



Rabelais's Radical Farce
**Late Medieval Comic Theater and
Its Function in Rabelais**

E. Bruce Hayes

RABELAIS'S RADICAL FARCE

*To my parents, Pat and Rex
and my children, Adam and Mado*

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Late Medieval Comic Theater and
Its Function in Rabelais

E. BRUCE HAYES

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Routledge

Taylor & Francis Group

LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010 by Ashgate Publishing

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

Hayes, E. Bruce.

Rabelais's radical farce: late medieval comic theater and its function in Rabelais.

1. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? – Criticism and interpretation. 2. French drama (Comedy) – History and criticism. 3. Farce – History and criticism. 4. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Pantagruel. 5. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Gargantua. 6. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Tiers livre de Pantagruel. 7. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Quatre livre de Pantagruel.

I. Title

843.3-dc22

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Hayes, E. Bruce.

Rabelais's radical farce: late medieval comic theater and its function in Rabelais / by E. Bruce Hayes.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-7546-6518-2 (hardback: alk. paper)

1. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553?—Criticism and interpretation. 2. French drama (Comedy)—History and criticism. 3. Farce—History and criticism. 4. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Pantagruel. 5. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Gargantua. 6. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Gargantua et Pantagruel. 3e livre. 7. Rabelais, François, ca. 1490–1553? Gargantua et Pantagruel. 4e livre. I. Title.

PQ1694.H39 2010

843'.3—dc22

2010018963

ISBN: 9780754665182 (hbk)

ISBN: 9781315603346 (ebk)

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Acknowledgements

A book may have a single author, but there are in fact a multitude of people who contribute to its completion. This book began as a dissertation. During that phase, I owe a tremendous debt of gratitude to my advisor and mentor, Ned Duval. He provided crucial guidance and then backed away and encouraged me to figure things out for myself. I am also grateful for the feedback I received from Catherine Cusset and Howard Bloch. I am particularly thankful for the helpful discussions I had with Howard as the project was brought to its initial completion.

Since then, quite a bit about this project has changed, and there are many colleagues and friends who have helped me along the way. Barbara Bowen deserves special mention. After reading my dissertation in 2001, she has since provided much appreciated mentorship and feedback. She has kept me on my toes with her cantankerous comments, all while offering generous support and encouragement. There have been many other senior scholars I have met at conferences who have provided me with support and feedback and whose research has inspired me. It is impossible to name everyone, but among those are Jelle Koopmans, who has generously helped me repeatedly with his immense knowledge of farce; Marian Rothstein, one of my biggest boosters; Tom Conley, whose visit to the University of Kansas in 2004 was a real treat for me; François Rigolot, who has provided kind words of encouragement. I am also grateful to colleagues such as David LaGuardia, Gary Ferguson, Jeff Persels, and Dora Polachek, whose work and collegiality helped motivate me along the way. Three friendships stand out, as they were all formed during the genesis of this project through common interests as *seiziémistes*: Ed Tilson, supreme *montaigniste*, my partner-in-crime in graduate school, and a gifted scholar; Hassan Melehy, a generous soul whose intellectual passion inspires me; and finally, my fellow *farceur*, Bernd Renner, whose endless erudition and tireless scholarship have served as a goad to make me a better scholar.

There are many colleagues to thank at the University of Kansas, too many to mention here. I would like to recognize Tom Booker, Van Kelly, and Caroline Jewers, who read my manuscript and provided very helpful feedback. A special place must be reserved for my amusingly exigent and misanthropic colleague, Paul Scott, who is also such a very dear friend. He has been both devastating in his criticisms and moving with his continual support. For both, I am most grateful. Many thanks to Ingrid Horton for her invaluable help with proofreading and translating passages in the manuscript. I am also grateful to the librarians at the University of Kansas who have aided me with this project. Four deserve special mention: Richard Clement and Karen Cook from the Spencer Research Library (sadly Rick has left us for greener pastures out west), Frances Devlin, our French bibliographer, and Lars Leon, head of Interlibrary Loan Services. I have greatly appreciated the help I have received from Paula Courtney, Gwen Claassen, and

Pamela LeRow at Digital Media Services. Sarah Greenwood and Jane Masheter in our department office have also assisted with this project. I offer my sincere thanks to Erika Gaffney and to my readers at Ashgate. Both of the readers of my manuscript provided excellent critiques and suggestions, and I have done my best to acknowledge this in the book. Whatever the shortcomings of this book, they are entirely my own.

