Education for Nobility in the Works of François Rabelais

A thesis submitted to the Miami University
Honors Program in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for University Honors with Distinction

By

Jim Coons

May 2005
Oxford, Ohio
Abstract

The writings of François Rabelais are thick with satire of early modern Europe. Education, an issue with which Rabelais had lengthy experience, plays a central role in the characters’ upbringing as well as in the structure of the narrative. This thesis will examine the nature, structure, and intent of education in Rabelais’ *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, especially as regards the process of becoming a proper nobleman.
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by Jim Coons

Approved by:

_________________________, Advisor
Dr. Wietse de Boer

_________________________, Reader
Dr. Renee Baernstein

_________________________, Reader
Dr. Erik Jensen

Accepted by:

_________________________, Director,
University Honors Program
Acknowledgments

I am deeply indebted to an enormous number of people, without whom this whole thesis would never have gotten off the ground. First and foremost, to my incredibly helpful advisor, Dr. Wietse de Boer. He has been a great help in researching and writing the following paper, as well as in my simultaneous applications to Ph.D. programs. Similar thanks are due to Dr. Erik Jensen and Dr. Renee Baernstein, my readers. Their advice and encouragement has been invaluable, not to mention my thanks for Dr. Baernstein’s advice on grad school and commentaries in her classes on the room for improvement in my writing.

The University Honors Program has likewise been of inestimable assistance to me in writing this. Jason Lanter and the entire HON 480 class kept me honest and level during the first semester when the very fact of this process seemed impossible. Further, the Honors office as a whole was extremely generous in funding my research, even when it included traveling abroad to conferences: The William C. Borchers Fund as well as the University Honors and Marjory C. Britton Fund have both been more than generous in helping me get the most out of this experience.

Many of my friends and family are as much a part of this as anyone, and deserve a special thanks: to my mother, Mary Coons, who was there to nag me when I was dragging my feet, but was always there to encourage me and tell me what a great job I was doing, whether I was or not. To my brother, Rob, who kept me entertained with stories, fútbol, and vampire slaying when I most needed it. To my dad, who was always proud of me. To Jessie, who was there to distract me from my studies, frequently when I didn’t want her to, and who was a constant source of love and support. To Sam, Rob,
Thad, Neyer, Julie, Kate, Megan, and everyone else who forced me to come out of my room or the library when I thought I couldn’t afford to. To Brendan, who was a constant and unaware reminder of what determination can accomplish. Finally, and probably in order of importance, to Mark Summers, Mike O’Malley, Moira Quirk, Summer Sanders, House, Stephen Merchant and Ricky Gervais, Christian Miles, and Max Bretos, for being willing to entertain me at a moment’s notice.
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**Introduction**

Education during the sixteenth century was a subject of high tension and passionate debate in France as well as throughout Europe. Two camps, the humanists and the scholastics, fought a war of letters over the preferable form of education and scholarship. The scholastics, led in France by the faculty of the Sorbonne, advocated a curriculum that was intended to direct its students toward knowledge of God and His laws. Humanists regarded this ideology as a relic of the Middle Ages, instead advocating the Renaissance tradition of learning from the original ancient sources. They stressed, accordingly, development of learning and scholarship necessary to gain a clearer understanding of human society. Led prominently by Erasmus, Budé, and Rabelais himself, the humanists embraced the liberal studies, particularly in language, in order to build on the worthy tradition of the ancients. The debate frequently spilled over into popular readings, such as Erasmus’ *Praise of Folly*, or Rabelais’ wildly popular *Gargantua et Pantagruel* series, which contain an abundance of examples of humanist criticisms of Scholastic pedagogical theory.

The writings of François Rabelais, particularly the four books of *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, are widely regarded as being among the seminal texts of the early modern period. Commonly spoken in the same breath as Cervantes, Boccaccio, and even Dante, Rabelais was instrumental in crystallizing a language, establishing the modern genre of novel, and capturing the attention and imagination of the French nation with his hilariously cutting satire. Since his time, however, his name has become synonymous with dirty, scatological humor and gratuitous sexual jests. Indeed, the term “Rabelaisian”
is defined as “characterized by coarse humor or bold caricature.” Since the mid-twentieth century, however, this stereotype has been thrown off as a dense, scholarly literature has been built up around the French satirist. His works are now recognized simultaneously for their admittedly base sense of humor as well as their thickly layered erudition. They are a rare combination of humor and social critique, consciously in the tradition of Juvenal, Lucian, and Erasmus.

In my study, I propose to show how Rabelais’ works reflect the ideological conflict between the humanists and scholastics of his day, and how Rabelais clearly promoted a humanist curriculum as being ideally suited for the sons of the noble classes who would one day take their place at the influential courts around Europe. The notion of courtly culture was, I will show, central to the ends and practices of the humanist tradition. This culture, however, was in a state of flux during the period of Rabelais’ writings, and such instability created a curious tension in his works which I wish to pursue.

The setting of Rabelais’ deep and complex works bear a few words of introduction. *Gargantua et Pantagruel* is the story of a family of giants, the line of Grandgousier (literally “Big Belly”), who are kings and rulers of a slightly-mythical land in France. Their size is curious, however. Sometimes, they seem to be merely very large men, patterned after Goliath of the Bible, while at other times they are (with apologies for the pun) gargantuan, creating geographical features or stone monuments with their bare hands, carrying off church bells with little effort, and performing fantastical feats of the like. At still other times, they absent-mindedly assume the size of normal men.
Fortunately, for the purposes of the following study, considerations of the protagonists’ size play little role.

*Gargantua* is thematically the first of Rabelais’ books. While actually published second (in 1534, two years after *Pantagruel*), it details the upbringing of the title character, the son of giant-king Grandgousier, and his son’s young life. To maintain some semblance of credibility, Rabelais sets the time of the first book back from his own time by the length of a generation, to sometime around the mid- to late-fifteenth century. The second book is the story of Gargantua’s own son Pantagruel, and is set during the contemporary times of Rabelais’ own life. The *Tiers Livre* and *Quart Livre*, the straightforwardly titled third and fourth books, are tales of the travels and adventures of Pantagruel and his companion Panurge, whom he meets in the second book, and are of little importance to the topic of intellectual upbringing. Additionally, a fifth Pantagrueline book exists, but is thought by many scholars to be of apocryphal authorship. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, we need only concern ourselves with the first two books, and more specifically with chapters 14, 15, 21, 22 (to a limited extent), 23, and 24 of *Gargantua*, and with chapters 5, 7 (again, to a lesser extent), and 8 of *Pantagruel*, as these are the sections that deal with the young nobles’ upbringing, tutors, and curricula.

More than a recounting of the education Rabelais describes for his characters, this study examines the thesis that the education with which he was concerned was training for a life of nobility – as a ruler, warrior, and head of court. Rabelais’ own life was filled with myriad and widely diverse experiences (as discussed below) which fashioned him into a veritable Renaissance man. He was trained and well regarded in four fields, all of which were themselves positions of respect: he was a man of the law, medicine, faith, and
letters. Further, he had an opportunity to witness some of the most important courtly cultures of his day at Paris, Rome, and in Spain. Prepared by his own thorough educational experiences, and with an eye toward the final purpose of the education of the well-born, his idea for a perfect noble curriculum crystallized and was weaved into his stories about giants.

