Contextual Misogyny in the Tiers Livre

FRANÇOIS RABELAIS
à l'esprit de la royne de Navarre.

Esprit abstraict, ravy, et ecstatic,
Qui frequentant le cieulx, ton origine,
As delaissé ton hoste et domestic,
Ton corps concords, qui tant se morigine
A tes edicts, en vie peregrine,
Sans sentement, et comme en Apathie:
Vouldrois tu poinct faire quelque sortie
De ton manoir divin, perpetuel?
Et ça bas veoir une tierce partie
Des faicts joyeux du bon Pantagruel?[1]

Rabelais' Tiers Livre opens with this enigmatic poem to Marguerite de Navarre, enigmatic precisely because the true intent of it remains to this day critically virgin. Of the many scholars who have discussed the alleged misogyny of this Rabelaisian text, few have attempted to resolve the seemingly obvious discrepancy between the dedicatory poem and the content of the book itself; in fact, the appropriate relationship of this dedication to the body of the Tiers Livre has yet to be adequately established.

Numerous Rabelais scholars have recognized a certain antifeminist bias in the Tiers Livre.[2] It is perhaps because the Tiers Livre deals on the most immediate level with the question of marriage that this book receives the most criticism concerning the view of women transmitted by it. However, as M. A. Screech quite appropriately points out in his article entitled "Rabelais in Context," one must consider the literary and social atmosphere to which Rabelais was subject in the writing of his works in order to

evaluate their content properly.[3] Without an adequate context, certain criticism leveled at Rabelais' chronicles become conspicuously anachronistic.

Writing at the very beginning of the era in French literature we now term the Renaissance, Rabelais inherited a long tradition of misogynistic views of women. In fact, Rabelais' own well-documented knowledge of things classical as well as medieval only extends the boundaries of possible influences on his works. Screech, among many other critics, has very effectively shown Rabelais' familiarity not only with Biblical sources, but also with classical Latin and Greek letters and medieval literature. Antifeminist biases abound in the majority of Rabelais' predecessors. As Screech points out in The Rabelaisian Marriage,

> Extremes of antifeminist expression are commonplace in Rabelais' time. The Renaissance in France was on the whole deeply distrustful of women. Classical learning had passed on to it the idea that woman was a botched male. Roman Law held to the principle of the fragilitas of women; in an age which aped everything Ancient this notion held wide currency (6).

Not only is this antifeminist bias present in the classical learning to which Rabelais was indebted, it was also to be found in the literature of the period directly preceding Rabelais' intellectual sphere. In discussing the view of women in medieval works, Maïte Albistur and Daniel Armogathe in their study on Histoire du féminisme français emphasize the prevailing view of women in chansons de geste and littérature courtoise. They point out the purely accessory role played by women when they appear in the chanson de geste, and their directly opposite function in courtly literature, where the woman is omnipresent, if only for the motivation of the work

in question. Moreover, Albistur and Armogathe find in both extremes an inherent misogyny, claiming that, although women were accorded a greater importance in courtly literature, "le thème de la sublimation de la dame n'a même pas permis à ces poètes d'évacuer toute leur misogynie naturelle."[4]

In addition to these classical and medieval precursors, Rabelais was clearly influenced by the popular apologies and attacks on women perpetrated in the Middle Ages and early Renaissance by various authors such as André Tiraqueau (The Laws of Marriage) and Amaury Bouchard, a friend of Rabelais who responded to Tiraqueau's work with his own, Of the Female Sex, against André Tiraqueau. Screech remarks that Rabelais "seems to have remained on reasonable terms with both,"[5] an interesting fact bearing on Rabelais' alleged misogyny, considering the polemic theses of the two authors in question.

On a purely historical basis, then, one very appropriately questions the accusations of antifeminism leveled at the author of the Tiers Livre. Rather than assuming misogyny as an underlying ideology in this Rabelaisian chronicle, one can quite easily see in it a simple continuation of prevailing literary practice.[6]

However, Rabelais was most certainly not an author to accept statically the accepted traditions of his sources. On the contrary, one finds in his work the exploitation of his own fertile imagination to expand upon and renew the commonplaces of his literary inheritance. While remaining completely true to the literary tradition of paradox handed down to him by the rules of classical rhetoric, Rabelais was able in the Tiers Livre to combine the practice of defending and attacking women so that the views of women in this work emerge essentially as opposite extremes presented at one and the same time. The character in the novel who most thoroughly exemplifies this tendency is without doubt Panurge, whose question about whether to marry is the impetus for

the Tiers Livre. Panurge's desire to marry, coupled with his fear of cuckoldry, provides the basis for the varied opinions of women expressed throughout the chronicle.