Finally, I am grateful for family, a notion that has changed quite a bit over the course of this book's creation. My parents and my children have been my biggest supporters, which is why this book is dedicated to them. I now have a new, larger family, and I feel tremendous gratitude for the encouragement I receive from my wife and partner Michelle, as well as the joy I experience with her wonderful children Logan and Isabelle, and our newly blended family.

Parts of Chapters 1 and 3 were published as "Rabelais' Radical Farce: A Comparative Analysis of the *Écolier Limousin* Episode and the *Farce de Maître Mimin Étudiant*." *Renaissance and Reformation/Renaissance et Réforme* vol. 28 (2004), 61–78.

Part of Chapter 3 was published as "Putting the 'Haute' Back into the 'Haute Dame de Paris': The Politics and Performance of Rabelais's Radical Farce." *French Forum* vol. 32 (2007), 39–52.

Part of Chapter 4 was published as "A Decade of Silence: Rabelais's Return to Writing in a More Dangerous World." *Études Rabelaisiennes* vol. 46 (2008), 101–14.

Introduction

According to the apocryphal account of Rabelais's death, the author's last words were purportedly, "Tirez le rideau, la farce est jouée"¹ ["Pull the curtain, the farce is over"]. In chapter 34 of Rabelais's highly erudite *Tiers Livre* (1546), a book that marks a pointed departure in form and content from the author's previous, more popular mock epics, *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, there is a somewhat unusual and surprising authorial self-reference. Pantagruel's companions comment on a farce they saw performed in Montpellier, *Celui qui espousa une femme mute*, a piece performed by actors which included François Rabelais.² This self-reference, one of only two such mentions in all of the books,³ not only elicits the author's name in the context of a farce, but also follows the allusion to Rabelais as a performer of farce with one of almost two dozen direct references found throughout the *Chroniques* to the most popular farce of the period, the *Farce de Maître Pathelin*. For the reader of Rabelais's books, it is not difficult to recognize the theatrical elements of the author's work, as the narrative often feels as much or more like an oral performance than a written work of prose. Yet beyond generalities regarding the frequently theatrical nature of the author's composition, the purpose of this book is first to explore the specific genre of farce, a dramatic form whose watershed era (approximately 1450 to 1550) overlapped the period of Rabelais's literary production, and second to explain how and why this particular form of theater forms a crucial subtext for understanding the author's work.

While this initial example from the *Tiers Livre* illustrates Rabelais's fascination with the theater of farce, more importantly, it is emblematic of a larger phenomenon at play throughout the *Chroniques*. Farce in fact serves as a central structuring mechanism for many of the episodes in *Gargantua* and the Pantagrueline chronicles. Tracing the manifestations of this form of theater within Rabelais's books reveals a profoundly rich and varied instance of textual appropriation; indicating the presence of farce throughout the author's work represents a mere

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all English translations are mine. André Thevet, *Les Vrais Pourtraits et vies des hommes illustres* (Paris: Veuve J. Kervert and G. Chadriere, 1584), f° 501 v^o.

² As V. L. Saulnier demonstrated in his article "Médecins de Montpellier," historical records confirm the autobiographical reality of this reference. Beginning with Montpellier's medical school records, Saulnier traced the future careers of the other players mentioned with Rabelais in chapter 34 of the *Tiers Livre*, among them Antoine Saporta, who became a professor at the University of Montpellier, and Pierre Tolet, who practiced medicine in Vienna and Lyon and produced some translations and therapeutic works.

³ The other self-reference is found in the *Quart Livre*, chapter 27, which describes how Rabelais was one of those present at the death of his protector, Guillaume Du Bellay, who passed away 9 January 1543.

beginning, as both the form and meaning of the genre are transformed in ways which produce both a radical reformulation of traditional farce and a superlative example of the new kind of satire, evangelical- and humanist-inspired, which was appearing during this early post-Reformation period in France.⁴

Thus, this book seeks to elucidate a specific and significant instance of the interplay between so-called popular and humanist culture and literature in sixteenth-century France. Among Renaissance humanists, Rabelais distinguished himself by joining together two distinctly different traditions. The first was the erudite one favored by humanists such as Erasmus, incorporating knowledge of biblical and classical sources, and the second was the lewd, irreverent world of popular culture, a world in which the theater of farce thrived.⁵ Rabelais was a dedicated humanist who published works in medicine and law; he once wrote a letter proclaiming that he had been nourished by Erasmus's "divinae ... doctrinae."⁶ This can be surprising to those who have read the tales of Gargantua and Pantagruel, marked as they are by a coarseness and vulgarity absent in many humanist writings.⁷ This contrast serves to illustrate the hybrid nature of Rabelais's work, a work simultaneously bawdy and erudite, boldly naturalistic and encyclopedic in scope. Rabelais's appropriation of farce serves as a key to comprehending the nuances and tensions between "high" and "low" forms of expression embedded within the Rabelaisian discourse, as the author adopts a seemingly simplistic theatrical form and recasts it in a variety of ways which expand the possibilities of the genre, an intertextual process which also produces a distinctive, innovative formulation of Erasmian humanism.⁸

⁴ A very useful exploration of this trend, with an important focus on changes in satirical theater, can be found in Jeff Persels's article, "The Sorbonnic Trots." See also below, footnote 24.