The first chapter of this thesis explores the biographical details of Rabelais’ life in order to better understand the factors that contributed to his pedagogical opinions and his writings. The second chapter deals with the intellectual aspect of the noble curriculum, while the third chapter examines the behavioral and comportmental provisions Rabelais makes. The background of Rabelais’ ideas, I will suggest, was an evolving idea of nobility during the early modern period in France; I wish to examine the tensions in *Gargantua et Pantagruel* that expose this classwide insecurity.

My study will attempt to synthesize a number of fields: early modern French history, literary studies of Rabelais, educational history and theory, and the history of manners, comportment, and masculinity. To my (admittedly limited) awareness, it is singular in its combination of these fields, and attempts to fill certain gaps left by the dense scholarship being built up in the fields. That Rabelais had extensive experience with and opinions concerning education is a well-established idea; likewise, it is agreed that he was aware of and even had firsthand experience with the noble courts of his day; further, the idea that masculinity and nobility were under social strain is widely accepted. The following study will attempt to show how Rabelais combined these ideas into a strikingly modern curriculum for his young noblemen.
Chapter One – A Gargantuan Life

François Rabelais led a life of contradictions. He was an attorney, a priest, a doctor, and at the same time a near-heretical author and outspoken social critic; he was a traveler and a cloistered monk; he was a man of high letters and great learning, yet found enormous entertainment in scatological humor; sworn to celibacy, he fathered at least three children, of whom two survived and were legitimized; he was an Evangelical, and a loud critic of Catholic clerical abuses who was awarded two Catholic benefices in his later years. Paradox is likewise a characteristic of Gargantua et Pantagruel, where pure silliness stands side-by-side with earnest exhortations, and gross hyperbole moves without interruption into real-world situations. In his life as well as in his writings, Rabelais had the opportunity to explore the world from many perspectives, and these varied outlooks gave him the ability and the authority to hold strong opinions on a wide range of topics. His own experiences, as well as his incredibly extensive formal education, are apparent in Rabelais’ writings. From his experiences with the competing educational ideologies in his lessons to his impressive travels, the marks of the author’s life are unmistakable in his writings, and the sections dealing with education are certainly no exception.

Rabelais was born in 1483 (or perhaps in 1494, though evidence for this date is less convincing) in Chinon, the fourth son of a successful local attorney, Antoine Rabelais. He was born into a life of some moderate wealth, his father being a member of the French professional class known as the noblesse du robe. Antoine owned a number of estates and houses throughout the surrounding country, and François was born at and

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later developed a special affinity for the country house called La Dévenière. The
countryside around this little home became the setting of many episodes in his later

As a member of the class of professional, “robe” nobility, Rabelais had a
particular outlook on the social estates of France. The ancient, landed, “sword” nobility
were the traditional class of feudal warriors who since the consolidation of the kingdom
and the end of the middle ages were becoming something of a functional anachronism:
they no longer provided the troops to their king, who had a national, professional army
and frequently hired mercenaries to bolster his ranks. There was a certain amount of
disdain among the landed nobles for the “upstart” nobles, who bought their titles rather
than inheriting them, and made their livelihoods behind desks rather than at court. The
robe nobility were professionals and bureaucrats, and though they had no hereditary title
to pass to their sons, neither did they have a crisis of identity and masculinity to confront.
This crisis of the sword nobles will be discussed further in Chapter 3, where it is more
relevant. However, Rabelais also had a chance to experience court from the perspective
of a sword noble, as he was taken on many diplomatic missions to the major courts of
Europe with his patrons, the brothers du Bellay. But again, further discussion of that
shortly.

Little record of Rabelais’ early life exists before he took his vows, though
historians surmise from correspondence that he studied law during the years before his
entrance into the Observant Franciscan brotherhood.\footnote{Screech, M. A. \textit{Rabelais}. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979. pg 17.} By the evidence of these indirect
accounts, as well as through his evident affinity and reverence for civil law (not canon
law, note) demonstrated in his later writings, Rabelais seems to have excelled in his juristic studies; Bouchard refers to him in 1522 in *Of the Female Sex* as “the most erudite of the Franciscans.” However, his father’s vocation seems not to have enticed him, and he took up the habit sometime before 1520, probably in or soon after 1510. In addition to legal studies, Rabelais had undertaken scholarship of both Greek and classical Latin, much to the displeasure of his superiors within the Franciscan order. Knowledge of Greek signified heterodox thinking, in that it allowed the reader to return to the original sources of the New Testament, rather than relying on Jerome’s translation and the Church’s authority. In 1524, therefore, the books of Rabelais and Pierre Amy, his fellow friar and compatriot in Greek scholarship, were confiscated, and the men themselves may have been incarcerated. Amy fled the convent, while Rabelais secured transferral to the Benedictine priory of Saint-Pierre-de-Maillezais. His negative experiences with the religious hierarchy would manifest themselves later in his writings.

Sometime before 1530, Rabelais left the clerical life behind in favor of the study of medicine. While at Saint-Pierre-de-Maillezais, he had come under the protection of Geoffroy d’Estissac (in fact, the move may only have come as a result of d’Estissac’s intervention). There had apparently already been a good deal of medicinal study in Rabelais’ academic past, as it took him only the period from 17 September to 1 November to earn a bachelor’s degree in medicine at Montpellier. His knowledge of Greek had given him access to the works of Galen and Hippocrates, whose writings he translated in 1531 (the *Ars Parva* and *Aphorisms*, respectively). Though to our modern

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4 *ibid* 19
5 *ibid* 20-21
6 *ibid* 21
7 *ibid* 21, 467
eyes the shift from a life of religion to a life of medicine may seem like an abrupt change, to a scholar of the sixteenth century the two professions were intimately related. Erasmus, whose influence on Rabelais can scarcely be overstated, comments that the care of the body by doctors is a calling second only to Christ’s care of the soul. To give oneself over to the care of others’ lives was an act of charitable kindness looked upon as the height of Christian love, especially when the pitiful wages for the work are considered – medicine was a calling taken up only by those whose convictions drove them to selflessly help others.\(^8\)

Under the protection of Bishop D’Estissac, Rabelais practiced for a time around the provinces, before taking up a post as a physician at the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris, a hospital of major importance and prestige.\(^9\) He would become a fully accredited doctor of medicine with the help of the brothers du Bellay in 1537.\(^10\)

1532 was a turning point for Rabelais, when he took up a position of prestige in France’s medical community with his role at the Hôtel-Dieu in Lyon. Moreover, he established himself as a major thinker by publishing scholarly works of both medicine and law. Additionally, 1532 saw the printing of the first edition of *Pantagruel*, as well as the *Pantagrueline Prognostications* for that year: Rabelais scholar M.A. Screech declares, “From now onwards Rabelais’s name figures increasingly in the marginalia of the great persons of his day.”\(^11\)

Perhaps of most influence on his later career, in 1532 he composed and sent a letter to Erasmus, of which a copy survives. Though no reply survives, if indeed a reply ever existed, Rabelais’ obvious admiration for the scholar from Rotterdam, his shameless

