

Pantagruelism

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When you kindly asked me here, I was a little afraid to come, because I felt that an audience like this would more or less expect me to get at Rabelais by his professional side, and I am not able to do that. I know nothing about the practice of medicine today, let alone how it was practiced four hundred years ago. I have always been pretty healthy, or I might know more, but I am contented. Probably you have noticed how contented ignorant people are. I am not sure that Aristotle is right in that fine sentence of his about all mankind naturally desiring knowledge. Most of them would rather get along without knowing anything, if they could, because knowing things is hard work. I often wish I knew less than I do about a great many things, like politics, for instance, or history. When you know a great deal about something, you have hard work to keep your knowledge from going sour – that is, unless you are a Pantagruelist, and if you are a professor of politics, like me, nothing but Pantagruelism will ever save you. Your learning goes so sour that before you know it the Board of Health comes sniffing around, asking the neighbours whether they have been noticing anything lately. Maybe something of that sort is true of medicine, too, but as I said, I do not know about that. Pantagruelism is a natural sort of preservative, like refrigeration; it keeps the temperature right. Some people put too much bad antiseptic stuff into their learning – too much embalming-fluid.

There seems to be no doubt that Rabelais's professional standing was high. According to all testimony, he must have been one of the most eminent and successful practitioners in Europe. For two years he was at the head of the great hospital at Lyon, perhaps the foremost in France, and I think also the oldest in continuous service. It is about a thousand years old. It was moved once, from one quarter of town to another, and it has been dusted up and renovated every now and then, but it still stands where Rabelais found

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it. Some fragments of structure which belong to his day are said to exist, but I could not identify them. The whole affair looked pretty old to me, but I imagine it is probably all right. I should not care to be a patient there, but I should not care to be a patient anywhere.

Rabelais did some good things at that hospital. In two years he ran the death-rate down three per cent. It is not easy to see how he did that. One might suppose that the death-rate would be pretty constant, no matter what diseases the patients had. Rabelais had an average of about two hundred patients, sleeping two in a bed, sometimes three, in air that was warmed only by an open fire, and with no ventilation worth speaking of. It must have been a little stuffy in there sometimes. Rabelais examined all his patients once a day, prescribed medicines and operations, and superintended a staff of thirty-two people. He managed everything. His salary was about forty dollars a year, which was high. His successor got only thirty. I believe he had his board thrown in. The hospital was rich, but the trustees capitalized its prestige. They thought a physician ought to work for nothing for the honour of it. Probably you never heard of any trustees like that, so I thought I would mention it.

The thing he did that interests me most was to beat that hospital out of five dollars. He did it in his second year there, nobody knows how, nobody can imagine how. I think that is more extraordinary than reducing the death-rate. Any man who could beat a French hospital corporation out of five dollars need not worry about the death-rate. He could raise the dead. The French auditor of the hospital was frightfully depressed about that five dollars. He left a marginal note on the account, saying that it seemed to be all wrong, but there it was, and for some reason apparently nothing could be done about it. The incident makes me think of Panurge and the moneychangers, in the sixteenth chapter of the Second Book, where Rabelais says that whenever Panurge “changed a teston, car decu, or any other piece of money, the changer had been more subtle than a fox if Panurge had not at every time made five or six sols vanish away visibly, openly, and manifestly, without making any hurt or lesion, whereof the changer should have felt nothing but the wind.”

Rabelais held a more important position, even, than this one at Lyon. For twenty years he was personal physician to two of the ablest and most prominent men in the kingdom, Cardinal Jean du Bellay and his brother Guillaume. Both of them were always ailing, always worn down by heavy labours and responsibilities in the public service. They were in pretty constant need of the best medical skill, and could command it; and Rabelais was their chosen physician and confidential friend.