However, those critics who insist upon seeing misogynistic intent in the battle waged over the question seem to ignore some essential considerations. Perhaps the most important of these considerations is the problem of just what the theme of the Tiers Livre actually is. Thomas Greene claims in his study Rabelais, A Study in Comic Courage that the Tiers Livre is "not really about the nature and status of women, as it has commonly been taken to be; nor is it primarily about the institution of marriage. . . . Rather, it is about the nature of truth and the nature of action."[7] Edwin Duval in his article "Panurge, Perplexity and the Ironic Design of Rabelais's Tiers Livre" states further that the book fundamentally treats the question of knowing oneself and one's desires.[8] It is in fact precisely this knowledge which Panurge lacks.

When first considering the possibility of marriage, Panurge is firm in his proposal:

> Je me veulx marier. . . . desjà j'endesve, je déguène, je grézille d'estre marié et labourer en diable bur dessus ma femme, sans crainct des coups de baston. O le grand mesnaiger que je seray! Après ma mort on me fera brusler en bust honorificque, pour en avoir les cendres en mémoire et exemplaire du mesnaiger perfaict (431).

He seemingly knows exactly what it is that he wants, and that is marriage, if only for socially acceptable sexual satisfaction. His knowledge of his own desires extends even into the future, for he is able to imagine the social esteem to be his in the future, when all will recognize him at his death as having been a good head of house.

The certain knowledge of his own desires is, however, but a fleeting impression given to the reader. During the course of the same conversation, his fears of marriage become apparent. Seeking Pantagruel's approval of his plans for marriage, Panurge belies his prior certainty:

> -Voyre mais (dist Panurge) je ne la vouldrois exécuter sans vostre conseil et bon advis.
>
> -J'en suis (respondit Pantagruel) d'advis, et vous le conseille.
>
> -Mais (dist Panurge) si vous congnoissiez que mon meilleur feust tel que je suys demeurer, sans entreprendre cas de nouvelleté j'aymerois mieux ne me marier poinct.
>
> -Point doncques ne vous mariez, respondit Pantagruel (437).

The self-assuredness present in Panurge when he first announces his desires to Pantagruel dissolves into total uncertainty when looking to others to approve his desires. To be sure, Rabelais makes of Pantagruel in this scene a devil's advocate, to underscore the importance of his theme of self-knowledge. Nonetheless, the reader is never again given the portrait of Panurge as sure of what he wants. Instead, we are treated to a quest for certainty, as Panurge, at Pantagruel's bidding, sets about consulting "experts" about the problem of marriage.

The doubts expressed by Panurge reveal not only the fact that he does not truly know the convictions of his own desires, but also a character trait of many humans; that is, the desire to dominate other parties in a given relationship. Many critics have discussed the relationship between love and war, both of which suggest a certain domination, established by Rabelais in the Tiers Livre. Rosalie Colie states in Paradoxia Epidemica that "marriage is a battle, a continual argument . . . ." [9] Panurge's appre-

hensions about marriage take on a very regular appearance early in the chronicle:

> -Mais si (dist Panurge) ma femme me faisoit coqu, . . .
> -Mais si (dist Panurge) Dieu le vouloit, et advint que j'esposasse quelque femme de bien, et elle me batist, je seroys plus que tiercelet de Job, si je n'enrageois tout vif . . .
> -Mais si (dist Panurge) estant malade et impotent au debvoir de mariage, ma femme impatiente de ma langueur, à aultruy se abandonnoit . . . et (que pis est) me desrobast, comme j'ay veu souvent advenir, ce seroit pour m'achever de paindre et courir les champs en pourpoinct (439-40).