\(^9\) Screech 21
\(^10\) *ibid* 471
\(^11\) *ibid* 21-22
name-dropping, and his invocation of friendship with one of Erasmus’ known close friends indicate Rabelais’ awareness of his own scholarship’s debt to Erasmus.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, most humanists of the day owed at least some part of their work to the scholar from Rotterdam. Rabelais makes veiled mention of Erasmus throughout the four books of \textit{Gargantua et Pantagruel}, and the philosophical overtones of his work and many aspects of his life are overtly Erasmian. Both men were deeply indebted to Lucian for the satiric flavor of their writings, and Rabelais even undertook translations of the satirist.\(^\text{13}\) Erasmus, like Rabelais, had once taken monastic vows, but shed the superficial religious trappings of cloistered life and instead expounded the quintessentially evangelical \textit{philosophia Christi}, a program of simple devotion to and love for salvation through Christ; Rabelais took a similar view of religion in his own life and in his writings.\(^\text{14}\) While there were certain aspects of Lutheranism that may have appealed to him (and certainly, comparisons may be drawn between the religious doctrines of Luther and Erasmus), Rabelais always took sides with Erasmus against Luther in proclaiming the freedom of man’s will, a topic of critical importance to the religious thinkers of the day.\(^\text{15}\) Rabelais’ pedagogical views, expressed in the first two books of his work, are likewise strikingly similar to the views of Erasmus.\(^\text{16}\) Though Erasmus may never have replied to Rabelais’ letters, the influence of Desiderius Erasmus on Rabelais is unmistakable and undeniable.

\(^{12}\) Zegura 70
\(^{13}\) Screech 7
\(^{15}\) Screech 18
\(^{16}\) Zegura 70
Rabelais continued at the Hôtel-Dieu for some time before coming into the employ of the du Bellay family as a physician sometime before 1534. Jean and Guillaume du Bellay, and to a lesser extent their brother René, played a vital role in Rabelais’ life and intellectual development. Under Jean, bishop of Paris and later a cardinal, Rabelais was taken to Rome on a number of occasions. For any French intellectual, the journey to Italy, the epicenter of the Renaissance (a movement which by now was aware of its own existence and origins) was a sort of pilgrimage from which the traveler emerged, changed and invigorated; Screech declares, “Rabelais was never quite the same again.” With Guillaume, the Seigneur de Langey and a hugely influential statesman, Rabelais got a taste for continental politics and courtly maneuverings. He served as the du Bellay’s family doctor, which probably entailed duties beyond medicine; personal physicians to the wealthy frequently performed the tasks associated with today’s confidential secretaries or personal assistants. Under their protection and probably with their provision, Rabelais gained access to realms of society otherwise unreachable to a middle-born lawyer, doctor, or priest.

Rabelais’ education, whether it was in a classroom, a cloister, or at court, occupied most of his adult life. Through his many experiences, he gained insights and strong opinions that were of use in writing the masterpieces of *Gargantua et Pantagruel*. These books were half a fictional narrative and half a confessional in which Rabelais could vent his frustration with many aspects of European life. Education was a primary issue, and his extensive experience with it gave him the authority with which he spoke.

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17 Bakhtin 448  
18 Screech 22  
19 Zegura 59-60  
20 Screech 22  
21 Bakhtin 448
Though many areas of his life are hazy or unknown, the dynamic between Rabelais and the Sorbonne is both uncomplicated and well-documented. But for the protection of the du Bellays, that relationship is likely to have been much harder on Rabelais. Intellectually, the faculty of theology at the University of Paris were opposed to humanists. Religiously, they were opposed to Lutherans and Evangelists (ideas between which they recognized no separation). Linguistically, they were opposed to speakers of Greek, who could undercut the authority of the Church as the lone source of religious truth through the Vulgate. Personally, they were opposed to Rabelais, who embodied all those prejudices listed above, and further had lampooned and caricatured themselves and their beliefs throughout his works. When they assembled their lists of censorable books, Rabelais’ extant works were included, and his new books were quickly added as they were published. Although Rabelais had been given a royal privilege for his publications in 1550, he was not excluded from the lists of books recommended to the Parlément for censorship by the Sorbonne.

The major intellectual debate during the early modern period was between the scholastics, embodied in the Sorbonne, and the humanists, who had their hero in the sixteenth century in Erasmus. (The ideological differences between the two will be discussed at some length in chapter two.) Rabelais placed himself firmly, even defiantly, in the humanist camp. It seems he had perhaps endured unhappy experiences at some point in his education – likely in his law training, and almost certainly during his period in the Franciscans – and never let go of his grudge. Let us take a moment to consider the evidence for Rabelais as a humanist in his own right. Apart from the explicit descriptions

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22 Zegura 233-235
23 Screech 473-476
and instructions for what components make up a good education, there is a
preponderance of evidence for the author’s predisposition to this school of thought. First,
there are innumerable references to classical history and literature throughout his work,
indicating both a comprehensive knowledge and deep respect for ancient culture.
Additionally, he advocates in a number of places an Evangelical approach to religion, a
view favored by many prominent humanists of the day, including Erasmus. This view
encouraged Christian devotion and love of God, but questioned many of the practices of
the Roman Church without going so far as to side with the Reformers. Finally, Rabelais
seems to love compiling humorous lists, such as the collections at the Library at Saint-
Victor as well as of Gargantua’s games. Such *facetiae* were a favorite pastime of
Renaissance humanists, and Rabelais was no exception. In these ways, the author shows
his personal prejudice against scholasticism and in favor of humanism.

His time spent working for the du Bellays did not hinder Rabelais’ intellectual
growth or his scholarly output. He continued to lecture on Hippocrates and other medical
topics, as well as to publish both minor works of scholarship and major works of public
interest. *Pantagruel* had appeared in 1532, and *Gargantua* in 1534. There was a break
between these and the continuations of the Pantagrueline chronicles, during which he
composed some revisions to the first two books, until 1546 when the *Tiers Livre* was
published. This return to publishing was followed by a rough, incomplete version of the
*Quart Livre* in 1448, and the final, polished version of the last definitively Rabelaisian
chronicle in 1552. In addition, he composed the *Sciomachie* in 1549.

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24 Whittle 12
26 Screech 468-476
publication saw a new round of harassment from the Sorbonne, and on each occasion Rabelais (with his royalist protectors) and the public demand for his works emerged triumphant in the face of censorship.

In 1551, Rabelais nominally returned to his previous religious life. He had secured financial security at the advanced age of 68 when he was given two non-resident benefices at Meudon and Saint-Christophe-du-Jambet. However, he resigned not long after (perhaps for reasons of ill health) and died April 9 (?), 1553.

The lifespan of Francois Rabelais saw incredible occurrences. The discovery of the New World occurred just as he would have been old enough to be aware of its significance, along with the expulsion of the Moors, the unification of Spain, and the fall of the Medici. He saw Reformation and Counter-Reformation. He was contemporary with the likes of Sir Thomas More, John Colet, Luther, Erasmus, Calvin, Machiavelli, and a host of other influential and revolutionary thinkers, and their ideas which washed over Europe during the early sixteenth century. Rabelais embraced this environment of intellectual frenzy, picking from it the ideas he found useful and leaving the remainder.

In light of his time, it may be tempting to view Rabelais’ encyclopedic work as a reflection or collection of the thoughts of other men. However, this dismissal would do a great disservice to an independent and individual author and his opus. In spite of his heavy debt to Erasmus, among other intellectual forbears, Rabelais was a progressive and innovative thinker in his own right. He is constantly on the cutting edge of such diverse fields as architecture, military theory, navigation, education, theology, politics, and philosophy; in his works we have the first recorded use of many specific terms for these

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27 Frame xxxii
28 Screech 476
studies, demonstrating Rabelais’ innovative attitude toward the full spectrum of studies. Rabelais and the books of *Gargantua et Pantagruel* are no mere reflection of other men’s genius, but the declaration and manifesto of a unique and vibrant thinker.