Then, too, there is his record at the University of Montpellier, which you historians of medicine know better than I do, and know how remarkable it was, so I need not go into it. The University of Montpellier always made a great specialty of medicine. It was like the Johns Hopkins in that. Except for a few years when Toulouse was ahead of it, I believe the Faculty of Medicine there was said to be the best in France. It is interesting to go in and look at the pictures of the sixteenth-century professors. Rabelais is there, and Rondellet, who some think was the original of the physician Rondibilis, in the Third Book. I am none too sure of that, but it does not matter. That sort of question never matters. Rondibilis is the same, no matter who his original was, or whether he had any. What of it? Think of scholars like F. A. Wolf and Lachmann tying themselves up for years over the question whether Homer was one man or eighteen. What difference does it make? You don't read Homer for any such notions as that. You read him to keep going, to keep your head above water, and you read Rabelais for the same reason.

Scurron, Rabelais's preceptor at Montpellier, has his picture there, and so has Saporta, whom Rabelais mentions as a fellow-actor in the comedy of *The Man Who Married a Dumb Wife*. They had college dramatics in those days, too. Anatole France rewrote this comedy from the synopsis of it that Rabelais gives, and Mr. Granville Barker put it on the stage for us. I wish we could see it oftener, instead of so many plays that are only slices out of our own life, and usually out of the dullest and meanest part of our own life, at that. . . .

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Rabelais makes some running comments on physicians and their ways that interest a layman. Some physicians are fussy. They want to regulate everybody and lay down the law about what is good for everybody, and especially about what is not good for anybody. They begrudge you any interesting food and anything interesting to drink. Then pretty soon another batch of little rule-of-thumb doctors comes along and tells us the first batch was all wrong, and that we ought to do something different. They were just like that in Rabelais's day, too. A friend of mine has been calling my attention to some dietary rules laid down in that period – why, according to those rules, you would say it was not safe to eat anything. This sort of thing even got under Gargantua's skin, you remember. He told Friar John that it was all wrong to drink before breakfast; the physicians said so. "Oh, rot your physicians!" said Friar John, "A hundred devils leap into my body if there be not more old drunkards than old physicians." Friar John went by what philosophers used to call "the common sense of mankind." He believed that the same thing will not work for everybody, and that seems to have been Rabelais's idea too. Rabelais mentions two or three diets in the course of his story, and they seem very reasonable and sensible. He thought that Nature had some resources of her own, and he was willing to let her have something to say about such matters. The little whimsical doctors of his time would not let Nature have any chance at all, if they could help it. They laid out the course that they thought she ought to follow, and then expected her to follow it. Sometimes she did not do that, and then the patient was out of luck.

Of course, you may lay down some general rules. Rabelais knew that. For instance, he says it was sound practice for Gargantua to eat a light lunch and a big dinner, and that the Arabian physicians, who advised a big meal in the middle of the day, were all wrong. There is sense in that. It is a good general rule. But then, you have to remember that one man's light lunch is another man's square meal. Also, something depends on what you have for breakfast, and when you get it, and what you have been doing during the morning. If you have ever been around a French restaurant at lunch time, you have probably noticed Frenchmen getting away with a

pretty hefty square, and it is a great sight to see the way they dig into it. As Panurge said, it is as good as a balsam for sore eyes to see them gulch and raven it. Well, if you had a French breakfast that morning, it is a fair bet that you would be doing the same thing. A French breakfast disappears while you are looking at it. Then again, Gargantua was a huge giant, and his light lunch would founder an ordinary stomach. It would be worse than an old-style American Sunday dinner. When he was a baby, it took the milk of 17,913 cows to feed him. No ordinary baby could do anything with that much milk. So, you see, you have to allow for exceptions to your general rule, after all, probably quite a lot of them.

By the way, did you ever hear that our term Blue Monday came out of those Sunday dinners? The mayor of one of our Mid-Western cities told me that. He said he never had such a frightful time with reformers and the moral element in his town as he did on Monday morning. They ate their heads off every Sunday noon, and when they came to on Monday morning, they were full of bile and fermentation and all sorts of meanness, and that made them want to persecute their neighbours, so they would run around first thing to the mayor's office to get him to close up something that people liked, or stop something that they wanted to do. Every Monday morning he knew he was in for it. It was Blue Monday for him every week.