⁵ Rabelais was certainly not the only humanist to use scatological, vulgar humor. For an insightful overview of some of the uses of scatological representations in early-modern Europe, see Jeff Persels and Russell Ganim's *Fecal Matters in Early Modern Literature and Art*.

⁶ Huchon, Mireille, ed. *Œuvres complètes de François Rabelais*, 998.

⁷ As noted above (footnote 5), Persels and Ganim's *Fecal Matters* contains many interesting examples of scatological language used by humanists such as Erasmus, Luther, and Thomas More.

⁸ There are a number of other comedic literary predecessors which Rabelais drew upon, but which I do not treat in this book. These include the French *fabliaux* (many late medieval farces are in fact taken from *fabliaux*), *nouvelles*, as well as the Italian mock epic tradition, most notably Folengo's *Baldus*, whose eponymous hero's trickster companion Cingar serves as a worthy antecedent to Rabelais's Panurge. For important insights into the connections between the *nouvelle* (and to a lesser degree, the *fabliau*) tradition and Rabelais, see David LaGuardia's *The Iconography of Power*, his article, "'Un bon escmoucheter par mousche jamais émouché ne sera': Panurge as Trickster," and his most recent book, *Intertextual Masculinity in French Renaissance Literature*. For an overview of some of the difficulties involved with any intertextual study of Folengo and Rabelais, see Barbara Bowen's article, "Rabelais and Folengo Once Again" in her edited volume, *Rabelais in Context*.

Until now, there has never been an extended investigation of the importance of dramatic farce in Rabelais's writings, yet it is difficult to overstate the importance of this genre for the author's work. Both a leading scholar of late medieval theater, Jelle Koopmans, and a prominent Rabelais specialist, Michel Jeanneret, have recently lamented this absence in Rabelais studies.⁹ An important date to highlight when tracing the path of scholarly interest in farce and its function in Rabelais's work is 1911, when two articles appeared in a volume of *Revue des Études Rabelaisiennes* by Gustave Cohen¹⁰ and Emmanuel Philipot.¹¹ Both articles centered on the interplay between late medieval theater and Rabelais—specifically on the theater of farce and its role in Rabelais's work. Koopmans has observed that Cohen's article in particular, “est resté pendant longtemps, malgré sa date de publication (1911), ... le dernier mot sur la question”¹² [“has remained for a long time, despite its date of publication (1911), ... the definitive word on the subject”], while stressing that there is much that remains to be pursued in Rabelais studies regarding the importance of this theatrical genre in the author's work. Almost a century later, readers of both farce and Rabelais have an impressive body of criticism to draw upon, yet there remains a sizeable gap in understanding both the literary aspects and possibilities of farce, as well as the performative, farcical underpinnings of the author's tales. To grasp the process by which Rabelais built this important corpus of performance-based, oral productions into his own written narrative is to understand a vital aspect of his literary project; the theater of farce represents a crucial subtext in understanding Rabelais's multifarious, polysemic work.

Rabelais's use of dramatic farce also offers a fascinating manifestation of cultural transferral. As previously mentioned, his books were written towards the end of the zenith of this theatrical genre in France; there remain more than 150 extant French farces dating from this period. As Koopmans has noted concerning references to farce in the author's work, “Rabelais cite soit directement soit indirectement, textuellement et librement, des centaines de passages, voire plus, parfois directement, parfois indirectement”¹³ [“Rabelais quotes either directly or indirectly, both verbatim and loosely, hundreds of passages, maybe even more, sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly”]. The goal of the present study is not to identify these hundreds of allusions to farce, but rather to show how the presence

⁹ See below for Koopmans's comments on the subject. Jeanneret has suggested new, promising avenues of inquiry in Rabelais studies, including the following: “L'influence du théâtral sur le narratif demeure aussi à étudier (ainsi les multiples souvenirs de la *Farce de Maître Pathelin* dans Rabelais, ou les vestiges de la farce dans les nouvelles comiques)” (“La Renaissance et sa littérature: le problème des marges,” 15) [“The influence of the theatrical on the narrative form also remains to be studied (as well as the many references to the *Farce de Maître Pathelin* in Rabelais, or the vestiges of farce in comic *nouvelles*)”].

