loire. It is a marriage bureau too, since they all manage to find a mate – not surprising, given the alarming uniformity and domesticity that soon settles down on this apparently

libertarian community, with its celebrated quasi-anarchist motto, “Do as you will”. It is disheartening to see that they all manage to want the same things at the same time. Someone says “Let’s play!” and they all play. Not for nothing was Rabelais the inventor (elsewhere in this text) of the French word *automate*. Thelema, the brainchild of Frère Jean and Gargantua, is a textbook illustration of the sociologist Max Weber’s observation that once Luther had left the cloister and initiated the secularization of the religious life, *everyone* became a monk or a nun; apparent freedom and spontaneity were merely regulated by more internalized (and thus more insidious) constraints. Surely Thelema instils the same sense of *claustrophobia* as the old cloisters from which it was meant to represent an escape?

But any sense of closure is soon dissipated. The refusal of the texts to settle down into a single set of values is embodied in its linguistic restlessness. Much of the time, the focus in these texts is not on the Giants and their deeds, but on the ever-changing languages that wash through them and around them. Like James Joyce in *Ulysses*, Rabelais is capable of changing style from chapter to chapter, or indeed from sentence to sentence, phrase to phrase. We may feel secure in a style, or point of view, or set of values espoused by the text, but then the author will turn on his tale with a coarse jest, or mock the reader with a curse. We are swept away (often comically) by doubt. But then – it can never be said too often – the whole book has one very good excuse for its excesses, its baroque whirligigs of self-conscious vertigo, its exaggerated but real brutality and its flights of frenzied, zany humour: its author is drunk, as are many of his characters. His readers, and his translators, are expected to follow suit.

It is perhaps Panurge who best incarnates the ambivalence we may feel for the pleasures and pains of living in Babel. Panurge is the great polyglot, the padding, plotting, anarchic, Mephistophelean figure who, once he has appeared in *Pantagruel*, constantly usurps centre stage. Scholars often consider him to be the anti-hero of the book. In particular, we are encouraged to condemn him for being “curious”, in other words for a boundless inquisitiveness that is ultimately both self-seeking and destructive.

It is true that in Rabelais’s later works Panurge’s fidgety curiosity becomes both the motor of the narrative and the source of an increasing

sense of futility and paralysis: in the sequel to *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, the *Third Book*, he becomes obsessed with the question of whether he should marry, given the fact that he is terrified of being cuckolded. He craves certainty, and every branch of human knowledge is dragooned into this vain quest. Already in *Pantagruel*, Panurge is a problem: he can be a nasty piece of work, the kind of man who gives practical jokes a bad name. His vengeance on the hoity-toity Parisian lady who repels his advances is one example. “He hath put down the mighty from their seat” is doubtless a text close to Rabelais’s heart, as in his marvellously farcical (and oddly mystical) vision of the topsy-turvy underworld visited by Epistemon, where the rich and powerful have exchanged places with poverty-stricken philosophers; but in Panurge this handy-dandy reversal can be ugly. And there can be a certain monotony or redundancy about Panurge’s words and deeds. When we first meet him, he shows off his multilinguistic prowess (how accurately he can speak all these languages is a moot point, but he can certainly talk the talk). But by first going through every language *except* French to produce basically one and the same message (“I’m hungry”), he paradoxically delays the satisfaction of that hunger, preferring the satisfaction of another oral pleasure.