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29 Bakhtin 452-453
Chapter Two – A Giant in the Classroom

Learning was Rabelais’ primary occupation for over half of his life. As is clear in his writings, he developed very definite opinions during that time about how teaching should and should not be carried out. The vehemence of his ideas is written into the attitudes of the fathers (Grandgousier and Gargantua) of the young giants in question, who are determined that no obstacle or expense should stand in the way of their sons receiving the finest intellectual upbringing available. For education was not simply a matter of a diploma or a degree for a nobleman; it would define their character, their civility, and their fitness for rule. A poor education would be shameful, even disastrous for their reign, while a right and thorough curriculum would equip them to bring honor and glory to themselves, their kingdoms, and their family legacies. In his Education of a Christian Prince, Erasmus himself argues the importance of a worthy education:

“Nothing remains so deeply and tenaciously rooted as those things learned in the first years.”

Education can be broadly categorized as having two ends: for purposes of intellect or for conduct. This chapter will explore the intellectual aspect, while chapter three will examine the behavioral aspect.

During the Renaissance, education took one of two major forms: humanism or scholasticism. Each approach believed the other to be inadequate, even ruinous to young boys’ minds and souls. The scholastic tradition had its genesis in the Middle Ages, stressing the trivium of grammar, logic, and rhetoric, all with the goal of understanding God and His laws. Humanism, by contrast, was relatively unconcerned with God, instead placing human society (as the name might imply) at its center, and stressing a thorough understanding of classical language, texts, ideas, and culture in order to imitate and

30 Born 31.
perhaps one day surpass the idealized cultures of the ancients. The scholastics believed that humanism was disastrous to students’ sense of religion, that it steered them away from God and truth; humanists, for their part, accused the scholastics of stultifying boys’ minds, in Rabelais’ words, of rendering them “crazy, stupid, all dreamy and idiotic.”

Though humanists were held in high regard, and frequently invited to take part in court or tutor the sons of important European monarchs, the scholastics still held great sway in the bureaucratic and legal battles that raged between the two sides. This was especially the case in France, where the scholastic-dominated Sorbonne recommended books to the Parliament for censorship, and frequently put the “heterodox” writings of the humanists (including *Gargantua et Pantagruel*) on their proscribed lists. Rabelais, nevertheless, counted himself a humanist, and wrote many scathing criticisms of the scholastics and their curriculum into his narrative.

When Grandgousier places Gargantua in the care of Master Thubal and Master Jobelin, both renowned sophists, their curriculum ends disastrously. These instructors waste no time in immersing their pupil in a perfectly scholastic education. Rote memorization is a key element of their pedagogy, to the extent that Gargantua is made to write out all of his own textbooks in Gothic script (a subtle jibe at how outmoded the instruction is – Gothic script was considered a relic of the middle ages). He learns to recite entire books verbatim, literally backward and forward, although the farcical names of the books’ authors call into doubt the value of his learning. He reads one book, *De Modis Significandi* (*On the Modes of Signification*), a pointless and dull scholastic treatise, with a host of even more worthless commentaries. All of this instruction is
accomplished under Masters Thubal and Jobelin in the absurd span of a little more than thirty-five years.\textsuperscript{32}

But to his father’s dismay, Gargantua is “getting nothing out of it,” despite putting forth his very best effort. “On complaining of this to [a friend, Grandgousier] gathered that it would be better for [Gargantua] to learn nothing than such books under such teachers.”\textsuperscript{33} To prove his fears, he places his son in a competition of bearing and civility against a humanist tutor’s student. In the end, there can be no doubt that humanism emerges victorious (this victory is largely behavioral, and will be discussed in much greater detail in the following chapter). Gargantua breaks down in tears and is unable to match the young boy’s eloquence and propriety. Furious, Grandgousier fires (but is restrained from murdering) his son’s tutor, and hires Ponocrates in his stead.

The new pedagogue purges his pupil of all previous learning, as it did him no good, and in fact was hindering his mental development. Gargantua is placed on a new course of learning, this time in the humanist tradition, which begins to transform him into an ideal ruler and member of polite society. Jumping ahead, when the time comes for Gargantua to provide for his own son’s education in the book of \textit{Pantagruel}, he does not make the same mistake his father did. He chooses a humanist tutor like Ponocrates, named Epistémon. Under this teacher, Pantagruel tours France to visit the many schools and ends in Paris, the French intellectual nexus of the day. He stays in the capital for the benefit of his learning, surrounded by scholars and wise men. While there, Gargantua sends him a letter exhorting him to pursue worthy and noble learning, and enumerates

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[32] Frame 37-38
\item[33] \textit{ibid} 39
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
exactly which disciplines, books, and skills he must learn in the process of “becoming a man.” 34 But more on both young nobles’ educations shortly.

When Ponocrates has Gargantua continue as he had under his scholastic tutors for a short time in order to assess the harm they have done, we see Rabelais’ degree of disgust for their teaching. From the very alphabet Gargantua is taught to write to the authors of books he is made to read and memorize (e.g. Rascal, Too-many-of-‘em, No ‘count, and Vaginatus, among others), every aspect of the curriculum he studies is worthless to a ridiculous extent. Further, his eating, drinking, sleep, and exercise habits are all far removed from the best medical wisdom and standards of civility of the day, and his grooming is positively atrocious. He spends a great portion of his day hearing masses and saying his rosaries, out of all proportion to the “paltry half-hour” he spends in actual studies. 35 In short, he has been taught poor health, worse grooming, vain and unconsidered religion, and no semblance of thinking or reasoning skills.

Ponocrates, therefore, wipes the slate clean and starts anew. The young giants’ curricula are remarkably exacting, and Rabelais shows that he has a clear vision of exactly what a young man should be taught. In Gargantua’s case, Rabelais gives us an hour-by-hour account of the giant’s daily lessons. Ponocrates starts with the basics: Holy Scripture. The day begins around four o’clock in the morning, with grooming and the Bible. Over the course of the day, the morning’s lesson will be repeated and gone over in detail many times. Then, they consider the astronomy of early morning, and the meteorological signs with which they should be familiar. They dress and groom, while the student expounds on the morning’s first reading, and would discuss them in concrete

34 ibid 161
35 ibid 50
application as well as the hypothetical implications. The next three hours are spent in
lecture and being read to; however, this is not idle instruction. After the reading, they
discuss the meanings and implications of the texts, and thereby gain a better and deeper
understanding of their meanings. They continue to discuss the readings during and after
their morning exercise in the fields, playing ball or some other sport. They carry on the
discussion while waiting for lunch, and change the subject to “some amusing story of
ancient exploits.” In this way, Gargantua learns his history. Through the conversation
over lunch on the nutritional properties of all of the foods they are served, he learns about
the gastronomical sciences, as well as the biology and natural philosophy pertaining to
plants and foods, with examples from Pliny, Galen, Oppian, Polybius, Aristotle, and other
classical thinkers. Thus they spend a typical morning.