¹⁰ Gustave Cohen, “Rabelais et le théâtre.”

¹¹ Emmanuel Philipot, “Notes sur quelques farces de la Renaissance.”

¹² Jelle Koopmans, “Rabelais et l'esprit de la farce,” 299.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 302.

of farce can be uncovered throughout the books, where it often serves both as a structuring mechanism and a rhetorical weapon for social, religious, and political satire. By initially exploring the world of what could provisionally be referred to as traditional farce, one is able to recognize how radically transformed the genre becomes, as well as the varied forms the genre assumes in the author's creation.

Popular Culture and Its Role in Rabelais's Work

While it is true that until now there has never been an extended investigation into the role of farce in Rabelais's work, a substantial body of criticism devoted to the role of popular culture in the author's writing does exist, the best-known study being Mikhail Bakhtin's seminal work, *Rabelais and His World*. Like most scholars who focus on popular culture in early modern Europe and its impact on Rabelais in particular, Bakhtin emphasizes *oral* culture. The problem with examining popular culture in this way is that oral traditions are largely undocumented, and studies based on them are inevitably speculative. Farce and similar comedic genres of theater are printed documents reflective of the culture Bakhtin was trying to describe. Farces were not only seen and experienced on the stage, but also published and read by Rabelais and his readers. These texts have slipped between the cracks: too popular for those treating humanist topics in Rabelais, too literary for those treating popular culture, the texts are marginalized by their inherently ambiguous status. And until now, despite the continued popularity of farce in the sixteenth century, scholarship on farce has been done almost entirely by medievalists, while Rabelais scholarship is dominated by Renaissance specialists. The result has been that while there are brief references to Rabelais in scholarship on farce, as well as an occasional allusion to farce in Rabelais studies, no scholarly examination has brought the two together in any substantial way. The two objects this study finally brings together, farce and Rabelais's *Chroniques*, have until now largely been fenced off from each other by disciplinary boundaries.

There is no doubt that Bakhtin's study fundamentally changed the field of Rabelais studies. Despite the flaws of its methodology, which will be discussed below, this work represented the first serious effort to reassess and to bring to light the important role of popular culture in Rabelais's writings. In an important sense, my own study owes much to Bakhtin's pioneering exploration of the significance, and even the centrality, of popular culture in Rabelais's books. Drawing upon the title of Bakhtin's book, I wish to show how the world of farce and Rabelais's world are intimately connected, and to illustrate the ways in which the former offers an important key to understanding the latter's literary creation.

To begin with, the term *popular culture* is highly problematic, because it is much too homogeneous a term to designate a vast array of customs and practices that are at best only partially understood from a vantage point which must account for a wide array of limitations. For example, in the introduction to the revised reprint of his magisterial work, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke acknowledges the two fundamental problems with referring to "popular

culture.” The first is that it “gives a false impression of homogeneity and that it would be better to use the term in the plural, ‘popular cultures,’ or to replace it with an expression such as ‘the culture of the popular classes.’” The second problem is that the term implies that a strict distinction can be drawn between popular and elite cultures. As he states, “The borderline between the different cultures of the people and the cultures of the elites (which were no less various) is a fuzzy one, so the attention of students of the subject ought to be concentrated on the interaction rather than the division between the two.”¹⁴ It is precisely that interaction between popular and elite cultures that forms the central focus of this book. Bakhtin posited the concept of an “unofficial” culture,¹⁵ beyond (or rather below) the purview of official institutions and their attendant hierarchies, a culture comprised of an early modern proletariat who rebelled against official culture and offered its own, alternative vision of how society should function. As Bakhtin explained, “From the people’s point of view, as expressed in the novel, there were always wider perspectives, reaching far beyond the limited progress of the time.”¹⁶ This Marxist, utopian-like view of the lower echelons of early modern society has been discounted by other scholars who have based their conclusions on much more solid historical evidence.