Some of Panurge’s musings are rather more complex. He suggests building the walls of Paris from cunts and pricks; the idea stems from a typically cynical view of the cheapness of Parisian women’s maidenheads, and (remarking how flies would need to be kept off those alluring piles of private parts) he soon goes off at a tangent to tell a rather un-Aesopian fable. But for a brief moment we have been reminded that stone walls are less important than the flesh of the human beings they enclose, not just for the Spartan reason that it is the virtues of citizens that maintain a community, but for the more Rabelaisian reason that it is Eros who is the builder of cities, and that culture is raised on the powers and pleasures of ordinary human bodies. (This lesson has been eloquently embodied by Jamie McCartney’s recent installation *The Great Wall of Vagina*.) Likewise, it is Panurge who solves riddles, who outwits the English scholar Thaumaste when the latter comes to “test” his master, who heals the sick and raises the dead: activities that are all unnervingly reminiscent of certain episodes in the Gospels. Panurge may be the source of much of the laughter in these books (while Pantagruel becomes more staid and cautious from the *Third Book* onwards), even

if the dark streak of *philautia*, or self-love, is a question mark over his character; this sly, riddling, querulous figure is a problem child (albeit aged thirty-five, midway in life's journey – like the equally verbose thirty-something Hamlet, he has not grown up). It is this problem, perhaps, that Rabelais's later books will try to solve: what on earth can be done with such a brilliant and yet disconcerting character as Panurge? Nonetheless, Rabelais tells us that Pantagruel “loved him all his life”; it is the selfish, Till Eulenspiegel-like Panurge who adds so much sheer hectic exuberance to the text. I have to admit that he plays a part in my preference for *Pantagruel* over the later and more assured and serious *Gargantua*: the earlier text is more childish and “popular”, but its restless variety of tone, helter-skelter flights of verbal magic, and sheer exaggerated silliness are a tonic for many a dark day.

And after all, there is no need to get too anxious about the shadows that fall across Rabelais's text. We have given the Accuser of this world his due, with his endless carping about what we can and cannot read into texts, his endless “criticastering, nitpickering, nosepokering” – for this is how *Pantagruel* dismisses the enemy in its Conclusion (Chapter 34). *Gargantua* too may begin and end with a riddling hermeneutic shrug, pondering the enigmas of power and prophecy and persecution, of papal and imperial abuses, repression and censorship; but in the meantime we have been able to enjoy enthralling stories told in countless styles. We have travelled the length and breadth of France, and gazed out at a world that extends far beyond Europe, and indeed beyond planet Earth. On a more local level, we have spent time in the beautiful Loire, where many of the places mentioned in Rabelais's text (rivers, fords, towns, villages) can still be identified today. We have watched as our heroes, the son and then the father, have grown from leaky babies into mature (but still boyish) Renaissance princes. Devils roam the land, but they are easily dealt with; tyrants have been defeated; the fogies of the established order have been held up for mocking inspection. And, above all, we have been allowed to share, at a distance of many centuries, the bantering exchanges of a crowd at the second-best nativity scene in world literature (*Gargantua*, Chapter 5). A birth – the birth of a baby, the birth of language, of a language, of languages, perhaps the birth of a genre (what some people call the *modern European novel*, ever new): that's what it's ultimately all about.

When Erasmus retranslated the opening words of St John’s Gospel into Latin, he deviated from the Vulgate version *In principio erat verbum* and replaced it with *In principio erat sermo*. He was charged, inevitably, with heresy. He meant many things by *sermo*, but one of them, surely, was simply “speech”. In the beginning was, not a sublime origin, a metaphysical Logos or a hypostasized abstraction, but human speech – the speech of boozy babble and idle gossip, with all its power both to hurt and to heal, the speech that floods Rabelais’s writing: the speech of human beings gabbling away since the foundations of the world.

– Andrew Brown, 2018

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Christian Müller provided expert and erudite editing – my thanks go to him.

An earlier version of this translation was dedicated with all my love to Jenny, Adam, Rachel and Matthew; this revised translation is too, with unrevised love.

