



WOMEN IN RABELAIS'S *CHRONICLES*

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While Carla Freccero's complaint of 20 years ago that "current scholarship on Rabelais and on the Renaissance too often colludes in the deliberate elision of [women]" is no longer valid¹, it remains generally true of Rabelais's pseudo-epic. The unspoken assumptions presumably are: 1) Rabelais was a monk, and monks are supposed to have little to do with women (although as we know Rabelais managed to have several children), and 2) his book is (among other things) a pseudo-epic, and epics have little time for women.

This paper is certainly not claiming that there are unnoticed major female characters in Rabelais's work, but it does suggest that there are more mentions of women than we might expect, and that we can deduce something of his attitude from them. The major focus here is on *Gargantua* and the *Quart Livre*, although for obvious reasons more women appear in *Pantagruel* and the *Tiers Livre*². I have arbitrarily grouped references to women in four categories: women as class or cliché; historical or holy women; Biblical or mythological women; and 'real' women who are part of the story Rabelais is telling.

WOMEN AS CLASS OR CLICHÉ

In *Pantagruel's* 34 chapters only four contain no mention of women, and most of those mentioned are connected with Panurge: he is popular with women but also tricks them and marries off old women. There is one favourable reference: 'even' women and girls aspire to the new learning³, and at least one unfavourable one: women lament that there are no more extra-long penises⁴...

Gargantua takes up the pseudo-epic *ambiance* of the *Grandes Chroniques*, and is also much longer than the first book; there are no women in 30 of its 58 chapters, but plenty as we shall see in the remaining ones. The derogatory view of women continues: cowardice is defined by Picrochole's Comte Spadassin as spending time with women⁵; French soldiers are effective on the first attack, but if there's a waiting period they are less than women⁶.

Of the *Tiers Livre's* 52 chapters only 5 mention no women, not surprisingly since the whole book is ostensibly about Panurge's marriage dilemma. The Prologue already features the courtesans of ancient Corinth, and the consultant Rondibilis claims that women are like the moon ("fickle")⁷, while Ponocrates adds that they can't be trusted with a secret⁸. In the same chapter we hear the story of the play about the mute woman, the moral of which is that

¹ Carla Freccero, *Father Figures: Genealogy and Narrative Structure in Rabelais*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1991,

² All Rabelais references are to Mireille Huchon's critical edition : François Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, éd. établie, présentée et annotée par Mireille Huchon, avec la collaboration de F. Moreau, Paris, Gallimard, coll. Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1994.

³ *Pantagruel*, chapter 8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 1.

⁵ *Gargantua*, chapter 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 48.

⁷ *Tiers Livre* chapter 32.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 34.



women are more bearable when mute!

The *Quart Livre*, which returns to the epic ambiance, predictably has the largest number of chapters without women: 17 out of a total of 67. This is the most interesting book, as we shall see, when we come to 'real' women, but references to women as a class are not numerous. The Prologue assumes that readers have wives; there are women in Ennasin⁹, but only for the purpose of the linguistic joke; Panurge in his fear of the storm calls on "saints et saintes" without specifying which¹⁰; Panurge assumes that women are always connected to sex ("maquerellaige ne compete que aux vieilles, aux jeunes compete Culletaige"¹¹). The fact that Priapus is the "grand tentateur des femmes"¹² needs no commentary.

HISTORICAL OR HOLY WOMEN

Saints are included here, because I have no idea which saints are historical fact, and which are not. In fact Rabelais seldom mentions saints, male or female; the few women he does mention are St. Gertrude¹³, St. Barbara¹⁴, St. Madeleine and St. Anne¹⁵. It is usually the renegade Panurge who quotes saints; Friar John is more likely to incorporate them into a curse ("ventre saint Jacques"¹⁶).

Historical figures are more common: Cleopatra¹⁷, Julia and Populia¹⁸, Agrippina and Lollia¹⁹, Messalina²⁰, Hippocrates's wife²¹, the daughters of Artaban²², and Emilius²³, Barbarossa's wife²⁴; and Jacobe Rodogine²⁵.

BIBLICAL OR MYTHOLOGICAL WOMEN

This is the first surprising category. It's true that Biblical women are few: Lot's wife and the Queen of Sheba in *Pantagruel*; Eve, Saul's Phitonisse and Solomon's strong woman in the *Tiers Livre*; and Salome in the *Quart Livre*, but mythological women are almost too numerous to count, especially in the *Tiers Livre*. The Muses occur frequently, and here we should remember that one of Rabelais's most important sources is Teofilo Folengo's *Baldus*, a mock epic in macaronic verse which is dedicated to the Muses of food²⁶. Goddesses are frequent, especially Venus, Juno, Minerva and Diana, but so are literary characters: Dido, Pandora, Ceres, Helen, Andromache. They far outnumber males in the same category, and we do wonder why.

⁹ *Quart Livre*, ch. 9.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, ch. 38.