Burke, for example, arrives at the following conclusion, “Popular attitudes in this period may be described as generally ‘conservative,’ or better, ‘traditional.’ ... It is as if people believed that the system could not change.”¹⁷ As we will see when we look specifically at farce, despite the ubiquity of the “world upside down” motif found in farce, it is a genre characterized by its fundamental conservatism that seeks to maintain the status quo. In his examination of popular festive and theatrical forms, Burke supports with some reservations the safety-valve theory to explain the comic reversals that take place and which form the central action of farce.¹⁸ As he notes, “The safety-valve theory of festivals has much to recommend it. ... Comedies built around situations of reversal ... and played during Carnival, frequently end in a similar way with a reminder to the audience that it is time to

¹⁴ xvi.

¹⁵ For Bakhtin, this unofficial culture existed primarily in popular festive forms and in the marketplace. See his Chapters 2 and 3 on these vessels of unofficial culture.

¹⁶ 439. As shown below, perhaps the central flaw of Bakhtin’s study is contained in the phrase, “as expressed in the novel.” The world outside Rabelais’s work that Bakhtin seeks to describe exists, in fact, only within the books themselves.

¹⁷ *Op. cit.*, 175–6.

¹⁸ This theory was originally presented by contemporary authorities who argued against the abolition of popular festivities. For example, a letter sent out by the Faculty of Theology of Paris in 1444 uses the following metaphor: “Les Tonneaux de vin créveroient, si on ne leur ouvroit quelquefois la bonde ou le fosset, pour leur donner de l’air” (see Carol Clark, *The Vulgar Rabelais*, 84–5) [“The wine barrels would burst if the tap were not opened from time to time to let them breathe”].

set the world the right way up again."¹⁹ Many farces, as we will see, do in fact end with such reminders, brief didactic messages that reinforce societal norms.

Arguing for a more radical view of these festive expressions of popular society, Natalie Zemon Davis has challenged the safety-valve theory, maintaining that, "festive life can on the one hand perpetuate certain values of the community ... and on the other hand criticize political order."²⁰ However, at the end of her study, she arrives at a similar conclusion, namely that, "License was not rebellious. It was very much in the service of the village community. Total violence or disorder in the course of *Misrule* was a mistake, an accident."²¹ Acknowledging Bakhtin's contribution to our understanding of the more subversive elements of popular culture, Davis nevertheless refuses to see the same revolutionary spirit Bakhtin claimed to have uncovered. She observes, "These elements of political and social criticism in the midst of carnival were intended to destroy-and-renew political life in Mikhail Bakhtin's sense, but not to lead directly to further political action."²² Thus, while Davis does acknowledge that there are elements of "political and social criticism" to be found in popular festive forms, including farce, she disagrees with the Russian critic's assertion that this translates into a rebellious mentality which seeks to overturn traditional hierarchies.

In another essay, Davis elucidates the process by which popular performances, including farce, move into other arenas, where they may become more overtly political:

Rather than expending itself primarily during the privileged duration of the joke, the story, the comedy, or the carnival, topsy-turvy play had much spillover into everyday "serious" life, and the effects there were sometimes disturbing and even novel. As literary and festive inversion in preindustrial Europe was a product not just of stable hierarchy but also of changes in the location of power and property, so this inversion could prompt new ways of thinking about the system and reacting to it.²³

In the case of traditional farce, the genre offers little in terms of "new ways of thinking about the system," yet an author like Rabelais, who was actively engaged in an ideological struggle, recognized farce's potential to be transformed into a political weapon to be used against entrenched institutions. It is within the

¹⁹ *Op. cit.*, 202. In his elaborate study on popular culture in early modern France (*Culture populaire et culture des elites*), Robert Muchembled reaches a similar conclusion: "Les fêtes, les jeux, la danse, la musique, le théâtre ... ont pour fonction d'éviter cette rupture, de redéfinir fréquemment pour chacun le sens d'appartenance au groupe. ... Ce monde tend vers la clôture" (134) ["Feasts, games, dance, music, theater ... serve as a means to avoid this breach, to frequently redefine for each person the sense of belonging to a group ... This world tends toward closure"].

²⁰ *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 97.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

²² *Ibid.*, 119.

²³ *Ibid.*, 143.

space created by this “spillover into everyday ‘serious’ life” that Rabelais, who was very much attuned to this type of theater and its satirical possibilities, could alter an essentially conservative genre and produce radical, subversive farce-like performances in his writing. As the present study will show, it is only within the context of an ideological battle being waged by an elite group of reform-minded humanists, a group with which Rabelais readily identified, that popular forms such as farce were radicalized and thus used as vehicles for social and religious change.²⁴