# PANTAGRUEL

KING OF THE DIPSODES,  
RESTORED TO HIS NATURAL STATE,

WITH HIS DREADFUL  
DEEDS AND EXPLOITS

COMPOSED BY THE LATE M. ALCOFRIBAS,  
ABTRACTOR OF THE QUINTESSENCE

MDXLII

FOR SALE AT FRANÇOYS JUSTE'S  
OUTSIDE OUR LADY OF COMFORT

Dizain by Master Hugues Salel,  
to the Author of this Book

If we do prize an author who can meld  
The sweet and useful, you'll be met with praise,  
Of that be sure: your little book has spelled  
A message that, beneath its surface haze  
Of quips and japes, our diligence repays  
With interest. To me it all seems clear:  
A new Democritus does now appear,  
Laughing at all of this our human life.  
Press on! If you're not recognized down here,  
You'll meet with your reward in heaven above.\*

## The Author's Prologue

Most splendiferous, most chivalrous and most valiant champions, gentlefolk (and others), who love to devote yourselves to all affable and honourable occupations! You've recently read, marked, learnt and inwardly digested the *Great and Inestimable Chronicles of the Enormous Giant Gargantua*;<sup>\*</sup> and like the truly faithful, you've gallantly believed them, frequently pondering them in the company of honourable ladies great and small, telling them wonderful stories from these *Chronicles* at eloquent length whenever you were at a loose end. You deserve the highest praise for this, and sempiternal remembrance.

You know, I only wish everyone would drop his own tasks, ignore the claims of his professional life and put his business on a back burner so as to devote himself entirely to these *Chronicles*, without his mind being sidetracked or hampered by any distractions until he knew them off by heart. Then, if by any chance the art of printing should fall into abeyance, or all books should perish, in times to come everyone would be able to teach the *Chronicles* to his children, word-perfect, and pass them down from hand to hand to his successors and heirs, like a religious Cabbala. There's more juicy profit to be gained from the *Chronicles* than a certain gang of scabby blustering braggarts might perhaps think: *they* understand these joyous little tales even less well than Raclet understands the *Institutes*.<sup>\*</sup>

I've known high and mighty lords, plenty of them in fact, who'd go off hunting great beasts, or send hawks to chase after she-ducks, and then, if the beast wasn't found on their trail of broken branches, or the falcon just hung hovering in mid-air on seeing its prey escape, well, they were pretty miffed, as you can well imagine. But they didn't just stand around cooling their heels; they could take refuge and consolation in rereading the inestimable deeds of the aforesaid Gargantua.

There are other people around and – I kid you not – when they're suffering from a bad attack of toothache, and they've spent all their wealth on doctors but are still in pain, they've discovered that the most effective



remedy consists in wrapping these *Chronicles* up between two nice warm cloths and applying them just where it hurts, making a poultice of them with a little powder of fool's gold.

But what can I say about those poor folk who are suffering from pox and gout? Ah, how often we've seen them, just after they've been well rubbed down with ointment and nicely greased up,\* their faces all shining like the lock on the door of the meat pantry, and their teeth clattering like when you play the keys on an organ or spinet keyboard, and they were foaming at the chops like a boar's when it's driven by a pack of hounds into the nets! And what did they do then? Their whole consolation consisted in listening to someone reading out a few pages of the aforesaid book. And we've heard some of them swear that a hundred hogsheads full of old devils could come and drag them off if they didn't start to feel noticeably better when they listened to readings from that book as they stewed in their limbo\* – exactly as women in childbirth feel their labour pains lessening when they have the life of St Margaret read out to them.

Pretty impressive, don't you think? Just find me a book in any language, on any subject or topic whatever, that has such effective qualities, properties and prerogatives, and I'll treat you to a half-pint of tripe. Nay, gentlemen, thrice nay! This book is one of a kind: it has no rivals or competitors. I'll go to the stake for it... but no further. And as for all those who'd claim the opposite, you can count them as deceivers, predestinojugglers, impostors and seducers.

It's quite true that you *can* find certain occult properties in various vintage books: *Tosspot*, *Orlando Furioso*, *Robert the Devil*, *Fierabras*, *William the Fearless*, *Huon of Bordeaux*, *Montevieille* and *Matabrune*.\* But they just can't be spoken of in the same breath as the one we're talking about. And the world has come to realize, by never-failing experience, the enormous advantages and benefits to be derived from the aforementioned *Gargantuan Chronicles*. After all, the printers have shifted more copies of it in two months than they'll sell copies of the Bible over the next nine years.

