Renaissance orality and Literary Banquets

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placing the telos from the end to the center, Rabelais transformed that telos from the complete revelation and final solution of the 1532 Pantagruel into a provisional revelation and a solution of a decidedly less final kind. Gradually and systematically, he subverted the utopian idea of a definitive answer, along with its implications of completion, plenitude, and certainty. The result is an increasing sense of permanent and irremediable incompleteness, which is compensated only by some ethical principle, revealed at the center. This principle is not an end but a never-exhausted means, and a constantly renewed beginning. It is a stable principle of action that allows the hero to continue to act with assurance, even in a very un-utopian world characterized by unending contingency and violence. As such it also serves as a stable principle of interpretation that allows the reader to continue to read and to understand with some degree of certainty, even in the absence of a final, definitive revelation of meaning.

See also 1512, 1534 (Fall), 1534 (17–18 October), 1942.


Edwin M. Duval

1534, Fall

Rabelais Publishes Gargantua Anonymously in Time for the Fair in Lyons That Follows the Harvest of the Grapes

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"As soon as he was born, he cried not as other babes use to do, miez, miez, miez, but with a high, sturdy and big voice shouted about, Some drink, some drink, some drink, as inviting all the world to drink with him" (Gargantua, p. 9). This is the first babble of the baby Gargantua; it has been taken for the voice of the Renaissance itself, thirsting for life and knowledge. We are at the beginning of the novel. The giant comes into the world during a feast in the country, where meats, wines, and enjoyment are overflowing. The hero's destiny and the whole book thus open on this note of joyous abundance. Rabelais's first novel, Pantagruel (1532), had also started as a story of a bout of overeating.
during which the bodies of the first men, at the beginning of the world, had
swollen up and given birth to the race of giants. The inaugural act, which
creates life and appeals to the reader, is, then, the invitation to share copious
famines and fastings, these overflowing menus symbolized nature's bounty, her
fertility, and also the continuation of vital energies in a productive cycle
renewed after the dead season. In this perspective, hunger and sexual impulses
often go together, and to admit to, to satisfy, enormous appetites is also to
go and renew his harmonious relationship with nature and society. By
praising good food in his first two novels, Rabelais expresses a naturalistic and
orgy, and abundance turns into excess: the stomach (Messere Gaster) looks like
a monster, and Rabelais makes gluttons (Andouilles, Papimanes, Gastrolichts)
vigorous and repulsive.

In the prologue to Gargantua, the author, in the guise of a happy fellow
drinker—he claims to have dictated his book while drinking and eating—
invites his readers not merely to drink and have fun with him, but also to break
open the bone and to suck its marrow. When he sits down at table, man frees himself from moral embar-
goes and renews his harmonious relationship with nature and society. By
praising good food in his first two novels, Rabelais expresses a naturalistic and
vitalistic ideal and recreates rites and myths that are deeply rooted in folklore.
Later, it is true, in the Quern livre (1552; Fourth Book), the feast becomes an
orgy, and abundance runs into excess: the stomach (Messere Gaster) looks like
a monster, and Rabelais makes gluttons (Andouilles, Papimanes, Gastrolichts)
vigorous and repulsive.

The literary device of conversation at a banquet shows up two important and
closely related tendencies in 16th-century literature. As we have seen, the
spontaneous and composite nature of table talk corresponds to a generalized
emphasis on abundance: humanist texts are often prolix, heterogeneous, and
apparently disordered; they are not bound by the principles of order, clarity,
and sobriety that ruled in the following century. With this structural freedom
comes a great license in the handling of the language, bestowing on Renaissance
writers an extensive variety, as if the proximity to food gave the words a flavor and a sonorous substance richer than in

the curiosity of the mind. The head does the thinking, the conversation stimu-
lates reflection and helps ideas circulate, while mouth and stomach take plea-
sure in food. In the ideal integration of the banquet, man can satisfy all his
faculties, intellectual, moral, and sensual. Montaigne (Essais, III, 13) agrees
with many of his contemporaries when he explains that a good meal, seasoned
with good conversation, creates for the individual a special occasion in which he
can bring all his capacities into harmonious play, and thus realize an essential
aim of humanistic ethics.

Literary banquets in late antiquity—after those of Plato and Xenophon—
changed their character: the works of Plutarch (Table-Talk and The Dinner of
the Seven Wise Men), Aetnanes (The De Sophists, or Sophists at Dinner),
and Macrobius (Saturnalia) have an aim that is less philosophical than learned
and encyclopedic. They are enormous catalogues designed to conserve knowledge.
The fiction of a meal, with its desultory conversation, allowed these learned
writers to accumulate literary memories, practical observations, philological
remarks, and so on. The French humanists, who strove to store as vast a number
of documents on ancient culture as possible, liked this sort of compilation.
They published and translated those of antiquity and, especially in the second
half of the 16th century, produced many miscellanies. Guillaume Boucher's La
sérées (1584–1598; Evenings) illustrates how the genre had evolved. The
structure of a meal permits the proliferation of anecdotes, bits of erudition, and
serious or amusing subjects with the intention of collecting multifarious pieces
of knowledge. A mere concern for quantity tends to overplay the pleasure in the
story and the festive atmosphere that existed in Rabelais. Nevertheless, this
reflex of encyclopedic accumulation is profoundly rooted in the mentality of
the period. Whether in a symposium form or not, there are many examples of this
gluttonous taste for miscellanies in which learning, wisdom, and science are
heaped in profusion (see, for example, the works of Pierre Bonistuau, Pierre de
La Primaudaye, François Béroalde de Verville, and Pierre Messe).
ordinary use. Béroalde de Verville's *Le moyen de parvenir* (ca. 1610; *The Way to Succeed*), a literary banquet of an extraordinarily free composition and inventive style, proves in virtuoso fashion that literature is also a matter of conviviality and that, when fable sits at table, good words are as palatable as good wine.

See also 1512, 1532.


Michel Jeanneret

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1534, 17–18 October

The Posting of Violent Anti-Catholic Placards in France's Main Cities and on the Very Door of Francis I's Room Launches a Period of Systematic Repression

Evangelism

In his letter of 22 December 1521 to Margaret of Alençon, sister of King Francis I and future queen of Navarre, Guillaume Briçonnet, bishop of Meaux, echoed what Luther and others had said before, what Clément Marot, Rabelais, and Calvin would repeat soon thereafter: "The water that flows from the abyss of wisdom and of evangelical doctrine is not being supplied by those who are in charge of it, hence the sterility and drought of souls, and not because of a lack of water... The church is today arid and dry like a torrent during the high heat of summer. Everyone is looking out for his own welfare and advancement. No one is concerned about God anymore. We are completely given to terrestrial matters, when we should be all spirit. And this is because we lack the water of wisdom and evangelical doctrine, which does not flow and is not supplied as it should" (*Correspondance*, 1:85).

The church was indeed ailing. Weakened by the sophistry and intellectual arrogance of its theologians, the immoral behavior of its prelates, the petty rivalries among its monastic orders, the ignorance and superstitions of the vast majority of its members, it was no longer able to meet the new spiritual needs of Christianity. Those whose responsibility it was to supply "the water of wisdom and of evangelical doctrine" had become slaves to their own appetites. Wholly "terrestrial" and corporeal beings, they resembled in every way the oxen of scripture condemned by St. Augustine, or the happy, smug and troubling "Papimanes" (Pope Lovers) whom Rabelais would soon satirize so brilliantly in his *Quart livre* (1552; *Fourth Book*). Fortunately, the remedy was simple; it was, for Briçonnet, inscribed in the very nature of the sickness itself. To slake the