

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO



# RABELAIS

*Edited by John O'Brien*



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EDITED BY  
JOHN O'BRIEN  
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CAMBRIDGE  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,  
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org  
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521687287

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First published 2011

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

The Cambridge companion to Rabelais / edited by John O'Brien.

p. cm. – (Cambridge companions to literature)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-521-86786-3 – ISBN 978-0-521-68728-7 (pbk.)

1. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? – Criticism and interpretation.

I. O'Brien, John, 1954–

PQ1694.C36 2011

843'.3 – dc22 2010041664

ISBN 978-0-521-86786-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-68728-7 Paperback

THE CAMBRIDGE COMPANION TO  
RABELAIS

The Franciscan monk, humanist, and physician François Rabelais, who flourished in sixteenth-century France, is widely considered as the Renaissance's greatest comic writer. His work – including most notably *Gargantua and Pantagruel* – continues to enthrall readers with its complex and delicately crafted humor. “Rabelaisian” and “Gargantuan” have entered the lexicon but are often misunderstood; this *Companion* explains the literary and historical reality behind these notions. It provides an accessible account of Rabelais's major works and the contextual information and conceptual tools needed to understand the author and his world. The most up-to-date book on Rabelais to be designed specifically for English-speaking audiences, the *Companion* is intended to enable a broad spectrum of readers both to appreciate and to enjoy Rabelais. With a detailed guide to further reading and a chronology, and with all quotations given in translation, this is an ideal guide for students and scholars of French and comparative literature.

JOHN O'BRIEN is Professor of French Renaissance Literature at Royal Holloway, University of London. He is the author of *Anacreon Redivivus* (1995) and the coeditor of *Remy Belleau, “Les Odes d’Anacréon”* (1995), *Distant Voices Still Heard* (2000), *La “familia” de Montaigne* (2001), and most recently of *Theory and the Early Modern* (2006). His current projects involve the relationship between law, fiction, and narrative, and between speculation, the imagination, and the grotesque in early modern French literature.

*A complete list of books in the series is at the back of this book.*

*To the memory of*  
*Malcolm Bowie (1943–2007)*  
*friend, scholar, intellectual, luminary*  
Ta plume vole au ciel pour être quelque signe

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to record my thanks to Linda Bree and Maartje Scheltens of Cambridge University Press: they have been helpful and encouraging, wise and forbearing, and it has been a pleasure working with them.

## A NOTE ON THE TEXT

References to Rabelais's work included in the text are to *The Complete Works of François Rabelais*, Donald Frame, trans. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), abbreviated *F* followed by the page number(s); and to Rabelais, *Œuvres complètes*, Mireille Huchon with François Moureau, eds., Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), abbreviated *H* followed by the page number(s).

## CHRONOLOGY

- 1483      Likely date of birth of Rabelais, the son of Antoine Rabelais, seneschal of Lerné. Tradition holds that François is born at La Devinière, a farmhouse owned by his father to the south of Chinon in the Loire valley.
- 1494      Former (putative) date of Rabelais's birth.
- 1500      Erasmus publishes his *Adages*. This work will increase in size over successive editions.
- 1511      Rabelais reputed to have been a novice in the Franciscan priory of La Baumette, near Angers. Erasmus publishes *Praise of Folly*.
- 1515      François I succeeds to the throne of France.
- 1516      Sir Thomas More publishes *Utopia*. Erasmus publishes his edition of the Greek New Testament and *The Education of the Christian Prince*.
- 1517      Luther nails his ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenberg Church.
- 1520      Rabelais is known at this date to have been a monk at the Franciscan priory of Le Puy-Saint-Martin, at Fontenay-le-Comte. He studies Greek with his fellow priest, Pierre Lamy (or Amy), and moves in the humanist circles of André Tiraqueau (1480–1558).
- 1521      Rabelais sends a letter to Guillaume Budé (1468–1540), the leading French humanist of his day. Although the letter is in Latin, it contains much Greek and shows Rabelais's commitment to the "New Learning."

- 1523 The Greek books of Rabelais and Lamy are confiscated by their religious superiors, only to be returned a year later. However, Lamy leaves the monastery.
- 1524 Rabelais supplicates the Pope, Clement VII, and receives permission to change from the Franciscans to the Benedictines. He transfers to the Benedictine Abbey of Maillezais in Poitou. He is protected by Geoffroy d'Estissac and comes to know the poet and chronicler Jean Bouchet. At the beginning of Tiraqueau's *De legibus connubialibus* (*On the Laws of Marriage*), published the same year, he writes a Greek poem in praise of the author, just as Lamy writes a poem in praise of Rabelais and his translation of book 2 of Herodotus (now lost). Three years later, Rabelais is granted permission to hold ecclesiastical benefices.
- 1526 From the priory of Ligugé, Rabelais writes a verse epistle to Bouchet. It will be published in the latter's *Epistres morales et familiares* (*Moral and Familiar Letters*) of 1545.
- 1528–30 Possible stay in Paris for medical (and legal?) studies. Two children (later legitimized by the Pope) are dated to this period in Rabelais's life.
- 1529 Pierre de Lille, in his *Tria calendaria* (*Triple Calendars*), mentions a translation of Lucian by Rabelais, a monk of Maillezais.
- 1530 François I founds the Royal College, later to become the Collège de France. It is headed by Guillaume Budé. Rabelais registers as a student in the Faculty of Medicine at Montpellier. He attends an anatomy lesson given by Rondelet and gains his Bachelor of Medicine degree in November of the same year.
- 1531 He lectures at Montpellier on Hippocrates and Galen.
- 1532 In January, he performs with colleagues in a farce, *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*. In June, he publishes the second volume of Manardi's *Medical Letters*, with a dedicatory letter to Tiraqueau. In August, he follows this up with publications of Latin translations of treatises by Hippocrates and Galen, with a dedication of one major treatise to Geoffroy d'Estissac. In November, he is appointed a doctor at the