I, therefore, your most humble servant, would like to add even more to your enjoyment, and I'm offering you right now, up front, another book of the same calibre, except it's a bit more reliable and credible than the other one I mentioned. Now I don't want you to walk open-eyed

into the trap of imagining that I'm going to talk of this book the same way the Jews discuss their Law. I wasn't born under such a star, and I've never told a lie or pretended something was true when it wasn't. I'm like the lusty pelican, up before the beak, slap 'n tickle in court, m'lud, if I may just speak... *Quod vidimus testamur*.<sup>\*</sup> This is the story of the dreadful deeds and exploits of Pantagruel; I've been in his service ever since I stopped being a page, right up to the present day, and he's given me leave to visit my native barn and byre and find out if any relative of mine is still in the land of the living.

And so, let me bring this prologue to a conclusion: may I be carried off by a hundred thousand basketfuls of fine devils, body and soul, innards and entrails, if I lie by so much as a single word in the whole story. And in the same way, may St Anthony's fire<sup>\*</sup> burn you up, may the falling sickness lay you low, may a thunderbolt knock you flat, may venereal ulcers clag your legs, may bloody stools squirt from your guts, may you be racked by the bad fine fire of bump and grind,<sup>\*</sup> in thin strands like a cow's hairs, with quicksilver to add to the fun, climbing up into your bum – and, like Sodom and Gomorrah, may you fall into sulphur, into fire, into the bottomless pit, unless you firmly believe everything I am about to tell you in this present chronicle!



# Chapter 1

## *The great Pantagruel's origin and antiquity*

IT WON'T BE A TOTAL WASTE OF TIME or space, seeing that we have nothing else to do, if I remind you of the earliest source and origin from which the good Pantagruel came to be born among us. I see that all good history writers have set out their chronicles in this way – not only the Arabs, Barbarians and Latins, but also the Greeks, those pagan folk who never stopped drinking.

So you should note that in the beginning of the world (I'm talking of a good long while ago now, more than forty times forty nights as the ancient Druids used to reckon it), shortly after Abel was slain by his brother Cain, the earth, drenched with the just man's blood, in one particular year brought forth in such abundance all the kinds of fruit that its fertile womb produces for us, in particular medlars,\* that it has gone down as the Year of the Great Medlars: there were three to a bushel.

That year, the calends were calculated according to the breviaries of the Greeks,\* no part of Lent fell in March and mid-August was in May. In the month of October, I think it was, or maybe September (if I'm not mistaken: I really want to get this right), there occurred the week, so renowned in the annals, known as the Week of the Three Thursdays:\* there were three of them because of the irregular leap year days, as the Sun wobbled and trespassed somewhat from its path to the left, and the Moon wandered more than thirty feet off course, and it was easy to make out the oscillation in the firmament known as *Aplanes*;\* the tremor became so intense that the middle Pleiad, leaving its companions, declined towards the equinoctial line, and the star called Spica left its constellation Virgo and withdrew in the direction of Libra. It was all perfectly dreadful, and these phenomena were so hard and difficult to understand that astrologers just couldn't get their teeth into them. And pretty long teeth they'd have needed to reach *that* far!

You can bet that everyone tucked into those medlars with gusto: they were lovely to look at, and tasted scrumptious. But just as Noah, that saintly man (ah, how greatly indebted and obliged we are to him! He planted the vine for us, from which we obtain that nectar, that delicious, precious, celestial joy juice, that godlike, God-given liquor known as *plonk*), well, he was quite unprepared for its effects when he first drank it, as he didn't understand its great virtues and powers; so likewise did the men and women of the time fill their faces with that gorgeous plump fruit, only to find that a whole range of side-effects soon ensued. All of them suffered from a really horrible swelling on their bodies; but not all of them had it in the same place. Some of them found that their stomachs swelled up, and their tummies humped out like a big round cask. Of these it is written *Ventrem omnipotentem*;<sup>\*</sup> they were all fine, decent men and women, and *bons viveurs*. And from this race sprang St Paunch, and Pancake Day.