¹³ *Pantagruel*, ch. 7.

¹⁴ *Gargantua*, ch. 27.

¹⁵ *Tiers Livre*, ch. 33.

¹⁶ *Gargantua*, ch. 27.

¹⁷ *Pantagruel*, ch. 30.

¹⁸ *Gargantua*, ch. 3.

¹⁹ *Tiers Livre*, ch. 24.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 27.

²¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 32.

²² *Quart Livre*, ch. 36.

²³ *Ibid.*, ch. 37.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 45.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 58.

²⁶ See my "Rabelais and Folengo Once Again," in *Rabelais in Context: Proceedings of the 1991 Vanderbilt Conference*, Birmingham (Alabama), Summa Publications, 1993, p. 133-146.



FEMALE CHARACTERS IN RABELAIS'S NARRATIVE.

This is by far the most intriguing category. Why does an epic about male giants need women at all? With *Pantagruel* we are not yet in an epic world, and there are quite a few female characters: Gargantua's wife Badebec, the midwives at Pantagruel's birth, the women pursued and tricked by Panurge, the "haute dame" courted and humiliated by Panurge, the woman we never meet with whom Pantagruel has been having an affair, the unspecified women engendered by Pantagruel's fart in chapter 27, and the old prostitute married off to the conquered Anarche by Panurge²⁷.

Gargantua is both an epic and a pseudo-epic, so we would expect fewer women, but that is not what we get. Grandgousier's wife Gargamelle²⁸ may be necessary to give birth to Gargantua, but we meet other women who don't seem to belong in an epic: female speakers in the "propos des bienyvres"²⁹; midwives again including an "horde vieille" responsible for Gargantua's extraordinary birth via Gargamelle's left ear³⁰; the narrator's grandmother³¹; the young giant's "gouvernantes" who laugh with delight when they play with his penis³²; Friar John's nurse, whose soft breasts explain why he has an impressive nose³³; the wives of the pilgrims endangered and rescued by Gargantua³⁴; and most surprisingly the women of Thélème³⁵, who are presented not only as equal to the men, but as superior to them in the sense that they make decisions about clothing and activities. Critical discussion of this episode shows no sign of slowing down; in my opinion, Rabelais is indulging in a charming fantasy by combining an aristocratic dream castle with an Evangelical dream community. These two dreams are of course fundamentally incompatible - just ask yourself what a died-in-the-wool humanist could find to talk about with a "dame de haut paraige" - but that is part of their charm.

While on the subject of 'real' women, we must not forget that the *Tiers Livre* is dedicated to Marguerite de Navarre, whose sense of humour in her *Heptaméron* occasionally reminds us of Rabelais. The subject of this third book purports to be Panurge's marriage, but Panurge's ideal woman is obviously only a sex object, and he rudely rejects an advisor's depiction of a real woman in a real marriage³⁶. There are actually few women mentioned: the wives of Utopia; the female companions on whom Panurge spends his money³⁷; Panurge's "grande tante Laurence"³⁸, Panurge's praise of the advice of old women³⁹, and Her Trippa's wife⁴⁰. The only female protagonist is the Sybille de Panzoust, an obvious descendant of Virgil's Sybil in the *Aeneid*.

Since the *Quart Livre* returns to the world of epic, we expect fewer women in the narrative, but surprisingly there are many more.

The entire book is a quest for the Dive Bacbuc, the oracle who will, they hope, finally resolve Panurge's (irresolvable!) marriage question. Assorted women are mentioned:

²⁷ *Pantagruel*, ch. 31.

²⁸ I do resent the fact that the name of the villain in the recent movie about the Smurfs is Gargamel...

²⁹ *Gargantua*, ch. 5.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 6.

³¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 9.

³² *Ibid.*, ch. 11.

³³ *Ibid.*, ch. 40.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 45.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, chapters 52-57.

³⁶ *Tiers Livre*, ch. 30.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 2.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 7.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 16.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 25.



Dindenault's wife⁴¹, the women of Ennasin⁴², the queen of Cheli and her attendant ladies⁴³, "les jeunes bachelettes de nos pays⁴⁴", the Chiquanous' wives⁴⁵, "deux vieilles Chiquanourres⁴⁶", the wives of dying men and a queen quoted by Friar John⁴⁷, the women of Ruach who die farting⁴⁸ ("en vesnent" whereas the men die "en pedent"), Rhizotome's sisters⁴⁹, and women's voices among the frozen words⁵⁰.

More interesting still are the female protagonists. In Panurge's lengthy narrative about the Chiquanous and the lord of Basché⁵¹ the women are important players in the farce elaborated to take vengeance on the Chiquanous without being caught. Basché's baker Loyre and his wife play a couple getting married, and after the ceremony the custom of exchanging mock blows allows all Basché's people to beat the Chiquanou of the day in earnest. Loyre's wife (still not named) has a more important role, and a short speech, in chapter 15. Basché's wife is also mentioned in chapter 13, and the whole affair suggests a happy family working together.