I have often wondered how much of this sort of thing is behind our great reform movements. One of them, you know, was started by a bilious French lawyer. He was a fearful fellow. Most people have no idea of the harm he did. He was a contemporary of Rabelais, and they were probably acquainted. He was down on Rabelais, and did as much as anybody to give him a bad name. That was because Rabelais would not join in on his reform. That is always the way with these bilious reformers. You have to reform things their way, or they say you are a scoundrel and do not believe in any reform at all. That is the way the Socialists and Communists feel nowadays, when we do not swallow their ideals whole, and yet maybe we want things reformed as much as they do. Rabelais wanted to see the Church reformed. He was hand in glove with Erasmus on that. But he was a Pantagruelist, so he knew that Calvin's way and Luther's way would not really reform

anything, but would only make a botch of it. Well, we see now that it all turned out just as he knew it would. Swapping the authority of a bishop for the authority of a book was not even a theoretical reform, and all it did practically was to set up a lot of little Peterkins all over Christendom, each one sure he was the only one who knew what the book meant, and down on all the others, fighting and squabbling with them and saying all sorts of hateful things about them. Rabelais knew that was sure to happen, and knew that kind of reform was just no reform at all. So he would not go in with Calvin, and Calvin, being a good bilious reformer, abused him like a pickpocket. Calvin was an enormously able man, but his liver was out of commission. It is a strange thought, isn't it, that if somebody had fed Calvin eight or nine grains of calomel at night every week or so, and about a quarter of a pound of Rochelle salts in the morning, the whole tone of Protestant theology might have been different. It almost makes mechanists of us.

Rabelais had much the same sort of notion about reform in medicine. His position on that has puzzled a great many people. That is because they look at him in a little, sectarian, rule-of-thumb way. He was for going back to Galen and Hippocrates, cleaning off the glosses on their texts, and finding out what they really said. Well, then, some say that shows he was a hide-bound old Tory in medicine. On the other hand, he made dissections and lectured from them, which was a great innovation. He went in for experiments. He laughed at some ideas of Democritus and Theophrastus, and in the seventh chapter of the Third Book you find him poking fun at Galen himself.

Well, then, others say, he was a great radical, and he has even been put forward as the father of experimentation in medicine. All that is nonsense. To the Pantagrueist, labels like radical and Tory mean just nothing at all. You go back to the classics of a subject for the practical purpose of saving yourself a lot of work. You get an accumulation of observation, method, technique, that subsequent experience has confirmed, and you can take it at second-hand and don't have to work it all out afresh for yourself. Maybe you can improve on it, here and there, and that is all right, but if you don't

know the classics of your subject, you often find that you have been wasting a lot of time over something that somebody went all through, clear back in the Middle Ages. What is there radical or Tory about that? It is just good sense.

I think Americans are peculiarly impatient about the classics of any subject. In my own line, I know, I next to never meet anybody who seems to have read anything that was written before about 1890. That is one reason why we get done in so often by other people, especially in business and finance. You take a good thing wherever you find it – that was Rabelais’s idea.

If somebody worked it out satisfactorily for you forty years ago, or four hundred, or four thousand, why, you are just that much ahead. You have that much more chance to work out something else, some improvement maybe, or something new. Knowing the classics matures and seasons the mind as nothing else will, but aside from that, in a practical way, it is a great labour-saver. When I was at Ems a couple of years ago, one of their experimenters had just discovered that the Ems salts helped out a little in cases of pyorrhea. That was known four hundred years ago. It is mentioned in a report on the springs, written in the sixteenth century. Then it was forgotten, and discovered again only the other day.

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But I must stop this sort of thing, and speak about Pantagruelism. I hear you have a good many Pantagruelists here in Baltimore, and that does not surprise me, because there used to be such a marvelous lot of germ-carriers in this university. If you caught Pantagruelism from Gildersleeve or Minton Warren or William Osler, there was no help for you. You had it for life. There was a big quarantine against Baltimore on account of those people. That was the most expensive quarantine ever established in the world. It cost the American people all their culture, all their intelligence, all their essential integrities, their insight, their dignity, their self-respect, their command of the future, to keep Pantagruelism from spreading.