Each of the fears Panurge expresses here deals with a form of domination--sexual, physical, and financial. Edward Benson in his article "'Jamais vostre femme ne sera ribaulde, si la prenez issue de gens de bien': Love and War in the Tiers Livre" interprets Panurge's fears of marriage in the following way:

> Just as the danger of having his wife guard his property is that she will appropriate it to her own uses, so the danger of casting their relationship in sexual terms is that her needs become more pressing than his. To a character whose sense of identity is so dependent on his male supremacy, that is naturally a disturbing prospect.[10]

The fears about marriage exhibited by Panurge throughout the book as well as his lack of self-knowledge paint a rather unflattering portrait of one of the major characters of the Tiers Livre. However, few critics are willing to charge Rabelais

with emasculating his male characters. Yet the antifeminist complaints persist, perhaps solely on the basis of the advice given to Panurge during his consultations with the "experts."

It is indeed interesting to note for the misogynistic argument that among all the "experts" consulted, there is only one woman, the Sibyl. However, it would be wise once again to refer to Rabelais' own context. The established social hierarchy of Rabelais' time included few women in places of importance, thus accounting for the fact that most of the advisers consulted are male. The second seemingly valid argument in support of this episode as misogynistic is the highly negative view transmitted by the scene of the Sibyl, and by analogy, of women. The actual physical description of the Sibyl is far from positive:

> La vieille estoit mal en poinct, mal vestue, mal nourrie, edentée, chassieuse, courbassée, voupieuse, languoureuse, et faisait un potaige de choux verds avecques une couane de lard jausne et un vieil savorados (471).

However, it is difficult to claim antifeminist bias by taking into account only the given details of her person. The truly incriminating evidence appears at the end of the scene: "Ces parolles dictes, se retira en sa tesniere, et sus le perron de la porte se recoursa, robbe, cotte et chemise jusques aux escelles, et leurs monstroit son cul" (473). This is hardly behavior appropriate to a prophetess. Moreover, in the process of describing this scene to his reader, Rabelais seems to be mocking not only diviners, but women as well. However, one must at all times question Rabelais' intent; rarely do we find in him an entirely serious author. In fact, the parody of Vergil's Aeneid in this scene is so evident that it becomes clear that no single-minded misogynistic intent underlies this episode. As Lance K. Donaldson-Evans points out in "Panurge Perplexus:

Ambiguity and Relativity in the Tiers Livre," "The enormity of the parody of Vergil leaves us in no doubt that the Sibyl is a purely comic character and that it would be folly indeed to give her any credence."[11]

Among the other consultations about Panurge's prospects in marriage, only Rondibilis, Hippothadée and Trouillogan expound what might be considered anti-feminist viewpoints. The doctor, Rondibilis, makes by far the most misogynistic comments about women to be found in the entire Tiers Livre when he describes womanhood, in a passage worthy, in light of this study, of lengthy quotation:

> Quand je diz femme, je diz un sexe tant fragil, tant variable, tant muable, tant inconstant et imperfaict, que Nature me semble (parlant en tout honneur et révérence) s'estre esguarée de ce bon sens par lequel elle avait crée et formé toutes choses, quand elle a basty la femme; et, y ayant pensé cent et cinq foys, ne sçay à quoy m'en resouldre, sinon que, forgeant la femme, elle a eu esguard à la sociale delectation de l'home et à la perpetuité de l'espece humaine, beaucoup plus qu'à la perfection de l'individuale muliebrité. . . . Nature leurs a dedans le corps posé en lieu secret et intestin un animal, un membre, lequel n'est es hommes, on quel quelques foys sont engendrées certaines humeurs salses, nitreuses, bauracineuses, acres, mordicantes, lancinantes, chatouillantes amerement; par la poincture et fretillement douloureux des quelles (car ce membre est tout nerveux et de vif sentiment) tout le corps est en elles esbranlé, tous les sens raviz, toutes affections interinées, tous pensemens confonduz; . . . (539-40).