The others swelled up at the shoulders, and were so humpbacked that they were called *Montifers*, viz., mountain-bearers. You still run into them here and there in the world, all with their different sexes and stations in life. And from this race sprang little Aesop;<sup>\*</sup> his fine deeds and sayings have all been recorded and published.

The others saw their todgers (nature's ploughmen, as they're called) swelling up and stretching out. They became wonderfully long, strong, thick, fat, full of sap, raised erect like a cock's comb, as in the ancient fashion, so that they could be used as belts and wound five or six times round the body. And if you'd seen them up and raring for action, with the wind in their sails, you'd have said they looked just like men with a lance couched ready to joust at the quintain. The race of these is extinct, or so women say – they're always moaning and sighing, "Where have all the big ones gone?" etc. You know the rest of the song.

Others grew such enormous big bollocks that three bollocks filled one muid. From these are descended the bollocks of Lorraine, which never stay snug in their codpiece, but flop out all down your trousers.

Others grew great long legs, and if you'd seen them you'd have said they were cranes, or flamingos, or stilt-walkers. Schoolkids just starting to learn how to scan poetry call them "legs" instead of "feet".

In others, their noses grew so huge they looked like the nozzle of a retort, mottled all over and spangled with spots, all pullulating, purple-hued and pomponnated, all enamelled, pimply and embroidered in gules.

Examples you may have seen include Canon Bellivelle, and Piedeboys, the gammy-legged doctor from Angers. Not many of this race had much of a taste for barleywater, but they were all very fond of dipping their noses into a certain Septembral beverage. Both Naso and Ovid sprang from this lineage,\* as did all of those of whom it is written: *Ne reminiscaris, or God alone nose to forget our wickedness.*

Others grew mighty ears, which swelled to such a size that with one ear they could make a doublet, breeches and a sleeveless tunic; and the other was like a Spanish cape – they could throw it over their shoulder like a continental soldier. And people say that this race endures still in the Bourbon region, hence the saying: “Bourbon ears, big ears”.

The others grew great long bodies: from these came the Giants, all the way down to Pantagruel.\*

And the first Giant was Chalbroth,  
 who begat Sarabroth,  
 who begat Faribroth,  
 who begat Hurtaly, who was a great slurper of soup, and reigned at  
 the time of the Flood,\*  
 who begat Nimrod,  
 who begat Atlas, who held up the sky on his shoulders and stopped  
 it tumbling down,  
 who begat Goliath,  
 who begat Eryx,\* who was the inventor of the game of goblets,  
 who begat Tityus,  
 who begat Orion,  
 who begat Polyphemus,  
 who begat Cacus,  
 who begat Etion, who was the first to catch the pox for not drinking  
 his wine chilled in summertime (see Bartachino for details),\*  
 who begat Enceladus,  
 who begat Ceus,  
 who begat Typhoeus,  
 who begat Aloeus,  
 who begat Otus,  
 who begat Aegeon,  
 who begat Briareus, he of the hundred hands,  
 who begat Porphyriion,