After washing up from lunch, they begin the afternoon regimen by singing praises
to God, and continue straightaway to the math lesson. Mathematics and related studies
(geometry, astronomy, and music) are all learned by practice. Probability, for example, is
taught through card tricks; geometry through drawing figures; astronomy, as we have
seen, through observation as well as instruction in the laws of the science; and music
through playing numerous instruments and singing. After this, they turn to the study of
chivalry, horsemanship, and martial prowess. Gargantua learns to ride, fight, sail, and
exercise through running, jumping, sparring, swimming, climbing, and weightlifting. On
the way home from this outdoor section of the afternoon, they examine the flora that they
happen to pass, and learn botany by collecting plants. Dinner continues with further
discussion of the day’s reading and learning. They conclude dinner with card games,
music, or discussion with learned or well-traveled guests. Before retiring for bed, they

36 ibid 56
examine the nighttime skies, consider one final time the learning of the day, and say their thanks to the Almighty.

Rabelais makes specific provisions for the schedule of the day when inclement weather strikes. Instead of the outdoor activities before and after lunch, they would chop wood or thresh hay, play board games, and observe the local shops and professionals (such as lawyers, printers, watchmakers, etc.) to understand and appreciate those vocations, and to learn from them what skills were important.

Nor was every day strictly laid out in this manner. Once a month, Eudémon would take his student to a beautiful field, where the day would be spent in leisure, though not unproductive. The flora and fauna occupied their studies, and they would recite pertinent passages of ancient authors (Virgil, Hesiod, Politian, Cato, and Pliny) to reinforce their learning. On this day, they would even practice entertaining experiments in hydraulics and engineering. Through this, we see that even on his “day off,” Gargantua spent every moment of his life in constructive, purposeful learning.

In the case of Pantagruel’s learning, Rabelais does not give us the hour-by-hour breakdown of each day’s studies that we have in the case of Gargantua, but he does say a good deal about what subjects, authors, and manners his father would have him pursue. In Gargantua’s letter to his son at Paris, he lays out his plan for Pantagruels’s upbringing. First, he must learn languages: Greek, “without which it is shameful for a man to call himself learned,”37 Latin, Hebrew, Chaldean, and Arabic. Of the liberal arts, he stresses geometry, arithmetic, music, and astronomy, though he makes a special point that he should shy away from astrology and other questionably scientific studies. He tells him to know law, as well as botany, zoology, geology, and geography. He is to carefully read the

37 ibid 160
works of the Greeks, Romans, Arabs and Hebrews, with special attention to the Talmud and Cabbala (a very fashionable trend among humanists of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries).\textsuperscript{38} He instructs him to learn physiology by dissection, the Bible by reading it in its original languages, and the use of arms and requirements of knighthood by diligent practice. In conclusion, he urges his son to be immersed in learning, and surrounded by men of learning, and above all to “serve, love, and fear God,” as the Proverbs of Solomon instruct.

In examining the curricula of the two giants, one is struck both by their similarity as well as by a handful of significant differences. Language, for instance, is stressed heavily in Gargantua’s letter to Pantagruel, while there is only scant mention of such scholarship in his own upbringing. Gargantua learned Latin from his sophist tutors, but was never given a chance to pursue learning in the other tongues he mentions. To account for this shortcoming, he makes a point of mentioning that languages have been restored and perfected since he was a boy, and that he did not have the opportunities that Pantagruel will have to engage with them. By reading the works of the ancients in their original languages, most of all the Bible, Pantagruel will have the opportunity to come to his own conclusions based on his own readings, rather than have to rely on a faulty or imperfect translation (the Vulgate, for example). In keeping with the theme of language, Hebraic studies, and particularly the Cabbala, are omitted from the first account. Devotion to cabbalistic thought, however, was a trend that did not catch hold until later, and it is therefore understandable that those studies might have eluded Gargantua.\textsuperscript{39}


\textsuperscript{39} Ibid 33
Finally, anatomy and physiology are to be studied carefully through dissection. Interestingly, for all the provision in his own lessons for botany and natural philosophy, Gargantua himself never studied the human body. In the space of one generation, entire branches of study have been added to the proper education of a young nobleman, bearing strong witness to the rapidly changing times of the Renaissance.

One very curious similarity the two plans share is a total omission of direct instruction in classical rhetoric. We find Gargantua and Pantagruel frequently speaking with learned men, and Gargantua even tells his son to defend his conclusions “in every branch of knowledge, publicly, before all comers and against all comers.”⁴⁰ Are we to assume that Rabelais intended, but forgot, to mention its instruction? This idea seems greatly unconvincing, considering the thoroughness with which he lays out all other aspects of their learning. Instead, it is my judgment that Rabelais eschewed formal rhetorical instruction in order to avoid affectation in his characters. Classical instruction in the art of rhetoric aimed to avoid appearing practiced, and, more recently, Castiglione (discussed in much greater detail in the next chapter) abhorred affected performances. However, Rabelais’ experiences with teachers or lecturers who attempted this “practiced unaffectedness” seem to have taught him that such deceptions were not easy to put on. Instead, he prescribes that all of Gargantua’s lessons are read “with a delivery in the appropriate manner,” “loud and clear,” and has him “exercise his lungs” in order to improve the volume and projection of his voice.⁴¹ On rainy days, they “went to hear public readings, solemn acts, rehearsals, declamations, the leading of the nice lawyers,

⁴⁰ Frame 162
⁴¹ ibid 55, 58
the sermons of the Evangelical preachers” to see what proper public speech looked like.\footnote{ibid 60} From this, we may surmise that Rabelais expected his young nobles to learn the art of speech by constantly being exposed to positive examples rather than learning it though ancient writings.

The elements that remained the same between father and son were primarily concerns with not what but how a student should be instructed. With the understandable exceptions of literary or Biblical instruction, the young giants are never taught from only a book. While their professors clearly do use many classical authors to reinforce their lessons, all of the instruction is interactive, responsive, and hands-on. In this regard, Rabelais is remarkably modern in his theory. Only in recent decades have ideas of involving students directly in learning been fashionable, but Ponocrates and Epistémon both go to great lengths to create lessons that require the student’s attention, participation, and response. The same cannot be said for teachers like Thubal or his cronies: for them, memorizing the book was sufficient, and even understanding it was an afterthought. The humanist tutors, by contrast, teach law by listening to attorneys, botany by collecting flowers, and mathematics by reasoning out the numbers behind card and dice games. Where books must be used, the student’s own ideas and reactions play a key role. Almost five hundred years before the modern term was created, the humanist tutors of Rabelais’ young giants were devising a curriculum of “student-created learning.”

In a similar vein, both students were instructed to surround themselves with wise men, whose examples would teach them as well as any schoolmaster. In Gargantua’s case, mention is made of the lettered men who attend dinner and converse with the young prince, as well as all of the pages and experts who lucidly read his lessons, teach him
physical exercises, or otherwise aid in his learning. On rainy days, experts in various
disciplines are sought out in order to learn the skills of their fields by observation, such as
lawyers and orators, smiths, apothecaries, and other professionals. Though we are not
given a glimpse into how exactly Pantagruel went about joining the company of the wise,
we know that his father encouraged him to do so. And he certainly had ample opportunity
to comply with his father’s wishes in the metropolitan French capital. In both
generations, it was considered a major and indispensable element of a first-rate education
to socialize with esteemed men of letters.

