

## RABELAIS AND THE EARLIER RENAISSANCE

BY BIRGER R. HEADSTROM

IT was during his long sojourn at the cloister that Rabelais became acquainted with the instincts, the hopes, and the ideas of the Renaissance in the form which it pursued in France, in England and in Germany,—a form, not merely humanist, but rich in aspirations for social and political improvement. And to Rabelais who was, above all, desirous of a non-monastic life—desirous rather of a joyous and free life, free from all restraint and obedience to the harsh and severe laws of monastic existence—its nobleness of purpose inspired him to give expression to its real significance as translated in the spirit and temper of his time.

That Rabelais has appealed to the imagination of men in many ways is attested by the various conceptions which have been formed of him. Some have viewed him as a sober reformer, of a rational if not dogmatic religion, who clothed his morals in a farcical envelope for the double purpose of enabling the vulgar to appreciate them and to protect himself from the consequences of his reforming zeal; to others he is not religious, and his book is more or less a protest against any attempt to explain supernaturally the riddle of the earth; while to many he is the incarnation of the "esprit Gaulois," preferring to accept life as he found it, and if not blind to its graver features at least disregarding of them.

These various views, conflicting as they are, indicate if nothing more than no one view can satisfactorily explain him; and it is just this that commands our attention. He is a mystery which fascinates us; who has given us a riddle which we find great delight in trying to solve; and though many attempts to adjust an interpretation of his work to him have been made, we are still far from understanding the real Rabelais, for to identify Rabelais with Pantagruel, as

many have done, fails to account for the vast amount of laughter and foolery which veils a little sense and reason; while to connect him with Panurge fails equally as well to explain the education scheme, the solemn apparition of Gargantua among the farcical and fantastic variations on Panurge's wedding, and many other passages. Yet after all, any one reading Rabelais who is possessed of a good knowledge of the history and literature of his time, and the times which preceded him, can not fail to appreciate the intrinsic value of his book.

Rabelais had no definite purpose, or fixed intention, when he began to write, but the immense popularity and success of his lively satire gradually suggested to him that in the satirical criticism of the life he saw around him he could give definition to those sentiments which study and meditation had invoked within him. Still, it is in the very absence of any definite purpose that the value and merit of his work lies. Though he certainly detested the monkish system, as well as the brutish ignorance of the earlier systems of education, he was essentially a satirist rather than a reformer. By merely giving expression to his thoughts and views on the life around him, rather than trying to enforce some system of thought or opinion, he serves as a spotless mirror to the temper of the earlier Renaissance. He had no universal medicine of his own to offer, nor did he attack anyone else's; he was content to observe life in its complex manifestations and to note its serious affairs in a lighter vein than possibly the tempo of the times warranted. In the Oracle of the Bottle, there is a certain "echo," as it has been called, "of the conclusion of the preacher," a certain acknowledgement of the vanity of things. It is this theme that rather characterizes his entire work, and is, in some respects, a reflection of the spirit of his age. From his close association with the affairs of the world, and the reaction of his own peculiar nature to the various social, political and religious matters, there was derived his doctrine of Pantagruelism, a sort of philosophy hard to define and almost equally as difficult to understand. Meaning in itself humour, it seems illogical to consider Rabelais as a mere humourist, for his wealth of learning enabled him to penetrate deep into the more serious affairs of life and to give definition to the thoughts which this study awoke within him. Humour, though not easily defined, when associated with Rabelais seems to assume a deeper meaning, a meaning in harmony with

his character,—a character complex and mysterious; and thus it can be said that Pantagruelism, in a sense, consists in the extension of a wide sympathy to all human affairs with a comprehension of their vanity. Yet, in this attitude we find an almost complete lack of reverence, and what seems more strange a failure to appreciate passion and poetry. In *Pantagruel*, there are touches of the latter, as in the portrait of Quintessence, but passion is conspicuous by its absence,—an absence for which the plan of the book, and its comic structure, do not admit of an adequate explanation.

To understand Rabelais is to compare him with Lucian and Swift, although he is much less a mere mocker than Lucian and entirely destitute of Swift's ferocity, even when attacking the abuses and faults of the monkish and educational systems. It is probably Lucian whom it is most necessary to know to fully appreciate Rabelais.

No one in reading Rabelais can fail to remark on the strange mixture of obsolete words and phrases and the wealth of allegorical allusions which he employed in his writings. No doubt his freedom and coarseness of language and imagery, characteristic of both *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, has been responsible for much of the confusion existing in respect to him. His obscenity, in particular, has come in for a great deal of criticism; and though the anti-Rabelaisians held the view that he "liked filth and wallowed in it from choice" there is nevertheless an excellent explanation for his licence. For it must be remembered that his book was, above all, popular, and written for the popular classes; and that the popular French literature of the middle ages, as distinguished from the courtly and literary literature which was singularly pure, can hardly be exceeded in coarseness. In fact, the *fabliaux*, the early burlesque romances of the Audiger class, and the farces of the 15th century, are no less obscene than the worst passages of *Pantagruel*.

To quote from a writer who seems to have expressed within a few lines a fairly true estimate of Rabelais: "His great work," speaking of *Pantagruel*, "has been taken for an exercise on transcendental philosophy, for a concealed theological polemic, for an allegorical history of this and that personage of his time, for a merely literary utterance, for an attempt to tickle the popular ear and taste." It is all of these and it is more, all of them in parts, none of them in deliberate and exclusive intention. It may perhaps

be called the exposition and commentary of all the thoughts, feelings, aspirations and knowledge of a particular time and nation put forth in attractive literary form by a man who for once combined the practical and literary spirit, the power of knowledge and the power of expression. The work of Rabelais is the mirror of the 16th century in France, reflecting at once its comeliness and its uncomeliness, its high aspirations, its voluptuous tastes, its political and religious dissensions, its keen criticism, its eager appetite and hasty digestion of learning, its gleams of poetry, and its ferocity of manners. In Rabelais, we can divine the "Pleiade" and Marat, the *Cymbalum mundi* and Montaigne, Amyot and the *Amadis*, even Calvin and Duperron."

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