who begat Adamastor,  
 who begat Antaeus,  
 who begat Agathon,  
 who begat Porus, against whom Alexander the Great waged war,  
 who begat Aranthus,  
 who begat Gabbara, who was the first to insist on matching your  
 mates drink for drink,  
 who begat Goliath of Secundilla,  
 who begat Offot, who had a terrific nose thanks to his habit of drink-  
 ing straight from the barrel,  
 who begat Artachaeus,  
 who begat Oromedon,  
 who begat Genmagog, who was the inventor of buckled shoes,  
 who begat Sisyphus,  
 who begat the Titans, from whom Hercules was born,  
 who begat Enay, who was a great expert in the art of extracting little  
 worms out of people's hands,  
 who begat Fierabras, who was vanquished by Oliver, peer of France  
 and companion of Roland,  
 who begat Morgan, who was the first person in this world to play  
 dice with his spectacles,  
 who begat Fracassus (see the study by Merlin Coccai),\*  
 who begat Ferragus,  
 who begat Flycatcher, who first invented the art of smoking ox tongues  
 over a chimney fire (previously, people had salted them the same way  
 they do hams),  
 who begat Clodswallower,  
 who begat Lankey,  
 who begat Tostoff, who had poplar bollocks and a sorb-tree prick,  
 who begat Strawmuncher  
 who begat Ironburn,  
 who begat Wuthering Windbag,  
 who begat Galahad, who was the inventor of flasks,  
 who begat Shmalahad,  
 who begat Alifanfaron,  
 who begat Clumsyclot  
 who begat Roboaster,

who begat Turdypants of Al-Quimbra,  
 who begat Brassiere of Mount Mammaries,  
 who begat Mouth Al-Mighty, who was vanquished by Ogier the Dane,  
 peer of France,  
 who begat Wadi Sey,  
 who begat Donkeydiddler,  
 who begat Haqalabaq,  
 who begat Prickwillow,  
 who begat Grandgousier,\*  
 who begat Gargantua,  
 who begat the noble Pantagruel, my master.

Now I can quite understand that, as you're reading this passage, a perfectly reasonable doubt could occur to you. You might well ask: how is all this possible, seeing as at the time of the Flood everyone in the world perished, except for Noah and the seven other people who'd all boarded the Ark with him – among whom there is no record of the aforementioned Hurtaly?

It's a perfectly good question, no doubt about it, and an obvious one to ask; but my reply will assuage every anxiety, and if it doesn't, then my brain's like a leaky vessel. And as I wasn't actually around at the time and can't give you all the details as I'd like to, I'll refer you to the authority of the Masorettes, those fine, frolicky, bollocky Hebrew bagpipers, who inform us that the said Hurtaly wasn't actually *in* Noah's Ark, and couldn't really have got in anyway, since he was too big; he was *on* it, sitting astraddle it with one leg on one side and the other on the other, like little children on wooden horses, and like the great bull's-horn-blower of Berne who was killed at the Battle of Marignano, having chosen as his particular mount a great stone-throwing cannon – a fine, merry ambling beast, make no mistake about it!\* This way, the said Hurtaly saved (with God's help) the said Ark from foundering – he paddled it along with his legs, using his feet to steer it every which way he wanted, just like the rudder of a boat. The people inside sent him all the food and drink he needed up a smokestack, to show how very grateful they were for the good turn he was doing them. And sometimes he and they would have a good old chinwag together, just like Icaromenippus and Jupiter (see Lucian).\*

Got all that? Sure? Then raise your glass, and drink it neat! And if you don't believe me, neither do I, said she!



## Chapter 2

### *The nativity of Pantagruel the Terrible*

**G**ARGANTUA, AT THE AGE of four hundred and fourscore and forty and four years, begat his son Pantagruel upon his wife, whose name was Badebec, daughter of the king of the Amaurotians in Utopia.\* She died in childbirth, as Pantagruel was so enormously huge and heavy that he couldn't emerge into the light of day without suffocating his mother.

But you'll be wanting a full account of the cause and reason why he was given the name he was baptized with. Let me put you in the picture: that year, there was such a severe drought in the whole land of Africa that they went for thirty-six months, three weeks, four days, thirteen hours and even a bit longer without rain, the sun's heat being so fierce that the whole earth was parched.\* And even in the days of Elijah it hadn't been any hotter. There wasn't a tree on earth with a single leaf or flower on it, the grass was withered and brown, the rivers were choked and the fountains dried up and the poor fish were left high and dry, quite out of their element, flopping all over the land with horrid gulps, while the birds kept dropping out of the sky as there was no moisture in the air, and wolves, foxes, stags, boars, deer, hares, rabbits, weasels, martens, badgers and other animals were found lying dead in the fields, their mouths agape. As for human beings, they were a pitiful sight; you should have seen them, their tongues hanging out like greyhounds who've been racing for six hours at a stretch. Several threw themselves down wells. Others climbed into a cow's stomach to find shade; Homer calls them *Alibantes*.\* The whole country had come to a standstill like a ship at anchor.