Most recently, Sara Beam has offered a very compelling thesis concerning the evolution of farce from pre-Reformation to absolutist France in her illuminating book *Laughing Matters*. She maintains that “farces were inherently satirical plays, and their jokes directly challenged the authority that religious and royal officials enjoyed in Renaissance France.”²⁵ In her study, she gives specific examples where plays targeted particular magistrates and other powerful people, while also acknowledging that most of the extant pieces to which we have access today are very general and contain few, if any, references to specific political or religious figures of any broad significance. She concedes that of the various genres of late medieval comic theater, “Many literary critics argue that farce as the least satirical of these comic genres.”²⁶ It is within the context of early post-Reformation France that the plays were more likely to contain more overtly satirical elements, a point that is central to my own thesis on Rabelais’s use of farce. Beam notes, “As religious tensions intensified in the 1520s, some reform-minded students and rectors indeed found that the traditional farce was an apt medium through which to express their

²⁴ Besides Rabelais’s books, the production of the *Farce des théologastres*, composed between 1526 and 1528, is an important example of an evangelical humanist appropriating farce for ideological purposes. The author of the play was likely Louis de Berquin, who would be condemned and imprisoned in 1526, leading to speculation as to whether his suspected authorship of the *Farce des théologastres* played a role in his condemnation. Three years later he would be burned at the stake, becoming an early martyr for the Protestant cause in France. For a thorough discussion of both the likely author and date of composition of the play, see the introduction to *La Farce des théologastres*, 9–40. As noted above in footnote 4, a very insightful examination of this and other humanist- and reformist-inspired plays can be found in Jeff Persels’s article, “The Sorbonnic Trots.” Marguerite de Navarre is another example of a French evangelical humanist who used popular farce for ideological purposes in her plays, some of which are clearly reformulations of traditional farce. See my article, “‘De rire ne me puy tenir’: Marguerite de Navarre’s Satirical Theater.”

²⁵ 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 28. Beam defines *farce* in the loosest possible way in her book, stating, “I employ *farce* as an umbrella term for all French comic theater of the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries” (27). Her decision is certainly understandable, especially as drawing strict divisions between genres is not always possible. I would still argue, however, that there is a group of plays that can be specifically categorized as farce, as opposed to *sotties*, *sermons joyeux*, etc., and that they tend to be the most conservative, least satirical of these comic plays.

doubts about the church.”²⁷ As noted at the beginning of this introduction, one such student was François Rabelais.

As a specific form of entertainment greatly appreciated by those representing the lower echelons of the third estate, late medieval farce serves as a useful illustration of how the reality of a strict division between “official” and “unofficial” cultures posited by Bakhtin proves illusory. The subject matter of farce is primarily drawn from the “little people” (*le menu peuple* or *petites gens* in French), as the plays are populated with cobblers, millers, merchants, inn keepers, beggars, and other figures belonging to the lower ranks of the third estate, and although there is the occasional presence of a character from one of the first two estates, these characters are never taken from the upper levels of either the nobility or the clergy. Additionally, these plays were performed and seen during carnival and other festivals that villagers and city dwellers, as well as a wide range of groups representing the third estate, appreciated and enjoyed.

At the same time, any rigid definition which considers these plays as the unique domain of a nascent proletariat would prove untenable. It is easy today to view the theater of farce, with its scatological humor and crude subject matter, as a “lower” form of entertainment, yet in early sixteenth-century France, these plays were performed not only during carnivals and street fairs, but also in the colleges and even at court.²⁸ The corpus of plays is far from homogeneous, and it is apparent that while many of the plays were aimed at a more general audience, others were written and performed for a more educated body of spectators. The use of Latin, as well as juridical language, underscores the fact that many of the plays were produced by groups such as the *Basoche* in Paris, a confraternity comprised primarily of law clerks, and intended for a more educated audience.²⁹ Student groups in the *collèges* and elsewhere (such as the one Rabelais participated in during his medical studies) represent another important source of the theater of farce. While most of the plays would be completely understandable to a lay audience, others would be either difficult to understand or less appreciated without a certain level of education. Thus, while for brevity’s sake I use terms such as *traditional* or *popular farce* in order to distinguish late medieval dramatic farce from the radical reformulations of the genre in Rabelais’s writings, I am not trying

²⁷ *Ibid*, 101.

²⁸ As Charles Mazouer observes, “Pour une fête, pour un événement public heureux, pour le carnaval, pour le divertissement du peuple mais aussi bien pour contribuer à la distraction du roi, on a recours à la farce” (*Renaissance*, 20) [“For a feast, for a festive public event, for carnival, for the entertainment of the people, but also for the king’s amusement, one turns to farce”].