We did it, though. The country is practically free of Pantagruelism now. There is less of it here than in any other country I know. Hardly anyone ever heard of it. Probably you know how the great exponent of Pantagruelism is regarded. Why, only the other day when I was talking to a few people informally about Rabelais, a man came up to me afterward and said he was sorry his wife was not there. He had left her at home because he thought she might have to hear some improper language. That was his idea of Rabelais, and he was a professor in one of our colleges, too. Just think of a miserable little coot like that. When you look the situation over and see the general part that this country is playing in the world's affairs, and see what sort of thing she has to play it with, you begin to think that quarantine cost too much.

Pantagruelism is not a cult or a creed or a frame of mind, but a quality of spirit. In one place Rabelais says it is "a certain jollity of mind, pickled in the scorn of fortune," and this is one of its aspects: an easy, objective, genial, but unyielding superiority to everything external, to every conceivable circumstance of one's life. It is a quality like that of the ether, which the physicists of my day used to say was imponderable, impalpable, harder than steel, yet so pervasive that it permeates everything, underlies everything. This is the quality that Rabelais communicates in every line. Read the Prologue to the Second Book, for instance – better read it aloud to yourself – well, there you have it, you can't miss it, and if it does not communicate itself to your own spirit, you may as well give up the idea that you were cut out for a Pantagruelist.

And at what a time in the world's life was that Prologue written. It was a period more nearly like ours than any other in history. The difficulties and temptations that the human spirit faced were like ours. It was a period of unexampled expansion, like ours; of discovery and invention, like ours; of revolution in industry and commerce; of the inflation of avarice into a mania; of ruinous political centralization; of dominant bourgeois ideals – not the ideals of the working bourgeois, but those of the new bourgeois of bankers, speculators, shavers, lawyers, job-holders; and it was a period of great general complacency toward corruption. This is one thing that makes

Rabelais particularly a man of our own time. The quality of spirit that he exhibits was brought out under circumstances almost exactly like ours, and contact with it helps us to meet our own circumstances in the way that he met his.

Pantagruelism means keeping the integrity of one's own personality absolutely intact. Rabelais says that Pantagruel "never vexed nor disquieted himself with the least pretence of dislike to anything, because he knew that he must have most grossly abandoned the divine mansion of reason if he had permitted his mind to be never so little grieved, afflicted, or altered on any occasion whatsoever. For all the goods that the heaven covereth and that the earth containeth, in all their dimensions of height, depth, breadth, and length, are not of so much worth as that we should for them disturb or disorder our affections, trouble or perplex our senses or spirits."

You see, the Pantagruelist never admits that there is anything in the world that is bigger than he is. Not business, not profession, not position. The case of the American businessman is much discussed now, as you know. What has the typical American businessman come to? He thought his business was bigger than he was, and he went into slavery to it and let it own him, and he was proud to do that, he thought that meant progress, thought it meant civilization, and he thought because his business was so great that he must be a great man; and he kept letting us know he thought so. He was like the misguided girl who had lived with so many gentlemen that she thought she was a lady. Well, then, a pinch comes, and now we are all saying the businessman is only a stuffed shirt, that there is nothing inside his shirt but wind and fungus. We see that the big men of business have had to have a tariff wall around them, or get rebates from the railways on their freight, or get some other kind of special privilege, and that they were not great men at all, for almost anybody with the same privilege could have done as well.

Then think of the people in politics, the jobholders and jobhunters. There are a lot of them around just now, telling us what ought to be done and what they are going to do if they are elected. The trouble with them is that they think the job is bigger than they are, and so they destroy the

integrity of their personality in order to get it or to hold it. Why, by the time a man has connived and lied and shuffled his miserable-way up to the point where he can be an acceptable candidate, there isn't enough of him left to be a good jobholder, even if he wants to. The Athenians blamed Socrates, you know, because he wouldn't have anything to do with politics; he would not vote or go into any campaigns or endorse any candidates – he let it all alone. He was a great Pantagruelist, one of the greatest, so he told the Athenians that what they were blaming him for was the very reason why he and his followers were the best politicians in Athens. That closed them out. He was such a good Pantagruelist that finally the boys had to get together and poison him.