- Hôtel-Dieu (Hospital) in Lyons and writes to Erasmus. The end of the year brings a spate of publications. *Pantagruel* is published in Lyons. At the same time, the *Grandes et inestimables chroniques* (*Great and Invaluable Chronicles*), of which Rabelais at the very least wrote the table of contents and perhaps the whole work, and the *Pantagrueline Prognostication* for 1533 and the *Almanach for the Year 1533*, signed by Rabelais, also appear.
- 1534 Stays in Rome as a doctor in the entourage of Cardinal Jean du Bellay (1492–1560), who, together with his brother Guillaume, Lord of Langey (1491–1543), now acts as Rabelais's patron. Later that year, Rabelais publishes Marliani's *Topography of Ancient Rome*, with a dedicatory letter to the Cardinal. In October of the same year the "affaire des placards" occurs: posters condemning the Mass are put up in Paris and other towns. Repression of Reformers follows.
- 1535 *Gargantua* published. Rabelais suddenly leaves his post in Lyons and stays in Rome for a second time, returning home in mid-1536. Requests the Pope, Paul III's, absolution from apostasy (since he has left the monastery of Maizelais without permission) and transfer to another Benedictine monastery. The *Pantagrueline Prognostication* for 1535 and the *Almanach for the Year 1535* are published.
- 1536 The Pope grants Rabelais leave to practice medicine and to transfer to Jean du Bellay's Benedictine Abbey of Saint-Maur-des-Fossés. Helps secularize the abbey and becomes a secular priest there. Death of Erasmus.
- 1537 Receives his degree of Doctor of Medicine at Montpellier; he lectures on Hippocrates and conducts an anatomy lesson.
- 1538 Publication of the *Disciple of Pantagruel*, a source of inspiration for Rabelais in *Book 4*.
- 1539 Accompanies Guillaume du Bellay, now Governor of Piedmont, to Turin. The first of several visits over the next 3 years.
- 1542 Publication of the revised editions of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*. Rabelais mentioned as a beneficiary in Guillaume du Bellay's will.

- 1543 Rabelais is present at the death of Guillaume du Bellay. The same year, death of Geoffroy d'Estissac. The Sorbonne includes *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* on its list of censored books.
- 1545 Jean du Bellay's secretary, François Bribart, is burned at the stake. The Council of Trent convenes, continuing its sessions with intermissions up to 1564.
- 1546 *Book 3* published. It is included on a new list of censored books. Rabelais leaves France for Metz, then part of the Holy Roman Empire, where he stays for about a year as town doctor.
- 1547 Goes to Rome as doctor to Cardinal du Bellay. Death of François I; accession of Henri II.
- 1548 First version of *Book 4*. Rabelais works on a revised edition during 1550.
- 1549 Death of Marguerite de Navarre, to whom Rabelais had dedicated *Book 3*. Rabelais composes the *Shadow Battle* (*Sciomachie*), an account of the celebrations organized by Jean du Bellay in Rome for the birth of Henri II's second son, Louis. Rabelais returns to France.
- 1551 Rabelais is granted the benefices of Meudon and Saint-Christophe-du-Jambet. Does not reside.
- 1552 Publication of revised editions of *Book 4* and *Book 3*.
- 1553 Probable date of Rabelais's death.
- 1562 Publication of *The Ringing Island* (*L'Isle sonnante*).
- 1564 Publication of *Book 5*, which includes most of *The Ringing Island*. The Council of Trent concludes its sessions. It deems Rabelais's writings heretical and places them on the Index of Prohibited Books.

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# I

JOHN O'BRIEN

## Introduction

### Prologue

Most illustrious topers, and you, most precious poxies – for to you, not to others, my writings are dedicated – Alcibiades, in Plato's dialogue entitled *The Symposium*, praising his master Socrates, inconvertibly the prince of philosophers, among other things says he is like the Sileni. (F<sub>3</sub>/H<sub>5</sub>)

Prologues fulfil a conventional role in early modern works. When they are addressed to a reader, as here, their aim is to explain and justify the work that immediately follows, highlighting its novel features and attempting to arouse the reader's interest and gain his or her sympathy. It is a rhetorical technique known as *captatio benevolentiae*, literally “the capturing of good will.” By those standards, the opening lines of the prologue of *Gargantua* far from fit this pattern, yet they present a set of features characteristic of Rabelais's work as a whole: a narrator who directly hails the reader; that reader addressed in scurrilous terms; a speech that then switches register and makes extensive reference to a classical text. From the threshold of the text – before even chapter 1 begins – the narrator introduces us to a world whose prime features are contradiction, tension, brought about, in this case, by the sudden change of cultural registers, the implicit characterization of the reader, the abolition of authorial distance, and the *rapprochement* between the narrator and his public. The reader is thrown headlong into a literary universe that can easily give rise to bafflement and confusion. It is worth emphasizing at the outset that such tensions are not incidental aspects of Rabelais's writing, but standard components. All conventional niceties governing the relationship between the author and the reader are set aside; and the effect is defamiliarization.

We need to draw a distinction between defamiliarization and alienation as forms of distance separating us from a writer five centuries old. Historical distance inevitably exists between our own time and Rabelais's. And various