²⁹ Farces that fit this profile include *Les Femmes qui se font passer pour maîtresses*, *Les Femmes qui apprennent à parler latin*, and *Maître Mimin étudiant*.

to create an artificial, unambiguous separation between the world of farce and Rabelais's creative enterprise.³⁰

While most scholars acknowledge the helpful ways in which Bakhtin's study of popular culture expanded the possibilities of Rabelais studies, there have also been several critiques of the Russian critic's work, the most in-depth being Richard Berrong's *Rabelais and Bakhtin*. Berrong's assessment demonstrates that Bakhtin's artificial separation of popular and learned cultures (unofficial and official) was anachronistic and that Bakhtin's privileging the former over the latter in analyzing Rabelais's books was misleading. First, Berrong describes Bakhtin's erroneous conception of the two supposedly distinct cultures: "'Popular culture,' for Bakhtin, was quite simply the culture of those outside the power establishment; it was entirely separate from—scorned and excluded by—those in power, who had their own 'official culture.' The truth, it would appear, is somewhat different."³¹ Instead, Berrong rightly maintains, the two cultures were not separate, and indeed the two types of culture in early modern France were learned culture and *every* man's culture. Referring to the narrator of *Pantagruel*, he writes, "In citing examples of popular culture, Nasier and his creator seem to imply that they spoke to and operated in a world that did not know Bakhtin's cultural segregation."³² Berrong's appraisal is important to consider when exploring the ways in which a popular form of theater such as farce informed Rabelais's writing, as the idea of a "cultural segregation" during this time period is in fact anachronistic and flawed. Carnival and other popular festive forms in which farces were performed were not limited to those "outside the power establishment," but were also appreciated by the literate, cultural elite of the period. Rabelais's own literary production serves ironically as a perfect illustration of the constant interaction between high and low cultures in early Renaissance France.

Berrong's second critique of Bakhtin centers on the evolution of Rabelais's books. His central contention is that, "in *Gargantua* ... there begins a methodic, systematic, radical exclusion of popular culture."³³ Berrong argues that in the changing climate of sixteenth-century France, one in which it became progressively more dangerous to engage in social satire, Rabelais opted to expurgate the more popular, subversive elements from his work: "Rabelais seems perfectly willing to preserve [popular culture's] social antagonism; rather than defuse or sanitize it later, when this culture is no longer so readily accepted by his potential readers,

³⁰ In an intriguing study of the *Abbaye des Conards* in Rouen, Dylan Reid argues for a new framework for understanding the nature of this group (comparable to the *Basoche* in Paris) which produced farces and staged other festive performances, a framework which moves beyond "the popular/elite dichotomy, and more accurately reflects the sociocultural distinctions that were perceived at the time." He observes that a "tripartite division between rural, urban, and court culture is less anachronistic," and concludes, "Within urban culture, the Conards can be classified as more popular" from both a socioeconomic and literary perspective ("Carnival in Rouen: A History of the *Abbaye des Conards*," 1054).

³¹ 13.

³² *Ibid.*, 21.

³³ *Ibid.*, 19.

he excluded it from his texts.³⁴ While there is much merit to Berrong's thesis arguing for a gradual effacement of popular elements in Rabelais's later books, popular culture, and more specifically, the genre of farce, continues to play an important role in both the *Tiers* and *Quart Livres*. By ignoring this fact, one runs the risk of misreading Rabelais's work, as in the later books, farce maintains a vital presence. What changes in the later books is not that this manifestation of popular culture is excluded or reduced, as farce-like episodes and references to farce can be found throughout the later books, but rather the ways in which the author reformulates the genre continue to evolve, producing new, more radical reconfigurations of the genre.³⁵

Another serious reappraisal of Bakhtin's "popular" interpretation of Rabelais is Walter Stephens's monumental study, *Giants in Those Days*. The crux of Stephens's criticism centers on Bakhtin's methodological tautology in which he constructs a folk world outside of Rabelais's work, which in fact exists only within the author's imagination. As Stephens observes, "What is most disturbing about Bakhtin's argumentation is the habitual circularity of his reasoning. *Pantagruel* is the principal informant for much of the 'folklore' that Bakhtin uses to interpret both Rabelaisian narrative as a whole and folk culture in general."³⁶ Like Berrong, Stephens is concerned with Bakhtin's privileging the presence of the popular to the detriment of learned culture in Rabelais. As he notes, "Bakhtin's contribution to the search for a unified interpretation was little more than a reversal of the relative importance attributed to folklore and erudition, the two 'irreconcilable' elements of Rabelais's inspiration."³⁷ By placing "irreconcilable" in quotations,

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 58. Berrong maintains that from the second half of *Gargantua* onward, there is an intentional, demonstrable movement away from the popular towards the more erudite, humanistic culture in Rabelais's writings.