It was heartbreaking to see how humans struggled to find some remedy for this horrific drought. It was touch and go whether any of the holy water in the churches would be saved; but orders were given by the council of Their Eminences the Cardinals and the Holy Father that everyone could have just one drink from it, but no more. Even so, when

anyone came into a church, you could see scores of poor parched souls come crowding up round as he doled it out, their mouths wide open to catch the least little drop of it, like the rich man in hell, desperate not to waste any. How happy was the man who, that year, had a cool and well-stocked cellar!

The Philosopher,\* in proposing for debate the question “Why is the water in the sea salty?”, relates that at the time Phoebus handed over control of his bright-shining chariot to his son Phaeton, the said Phaeton, an incompetent amateur in the art, quite unable to keep to the ecliptic line between the two tropics of the sphere of the sun, strayed off course, and came so close to the earth that he dried up all the countries beneath, burning up a great part of the sky, which natural philosophers call the *Via Lactea* or Milky Way, while your hoi polloi call it the Road to Santiago.\* But your arty-farty poets make out that it’s where Juno’s milk spurted out when she was breastfeeding Hercules. Anyway, the earth was heated up to such a temperature that it broke out into a huge sweat, and thus sweated out the entire sea, hence its saltiness, as all sweat is salty. You’ll find this is true if you’ll be so good as to taste your own sweat. Or try licking the sweat of pox sufferers when they’re undergoing the sweat treatment. Fat lot I care.

Almost exactly the same thing happened in the year in question. One Friday, when everyone had started saying their prayers, and was walking along in a fine procession with endless litanies and solemn chants begging Almighty God to deign to look down upon them with a merciful eye in this their great distress, people saw emerging from the earth great drops of water, as when a person sweats profusely. And the poor people started to celebrate, as if this new turn of events would be to their benefit. Some of them said that since there wasn’t a drop of moisture in the atmosphere to hold out any hope of rain for them, the earth was making up for the deficiency. Other educated folk opined that it was rain from the Antipodes, as described by Seneca in Bk 4 of his *Naturales quæstiones*, where he discusses the origin and source of the Nile.\* But they were wrong. Once the procession was over, and everyone went to gather up this dew and drink great jugfuls of it, they found it was nothing but brine, more horribly salty than seawater.

And since it was that very same day that Pantagruel was born, his father gave him the name he was to bear. “*Panta*” in Greek is as much

as to say “all”, and “*gruel*” in the Hagarene\* language means “thirsty”: the implication being that at the hour of his nativity all the world was thirsty. And he saw, in a spirit of prophecy, that one day he would be the lord of them which do thirst. This was made manifest to him at that very hour by a more evident sign: as his mother Badebec was giving birth to him, and the midwives were waiting to deliver him, there first came out of her womb sixty-eight mule-drivers, each of them pulling along by the halter a mule heavily laden with salt; after them there emerged nine dromedaries loaded with hams and smoked ox tongues, seven camels loaded with baby eels, then twenty-five wagons full of leeks, garlic, onions and spring onions.

All this gave those midwives a real fright, but some of them started saying, “What a spread! We used to just sip: this’ll make us slug it down! It’s definitely a good omen: all this salt is a spur to wine – ah, how divine!”

And as they chattered and cackled away, lo and behold, out came Pantagruel, as shaggy as a bear. And one of them said, in a spirit of prophecy, “He is a hairy man, he will show strength with his arm, and if he lives, he will grow to be old and full of years.”