Pantagruel and his companions arrive on the island of the Papefigues (people who made fun of the Pope⁵²) in time for the dénouement of a dispute between a farmer and a devil. The farmer's wife, specifying that it's lucky he's a young (and therefore inexperienced) devil, manages to deceive him with a scatological joke, so that henceforth he will leave the farmer alone. Her remark to her husband is genuinely comic: "Si c'eust esté un grand Diable, il y auroit à penser⁵³".

The following episode of the Papimanes (people crazy about the Pope) is much longer and more detailed⁵⁴, and involves numerous women. At the banquet after the church service, the "filles pucelles mariables du lieu" who serve at table are described in great detail down to the flowers in their hair⁵⁵. They all laugh at one point⁵⁶, and when Homenaz indulges in animal-like laughter⁵⁷ and hands his cap to one of the girls she kisses it lovingly and puts it on her own head as a sign that she will be the first to be married. They serve wine to guests pretending to be sad⁵⁸; Friar John says he would like to take away "deux ou trois chartées" of them; and on leaving the island Pantagruel delivers to each of them "neuf cent quatorze salutz d'or" for a dowry.

I've left until last the Andouilles episode⁵⁹, which seems to me the most intriguing. When we first meet the Andouilles, at the beginning of chapter 35, they are obviously animals climbing a tree; Pantagruel asks Xenomanes if they are "Ecurieux, Belettes, Martres, ou Hermines." Xenomanes then describes their quarrel with Quaresmeprenant over a peace treaty, and here they are equally obviously people. But the description of their advance (all 42,000 of them⁶⁰) remains ambiguous with the use of "fillieres" for 'ranks,' and "Saulcissons à

⁴¹ *Quart Livre*, ch. 5.

⁴² *Ibid.*, ch. 9.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, ch. 10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 12.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 16.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 43.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 52.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 55.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 12 to 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, ch. 45.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, ch. 47.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, ch. 48 to 54.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, ch. 51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, ch. 52.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, ch. 53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 54.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, ch. 35 to 42.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ch. 36.



cheval" don't sound very human. The names of Pantagruel's "coronels" (Riflandouille and Tailleboudin) serve to initiate a long discussion about significant names; we know that one of Rabelais's favourite narrative devices is the interruption of action for lengthy, and implausible in the circumstances, discussion.

The battle with the Andouilles (parody of the traditional Carnival-Lent battle) assumes human fighters on both sides, but again there are contradictory details; in chapter 41 Gymnaste cuts a sausage in half, mainly to introduce the joke "Ce Cervelat ecervelé." After the battle has been halted by the flying pig Pantagruel has a long discussion with queen Niphleseth⁶¹, who is clearly human - except that her name suggests 'penis' in Hebrew. The peace treaty specifies that every year 78,000 "Andouilles Royales" be sent to Pantagruel "pour à l'entrée de table le servir six mois l'an," which is ambiguous - to serve him as food or as waitresses? In the meantime the same number of Andouilles are sent to Gargantua "sous la conduite de la jeune Niphleseth Infante de l'isle" who subsequently marries and has children.

It seems clear from all this that Rabelais is revelling in the ambiguity of the word "Andouilles" so that his characters are sometimes people and sometimes sausages. In one sense, it is unfair to consider them as female characters, but who can tell when Rabelais is thinking character and when he is thinking language?

CONCLUSIONS?

Has this all-too-brief survey helped us to understand Rabelais's attitude to women? A few conclusions seem to me plausible. Most obviously, Rabelais repeats many of the antifeminist clichés popular in his time: women are weak, fickle, cowardly, sexually insatiable, and they talk too much. This does not, in my opinion, make him an antifeminist, given the other topics discussed here. In particular, the frequent repetition of "les femmes" with or without "les enfants" suggests that he thinks of society in terms of family units.

The few historical, Biblical or saintly women, and especially the numerous mythological women, are part of Rabelais's undermining of the epic ethos, as are many of the 'real' women who are part of the narrative. Epics deal with men and important issues above the heads of women. Moreover, epics are about deeds; Rabelais's pseudo-epic is often about words, as is particularly notable in the Andouilles episode. The *Quart Livre* would suffice on its own, I believe, to refute the theory that Rabelais is either antifeminist or simply not interested in women; whereas the girls in Papimanie are essentially part of the anti-Catholic stance, the Basché episode gives us a genuine family working together, with Basché's wife and Loyre's wife playing small but indispensable roles in the comedy.

It seems fair to conclude, then, that Rabelais was aware of antifeminist clichés and exploited them for comic purposes, but that he was basically a family-oriented man who thought of society as essentially composed of families. This is of course not one of the main points of his 'chronicles', which are about much more important issues: kingship, education, and above all religion. But it is, at least in my opinion, a point worth making.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, ch. 42.



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