The fundamental canon of required reading for a student of the humanities has
changed very little from the era of the father to that of his son. The Bible, for an
Evangelical such as Rabelais, is of course indispensable for teaching religion from the
original source. Likewise necessary are such authors as Cicero, Pliny, Cato, Aristotle, and
a host of others. As noted above, greater emphasis has been placed on Greek, Hebrew,
and even Arab writers, but the favorites of the humanists have not changed. As Gargantua
notes, however, books became a great deal more readily available between the fifteenth
and sixteenth centuries with the rise of the printing press and movable type, and new
printings were being circulated at a breakneck pace. It was for these reasons that reading
and the beaux lettres became much more widespread and inexpensive. In spite of this
revolutionary change, the books considered basic and necessary have changed
remarkably little.

Nor have the goals of the young giants’ educations altered. In both cases, the
purpose of their tutelage is twofold. The first aim was learning to reason. Through all
their instruction in particular subjects, the students are taught more to reflect on what they
have heard or read than to know the particular facts of the lesson, in contrast to the
scholastics. The purpose of learning languages was not to find the most trivial and
obscure verbs in a manuscript (though many humanists did revel in such discoveries), but
rather to get at the heart of the author’s purpose. They would be able to see to the core of
the Old Testament by being acquainted with it in the original Hebrew, and likewise the
New Testament or Plato in Greek, Livy or Cicero in Latin, or the newly respected
wisdom of the Ottomans in Arabic. In Ponocrates’ schedule for the day, moreover, more
time is given to repetition of and reflection on a particular reading than to the reading
itself. This repetition allows the student to become familiar with the subtleties of the
author’s arguments, as well as to consider fully the implications of the conclusions on the
human condition. Many subjects, such as math or music, were taught in such a way that
the student discovered for himself the knowledge that the tutor was attempting to instill,
and thus not only acquired the knowledge itself, but also learned the process behind
deducing it. In short, reasoning was the highest purpose of the humanist tutor for his
student.

As Gargantua tells his son in his letter, “No one must appear in public or in
company if he is not well polished in Minerva’s workshop.”\textsuperscript{43} Through their education
under humanist tutors, Gargantua and Pantagruel are thoroughly prepared for their life as
effective nobles. Under these tutors, they learn the knowledge that will be important to
them as rulers, courtiers, and members of the social elite. From medicine to theology to
the Arabic language, they are given the knowledge that will bring glory to themselves,
their house, and their kingdom. As we see in this section, Rabelais has laid the foundation
for his characters to live and rule wisely.

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{ibid} 160
For the second of the two purposes of the young giants’ education, we must now turn to the problem of behavior and comportment. Knowledge was useless if applied inappropriately or without proper decorum, and the perfect courtier postulated by Castiglione (discussed shortly) was nothing if not mindful of propriety. We turn our attention to the education that would create this perfect courtier in the following chapter.
Chapter Three – A Giant at Court

One day, early in Gargantua’s upbringing, a local humanist tutor named Ponocrates challenges Grandgousier to test the success of his son’s education. Grandgousier, pleased by the challenge, accepts, but is embarrassed by his son’s uncouth inability to match the young man’s speech and manners. Gargantua’s opponent, Eudémon, is introduced as “well combed, well dressed, well brushed; “to begin the contest, he first asks permission to speak, removes his cap, and then with utmost honesty and respect in his bearing and expression, he heaps praises upon Gargantua and exhorts him to obey and revere his father. In the end, he asks to be taken on “as the least of his servants,” so that he may have the opportunity to serve him in some worthy manner. “He set forth all this with such appropriate gestures, such distinct pronunciation, such an eloquent voice, and a speech so richly ornate and truly Latin, that he seemed more like a Gracchus, a Cicero, or an Emilius of bygone days than a youngster of this century.”

Gargantua, knowing he has been bested, breaks down and weeps, “and it was not possible to draw a word out of him any more than a fart from a dead monkey.” In this contest, the stakes were not knowledge or learning; victory or shame hinged on manners, rhetoric, and humility, and Gargantua was found severely wanting on all counts. His humanistic education, then, was intended to ameliorate this embarrassing lack of civility.

Civility and court culture were central features of European society during the early modern period. For those who would operate in it, and more so for those who would preside over a court, rules of politeness and civility were a code by which to live. Civility was a hazily defined standard, yet strictly enforced and adhered to by those at court, which centered on appropriate, courteous, natural behavior. It was a complex set of

44 Frame 39-40
regulations that varied by locale and context, to be minded carefully by those who wished to succeed at it. To prepare for this labyrinthine life, the purpose of a well-born man’s education was the molding of an acceptable nobleman and courtier. The primary effect of a humanistic education was to sculpt a young man into a fashionable, natural courtier and a chivalrous, masculine nobleman. In *Gargantua et Pantagruel*, Rabelais portrays that purpose with great success.

In the first place, a broad definition of “courtly culture” should be established. The ruling lord of a state would assemble a collection of subordinate nobles, scholars, and various entertainers to form the social manifestation of their kingdom’s (or duchy’s, etc.) benevolence, erudition, and opulence. The contemporary notion was developed primarily in Italy during the fifteenth century, where courts flourished as a result of the proliferation of states and rulers, and hence of courts (as opposed to the more northern states of Europe, where power was relatively more centralized). These ideas were thereafter vigorously exported northward. Etiquette of a very specific variety was expected of those who were a part of a ruler’s formal entourage in order to gain that ruler’s favor. Courtiers were expected to adhere to an understood, long-unwritten code of conduct, which covered all areas of comportment from table manners to polite conversation to athletic undertakings. For those who wished to pursue their fortune at a noble’s court, it was indispensable that these rules be mastered. Success at such a life depended almost entirely upon appearances and the social judgments of respected courtiers as well as the nobleman (or, in a few rare instances, noblewoman) who held the
court, and for these reasons it was crucial to master the intricacies of courtly behavior and moreover to cause them to appear effortless.45

One interesting physical representation of court culture lies in the many labyrinths built at royal palaces at that time. Most particularly, Queen Elizabeth commissioned a garden maze with hedges taller than the heads of her courtiers, and positioned it so that the windows of her private apartments had a clear view of the path of the maze. Courtiers could enter the maze and attempt to navigate it on their own, but when they became lost their only recourse was to call on their patron to assist them. Moreover, the maze was adorned with flowers, with a rose in the middle, signifying the queen. So, progress through the maze took on the meaning of succeeding at court life and drawing nearer to the holder of the court. The maze, then, is an excellent tangible metaphor for courtly life: dangerous, and impossible to navigate without the bird’s-eye view of the lord, but holding rewards for those who manage to find their way successfully.46

Baldesar Castiglione took it upon himself to act as scribe for the rules of the maze in 1528 with his Il Libro del Cortegiano, or Book of the Courtier, a handbook for any aspiring nobleman.47 Written in the form of a dialogue at the stylish court of Urbino in order to accommodate and depict the somewhat contentious ideas of courtly behavior, the book was not a “do and don’t” in the modern sense of manners books, but rather an extended discussion of the fine and poorly defined lines that the courtier walked, and some general guidelines for not falling flat. Where Castiglione has described how his

perfect courtier will act, Rabelais has described a plan to educate a young man to take such perfect form.