Pantagruelism is utterly unselfconscious; it works like a kind of secondary instinct. Have you ever noticed how Rabelais's wonderful art comes out in the relations between Pantagruel and Panurge? Pantagruel liked Panurge, was interested in him, amused by him, tolerant of all his ingenious deviltry, but never once compromised his own character. On the other hand, he was never priggish, never patronizing or moralistic with Panurge, not even in their discussion on borrowing and lending. His superiority was always unselfconscious, effortless. I think the delicate consistency that Rabelais shows on this point is perhaps his greatest literary achievement; and the climax of it is that Panurge, who was never loyal to anything or anybody, was always loyal to Pantagruel.

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But Pantagruelism is not easy. In the Prologue to the Third Book we come on another characteristic which is the crowning glory of Pantagruelism. Rabelais has been talking about the blunders of an honest-minded Egyptian ruler, and some other matters of the kind, how well-intended things are sometimes misapprehended, and so on, and then he says that by virtue of Pantagruelism we are always ready to “bear with anything that floweth from a good, free, and loyal heart.” Maybe that is easier for you than it is for me. I don't mind saying frankly and very sadly that my Pantagruelism breaks down oftener on that than on anything. On this point Pantagruelism is like

Christianity. I have often thought that I might have made a pretty consistent Christian if it had not been for just that one thing that the blessed Apostle said about suffering fools gladly. How easily the great Pantagruelists seem to do that! But it only seems easy; it really is very hard to do. How easily, how exquisitely Rabelais did it! I wish I might have him in New York so he could hear some of my friends talk about the great transformations that are going to take place when Mr. Roosevelt is elected or Mr. Hoover is reelected. I always walk out on them, but Rabelais would not. He would play with them a while, and probably get some results, for they are really first-rate people, but all that sort of thing seems beyond me.

The quarantine I spoke of a moment ago appears to be pretty well lifted. We are not quarantining against much of anything, these days. Now, in conclusion, may I ask if it ever occurred to you to think what a thundering joke on the country it would be if this university should quietly, without saying anything about it, go back to its old contraband business of disseminating Pantagruelism? For that was its business. You got good chemistry with Remsen, and mathematics with Sylvester, and semitics with Paul Haupt, and a degree at the end of it, and all that sort of thing, but mark my words, before time gets through with you it will show that the real distinction of this university was that it exposed you to Pantagruelism day and night. Let us dream about it for a moment. Suppose we say you sold your campus and your plant – they may be an asset to you, but they look to me like a liability; suppose you threw out all your undergradaute students – and this time I am very sure they are a liability; suppose you went back to the little brick houses where Huxley found you, and suppose you got together a dozen or so good sound Pantagruelists from somewhere and shut them up there with your graduate students, your bachelors and masters. What a colossal joke it would be! The country has virtually ruined itself in the effort to stamp out Pantagruelism. All its institutional voices have been raised in behalf of ignoble, mean, squalid ideals, and telling us that those mean progress, those mean civilization, those mean hundred-per-cent Americanism. Now that the country has got itself in such distraction from following this doctrine that none of the accepted prophets have a sensible word to say, I repeat,

what a joke it would be if the old original sinner should go back and begin corrupting the youth again.

Then suppose you should use a little selective pressure on your student body. You know, some people – excellent people, admirable people – are immune to Pantagruelism. You had some of them here in the old days, like President Wilson and Mr. Newton Baker. They were fine folks, good as gold, most of them, but no good at all for your purposes. Well, suppose when these immune people come around, you tell them after a while that they would probably do better up at Harvard, or maybe Yale. Yes, Yale is the place for them. There is an Institute of Human Relations up there, and these immune people are usually strong on human relations. Did you ever notice that? When Mr. Wilson and Mr. Baker got going on human relations, there was no stopping them. So you might off-load your immune people on Yale, and they could go to the Institute. They would probably find a director there – I mean, a Dean – and plenty of card-indexes and stenographers, and one thing or another like that that are just what you need to study human relations with; and meanwhile you could be getting on with Pantagruelism.