³⁵ Most recently, in an elaborate and erudite study, Bernd Renner has drawn a distinction between what he calls the "satire farcesque" of the first two books and the "satire plurielle" or "satire ménippéenne" of the latter books. As he argues, "Grâce à cette fréquente absence d'un message clair, il convient par conséquent de qualifier la version rabelaisienne de la satire ménippéenne comme foncièrement plurielle, attribut qui, autant que sa riche érudition, servira à la distinguer d'une satire farcesque plutôt univoque, prépondérante dans les deux premiers livres" (*Difficile est saturam non scribere*, 22) ["Thanks to this frequent lack of a clear message, it is thus best to characterize the Rabelaisian version of Menippean satire as fundamentally plural in meaning, an attribute which, as much as its great erudition, serves to distinguish it from the rather univocal, farce-like satire which dominates the first two books"]. Renner is certainly correct to note that the satire in the latter books is more nuanced and complex. This does not necessarily mean, however, that farce is supplanted and replaced by Menippean satire, as Renner suggests.

³⁶ 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 24. Stephens's book offers significant new insights into subtexts which play an important role in Rabelais's creation, namely nationalistic, erudite works such as Annus of Viterbo's pseudo-historical *Antiquities* and Jean Lemaire de Belge's mythico-historical *Illustrations de Gaule et singularitéz de Troye*. Along with Berrong, however, Stephens is attempting his own "reversal of the relative importance attributed to folklore and erudition" in critiquing Bakhtin, and his emphasis on the learned aspects of Rabelais's work comes at

Stephens underlines that the disparate sources for Rabelais's inspiration, the folkloric and the erudite, must both be taken into account in order to arrive at a thorough understanding of the author's work, a work which constantly moves between these two cultural traditions.³⁸

In *Rabelais's Carnival*, Samuel Kinser reaffirms the cross-cultural nature of Rabelais's books, explaining that "*Pantagruel* was written to appeal to both broad popular audiences and intellectual elites, for it combined tall tales with elaborate erudition."³⁹ Kinser, like Bakhtin before him, succeeds in bringing to bear the carnivalesque in understanding Rabelais's writing. Kinser praises Bakhtin's pioneering efforts while reaffirming the flawed nature of Bakhtin's investigation. Commenting on the Russian scholar's lack of strict historical methodology, Kinser writes, "Bakhtin asserts that these principles lying behind Rabelais's images were folkloric from time immemorial, but the evidence he cites in support of this view is nearly all literate and highly discontinuous."⁴⁰ However, Kinser balances this critique by focusing on the expansive effect Bakhtin's work has had on Rabelais scholarship. He observes, "It is no longer possible after Bakhtin's metatextual discovery to treat Rabelais's 'low,' popular aspects as incidental decor to an essentially elite masterpiece."⁴¹ Finally, Kinser underscores the importance of Bakhtin's work for general Renaissance scholarship: "[Bakhtin] has changed our sense of how to investigate the text/context connection. We must widen our investigations of sixteenth-century popular life, as previous generations widened our awareness of Rabelais's learned sources."⁴² My book represents an effort to accomplish two things mentioned by Kinser: first, to "widen our investigations of sixteenth-century popular life" through a study of farce, and second, to demonstrate convincingly that farce, as a "'low,' popular aspect" found throughout Rabelais's writings, functions on a much more profound level than mere "incidental decor," and in fact provides an important key to understanding the author's heterogeneous creation.

the expense of the popular. As both Berrong and Stephens would likely agree, the reality is that Rabelais's *Chroniques* are a profoundly hybrid creation, one in which multiple discourses, high and low, popular and humanist, are juxtaposed and intertwined. While the examples of this interplay are endless, one need only think of the prologue to *Gargantua* and observe how effortlessly the author moves in the opening sentence from "Beuveurs tresillustres, et vous Verolez tresprecieux" ["Most shining of drinkers, and you, most becarbuncl'd of syphilitics"] to Socrates and Plato's *Symposium*. All English translations of Rabelais, unless otherwise noted, are taken from M. A. Screech's translation (London: Penguin Classics, 2006).

³⁸ One of the strengths of Renner's *Difficile est saturam non scribere* is his near-exhaustive exploration of these two traditions in tandem. His first two chapters deal extensively with the classical and erudite, as well as the popular and farcical aspects to Rabelais's satire.

³⁹ 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 253.

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 254.

⁴² *Ibid*, 259.