In his guidebook to polite behavior, Castiglione makes much of two broad talents in a successful court participant (and Rabelais has provided for their inclusion in his curriculum): *grazia*, roughly “grace,” and *sprezzatura*, translated more or less as “skill.”\(^{48}\) However, these two terms carry connotations to which translation does little justice. *Grazia* connotes something inborn, unlearnable and unteachable, which gives its possessor an effortless grace while in polite company; a more colloquial, but perhaps more accurate term in English might be “smoothness,” or the French *savoir faire*. *Sprezzatura*, on the other hand, has the same effect but stems from an entirely different cause. It is the learned behavior which allows a person to perform, without mistake, the role of courtier. In short, *sprezzatura* is the act of *grazia*, performed in its stead - the appearance and show of false grace. The courtier must possess *sprezzatura* to succeed, however, for true *grazia* is too humble to advance itself in the competitive atmosphere that defined the Italian and European courts of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.\(^{49}\)

More than wide categories of learned or natural “grace,” Castiglione lists an apparently endless number of rules of thumb for behaviors that are or are not proper to a courtly setting. He spends enormous amounts of time and ink detailing which jokes should be told or not, and includes explanations of their comedic value or reasons they might upset or offend another individual; whether arms or letters are of more value to a successful courtier, and in what way each should be employed; even what sports should be played, when, and even what degree of mastery should be shown in them (for to be too


\(^{49}\) ibid 12
proficient in such a trivial manner as tennis or chess would hardly reflect well on a proper courtier’s serious demeanor. To complicate these instructions, Castiglione asserts that all his suggestions are totally conditional, and that the truly ideal courtier will discern and appropriately respond to circumstances that call for particular actions. Because it explicated the impossibly complex and contentious reasoning behind proper court behavior, The Courtier quickly became the standard handbook for decorum in palaces throughout Europe and helped to shape the development of manners and comportment in modern society.  

_The Courtier_ was a book written by a prominent nobleman for young, aspiring men of high birth. While it made some allowance for men of lower birth who were blessed with grace and ability beyond their station to rise to the ranks of the courtiers, the qualities needed to achieve success at court were widely thought to be possessed only by those whose blood was of a bluer hue. Rabelais, as a member of that pseudo-noble class of the noblesse du robe, was strongly in favor of promoting such upward mobility. The ideal courtier would be a well-born gentleman who was master of all the elements contained in the book, who knew perfectly how and in what situations to apply them, and who would execute them all with a perfectly natural air. However, if such a man in fact existed, Castiglione admits he would have no need of his book. Accordingly, the author settles for a man, noble or not, who can appear to possess the attributes of the ideal courtier, superficial though their grace might be.

Another work which certainly had a major impact on Rabelais’ ideas of education, manners, and the pedagogy of young nobles was published in 1530.

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50 Burke, 153.
51 Aresty 63-64.
Desiderius Erasmus’ *Manners for Boys* (*De Civilitate Morum Puerilium*) drew on a long tradition of manners books for the young, but differed from them in a number of significant ways. First, the book was addressed directly to the child, rather than to his tutor. It assumes agency on his own part, which contributes handily to the second difference between it and previous manuals: it was not addressed only to the nobility. Some of the young men for whom the book was written may have been without the privileges of an aristocratic background, and so would have to learn the lessons Erasmus taught and apply them on their own, without the assistance of well-paid tutors. Moreover, the code of ethics espoused in Erasmus’ treatise is not an aristocratic code. The precepts in it were intended to be valid for any educated walk of life, from courtly to artisan (though probably not for any class below merchants, as they were unlikely to possess literacy enough to read the work in the first place). Erasmus disagreed with little in Castiglione, advising similar table manners, bearing, and the like.

The theme of outward appearances rather than inward virtue runs through both of these manuals on manners. This is not to say that the authors had no regard for the actual possession of the civility they admonished. Erasmus himself admits in the opening paragraphs of his treatise: “I do not deny that external decorum is a very crude part of philosophy, but in the present climate of opinion it is very conducive to winning good will.” The ideal courtier would in fact possess perfect *grazia*, rather than its imitation. However, for the intended purposes of these guides, *sprezzatura* was sufficient. In this case, the outward act of civility was evidence of its inward existence: as Jacques Revel

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contends, “What matters is first of all what can be seen.” It was vital that the successful courtier appear to be humble, deferent, knowledgeable, and proficient in a variety of novelties, games, and social situations; likewise, the admirable young man was respectful, clean, modest, and considerate. Civility for the courtier was not a personality trait, but a performance which suggested the actual possession of such traits.

Rabelais was doubtless aware of these trends and ideas when he composed the first two books of *Gargantua et Pantagruel*. As a lettered, educated humanist and a worldly, well-traveled member of the *noblesse du robe*, awareness of such trends was nigh on unavoidable. In the accounts of both Gargantua and Pantagruel’s educational curricula, he portrays both positively and by opposition to negative concepts the qualities of civility and manliness he would have his characters espouse.

In the description of the contest recounted at the beginning of this chapter, we have a glimpse of nearly all of Erasmus’ ideas in *Manners for Children* (and thereby another example of Rabelais’ debt to the scholar from Rotterdam): the young man has already been introduced as “well combed, well dressed, well brushed;” he is humble, and only proceeds to speak once granted permission. He plays the role of Gargantua’s social inferior to perfection, asking to be taken on “as the least of his servants.” Moreover, he speaks with such praiseworthy clarity and rhetorical perfection that Gargantua is overcome with his own inferiority and breaks down in tears. This example provides many examples of the worthy attitudes Erasmus encourages: bodily cleanliness, humility, appropriate gesture and bearing, eloquent rhetoric, and appropriate learning.

In the face of such a perfect example, Gargantua shows his perfect inability to comport himself worthily. Likewise, his daily routine severely lacks for civil niceties as

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55 Revel 184.
defined in the manuals of the day. His sophist tutors had neglected to have him exercise properly, or to wash, brush, or comb himself: “his tutors said that to comb one’s hair, wash, and clean up in any other way, was to waste time in this world.” Nor was that the only social embarrassment they foisted upon him. Immediately after rising, “He crapped, pissed, threw up, belched, yawned, farted, spat, coughed, sobbed, sneezed, blew his nose like an archdeacon…to put down the bad air.” Gargantua finds a way to perform every rude bodily function the authorities on civility have stated should be hidden. These were acts that were associated with shame in the mind of the proper sixteenth century nobleman, but Gargantua has no hesitation in performing them in full view of his new tutors. To compound his problems, when his new humanist tutor attempts to correct him he answers with a certain insolence unbecoming of a polite young man. When he does sit down to eat his meals, he consumes a truly gluttonous portion, incompatible with any rule of polite behavior.

When the time comes for Ponocrates to correct these egregious errors of behavior, he purges him of all his previous scholastic learning, as they had no value whatsoever. While the scholastics focused intently on the minutiae of theology and logic, they have utterly neglected social (and much more, courtly) behavior. Accordingly, Ponocrates begins completely anew. Now, Gargantua performs private bodily functions in privacy, and learns that he should be appropriately “dressed, combed, tidied up, accoutered and perfumed,” rather than repulsively unkempt as was his previous habit. After his afternoon exercises, he is dried and rubbed with oils – a common practice in place of

56 ibid 49
57 Revel 187
58 Frame 56
bathing, as cleanliness was not as closely associated with water as it is today.\textsuperscript{59} He politely picks food from his teeth after meals with a proper toothpick, and even changes clothes and washes up throughout the day in order to keep himself presentable.\textsuperscript{60} During meals, he engages in “good conversations, all lettered and profitable” with his dining guests, and we may presume he does so with all proper decorum.\textsuperscript{61}

A brief aside is appropriate on the nature of Rabelais’ satire in this instance. Famously irreverent and ironic, Rabelais took little seriously. However, I find no evidence to convince me that he did not mean this scathing criticism to be anything other than totally straightforward. His respect for Erasmus is well known, his hatred for scholastics is obvious, and the uncanny similarity between the precepts in \textit{Manners for Boys} and the events in \textit{Gargantua}, and to a lesser extent in Gargantua’s letter to his son in \textit{Pantagruel}, are difficult to pass off as coincidence. The boy against whom Gargantua competes in the contest of wits recounted at the beginning of this chapter is ridiculously perfect in his grooming, dress, and behavior; perhaps this may have been intended to evoke a chuckle at the improbability of such a young man in fact living in this world. Nonetheless, I believe he was constructed by Rabelais as the exemplar of civility in a young noble rather than as a way to subvert the codes of civility to which he later adheres.

In all these episodes, we gain a clearer view of the importance Rabelais and contemporary society placed on courtly behavior and masculinity in the nobility. In describing improper behavior, Rabelais constantly uses images of animals to convey their baseness. When he is embarrassed by the polite young man he is supposed to debate,  

\textsuperscript{59} Revel 189  
\textsuperscript{60} Frame 56-59  
\textsuperscript{61} \textit{ibid} 59
Gargantua cries “like a cow;” under his sophist tutors, he rolls around in bed before arising in the morning “the better to brighten up his animal spirits.” Elsewhere, he eats ravenously like a wild beast, and urinates and defecates without shame like a dog. In this sense, the process of “becoming a man” described throughout these sections of Rabelais’ text can be read not just as developing masculinity but more deeply as growing into one’s humanity. The manners of the day were largely ways in which “animal” instincts should be controlled – bodily functions, proper ways of eating, humility, etc. – and neglecting one’s manners was tantamount to neglecting the very fact of one’s humanity: “To control one’s expression, gestures, and attitudes was to affirm one’s humanity against all that threatened it, latent animality above all.”

In addition to the niceties of decorous behavior, Gargantua and Pantagruel were instructed in martial matters in order to fulfill the expectations of masculinity to which he would be held. Common to all definitions of courtiership, manhood was a quality central to any successful courtier, as well as indispensable to any young nobleman’s education. Masculinity during Rabelais’ time was a complex ideal, drawing on medieval values of chivalry as well as the Roman concept of *virtus*, which was primarily defined by martial prowess and courage. Renaissance masculinity, then, was a hazily defined abstraction, including such attributes as bravery in conflict or confrontation, confidence and assurance in one’s decisions, Christian piety and righteousness, honesty and fidelity in word and deed, manly strength, bravery, and martial prowess, and above all a lack of effeminacy. In many regards, the idea of masculinity in the Renaissance was defined in opposition to

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62 ibid 40
63 ibid 49
64 Revel 171
65 Arditi 86.
qualities typical of womanliness rather than positively.\textsuperscript{66} To be a man was to not be weak, vacillating, impressionable, cowardly, ruled by emotion, trivial, or any other of a host of negative gender roles assigned to women. For a courtier, but especially for a ruler-in-training, it was indispensable to possess manly qualities befitting a prince.

In keeping with this trend, Gargantua learns horsemanship, jousting, combat with all varieties of weapons from axes to swords to darts, hunting, running and other exercises, even firing artillery.\textsuperscript{67} Under his scholastic tutors these activities had been totally neglected and their student had grown lazy. In Gargantua’s letter to his son, he exhorts training similar to his own in military skills and manly arts: “Now that you are growing up and becoming a man, you will have to come forth out of this tranquility and repose of study, and [learn the arts of] knighthood and the use of arms to defend my house and succor our friends in all their affairs against the assaults of evildoers.”\textsuperscript{68}

This discourse, and its development, is central to the thesis of Norbert Elias, presented in his opus \textit{The Civilizing Process} (1939): the upper classes, once set apart as the warriors of their kingdoms, had become something of a functional anachronism when mercenary and nationalized armies took the place of feudally conscripted troops. In an effort to maintain their separation from the lower classes – and more threateningly, from the upstart \textit{noblesse du robe} – manliness, as defined in opposition to animals, and courtesy, were cultivated. However, this ran the risk of rendering the men of the nobility effeminate, which was of course unacceptable. To combat this threat, the practice of the now-ritualized martial arts (largely confined to jousting tournaments, games such as

\textsuperscript{66} Williams, Andrew P., ed. \textit{The Image of Manhood in Early Modern Literature}. Westport: Greenwood, 1999. pg xii.
\textsuperscript{67} \textit{ibid} 57-58
\textsuperscript{68} \textit{ibid} 161
fencing, and the occasional duel) took on a new significance as a signifier of the noble class.

Proper behavior was not an isolated quality, but a manifestation of all the qualities that a man possessed. In Gargantua’s letter to his son Pantagruel, he tells him that the soul “shines out” through deeds, showing all who see the quality of his lineage, and the quality of his character. Proper behavior, then, is the sign of a well-kept soul, whereas the implications of impolite or poor behavior are proportionately less flattering. So, while ardent practice in manners and comportment can superficially mask such a weak soul, the best way to gain respect is to allow actions to truly reflect the quality of one’s character. Pantagruel is therefore admonished to live a “virtuous” life (both in the modern sense of upstanding character, as well as the ancient sense of manly virtus), so that the glory of his house will live on past his father, himself, or his posterity. Gargantua and Pantagruel are trained to develop true grazia, rather than sprezzatura. The young men do not simply appear humble, they in fact do possess humility. They do not have a superficial or nominal understanding of the sports they play or weapons they wield, they are proficient in their workings and use. Even in their card or board games, their tutors have them play in order to understand the principles upon which they are built, rather to than to have an ostentatious skill in them. The manuals of court life published around the same time as Gargantua et Pantagruel were a thorough list of what qualities were becoming of a courtier, but are insufficient to dictate the behavior and education of a young ruler, for whom court life was not just a show, but a function of life. The courtier attended court for his own advancement – he could leave if he decided his fortune was better sought elsewhere. For the ruler, though, court life was non-negotiable. For that reason, it was

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necessary for him to truly possess the polite qualities that others were allowed to merely appear to have.
Conclusion

In his great work, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, Rabelais channels all of his personal experiences, opinions, and prejudices concerning education to construct what he believes to be a perfect curriculum for a young nobleman. Heavily influenced by his contemporary society and thinkers, Rabelais’ works are at once a time capsule for the sensibilities of an age and an impressively forward-looking vision of the future of education. He pulls no punches, particularly when discussing scholastic thinking or the Sorbonne, and can scarcely find sufficient words to express his admiration for the humanistic ideology and its standard bearers.

In every aspect of their upbringing, Gargantua and Pantagruel are being consciously groomed for their later lives as rulers and holders of court. They are taught the knowledge and skills that will win them respect and regard from all of those courtiers who will see them. They will be well versed in the ancient classics, languages, law, medicine, religion and theology, all of the liberal arts and sciences, rhetoric, physical activities from jumping to swordplay. They will be decorous and masculine, having conquered their innate animality through rigorous study and practice of the qualities of manliness. Moreover, they will truly possess these qualities rather than their imitations or attempts at appearing so, and thus avoid the dangers of appearing affected against which Castiglione railed. Rabelais, through his extensive experience with education, has distilled the elements essential to a young future ruler in order to ensure that his characters are wise, benevolent kings.
Bibliography