The view of woman offered by Rondibilis can be taken only as negative; in effect, he reduces the nature of woman to one organ, the uterus, from which all the purported inconsistencies of woman derive. However, as with all passages in Rabelais' works, one must remain aware of the sources from which he drew. In this passage Rabelais relies partly upon previous views of women as transmitted to him through medieval literature and medecine. Albistur and Armogathe discuss the vices attributed to women in the Middle Ages: "stupidité, irritabilité, inconstance, loquacité, frivolité . . ." (59-60). Moreover, this particular view of women was popular not only in medieval times, but persisted even into the eighteenth century, where allegedly "enlightened" philosophes can be found who support the same thesis.[12]

What is perhaps most interesting about Rondibilis' comments is that, after having delivered a particularly severe portrait of women, he nonetheless advises Panurge to marry, thereby imbuing his comments with an ambivalence about women equal to that of Panurge about marriage.

Unlike the episodes concerning Rondibilis' view of women and of marriage, the chapters devoted to the "expert" in theology, Hippothadée, show no overt evidence of misogynistic stereotypes. Instead, he points out that if a woman has been well-bred and is provided by her husband suitable examples of conduct, then there will be little probability for the cuckoldry of the husband:

> jamais vostre femme ne sera ribaulde, si la prenez issue de gens de bien, instruicte en vertus et honnesteté. . . . Pour renfort de ceste discipline, vous, de vostre cousté, l'entretiendrez en amitié conjugale, continuerez en preud'homie, luy monstrerez bon exemple, vivrez pudicquement, chastement, vertueusement en vostre mesnaige, comme voulez qu'elle, de son cousté, vive; . . . (531).

Indeed, although he maintains that a woman should be subservient to her husband ("adhaerer unicquement à son mary, le cherir, le servir, totalement l'aymer après Dieu," 531) he suggests in his comments that ideally there should exist an equality between marriage partners. This equality is to be found in parallel moral behavior for the two. In the consultation with Hippothadée, then, the usual Biblical stereotypes are missing; this simple fact, combined with the suggestion for equality of behavior points out that, textually, one can in this episode make no strongly supported accusation of misogynistic intent.

However, the reader is quickly thrust back into the realm of negative views of women in the episode following Hippothadée's comments. Immediately following the generous theological viewpoint expressed in this chapter, Carpalim introduces a short anti-feminist interlude in the chapter on "Comment les femmes ordinairement appetent choses défendues." The anecdotes in this chapter reveal two stereotypes of women--unrestrained curiosity and loquaciousness. As Albistur and Armogathe pointed out, these views were common to the literature of the era preceding Rabelais' work. In fact Jourda identifies in his notes to this chapter sources for the two anecdotes related by the men present at the consultation; Rabelais has simply borrowed them from Tiraqueau and from the Farce de Maître Pathelin (note 1, p. 547 and note 1, p. 548).

The misogyny of this episode is quite evidently not the product of Rabelais' own ideology, but a continuation of traditon. In addition, a statement made by Carpalim hints at negative qualities in men. When he boasts

> On temps (dist Carpalim) que j'estois ruffien à Orléans, je n'avois couleur de de rhétoricque plus valable, ne argument plus persuasif envers les dames,

> pour les mettre aux toilles et attirer au jeu d'amours, que vivement, apertement, detestablement remonstrant comment leurs mariz estoient d'elles jalous. Je ne l'avois mie inventé. Il est escript, et en avont loix, exemples, raisons, et experiences quotidianes. Ayans ceste persuasion en leurs caboches, elles feront leurs mariz coquz infailliblement, . . . (545-46),

he is, in essence, pointing out that not only do men make use of women, but, by using the woman, they make use of another man as well. It is first a question of claiming jealousy on the husband's part to gain his own sexual satisfaction and second, a question of dominating another man by helping to make a cuckold of him. Following this reasoning, all humans want to dominate others. Thus the episode deals no longer with antifeminism, but, by suggestion, with antihumanism, using the term in its modern sense.

Like the discourse of Hippothadée, that of Trouillogan includes no traditional stereotypes of women. Instead the last "expert" to be consulted at this meeting (for Bridoye, as legal expert, does not appear to give his opinion) leaves the reader with the same ambiguous opinions expressed by Hippothadée about the state of marriage. Trouillogan's response to Panurge's question, in the nature of true philosophers who see both sides of a problem at once, is "Tous les deux" (550). It is interesting to note that Trouillogan makes no protest when Pantagruel interprets his advice in the following manner:

> que femme avoir est l'avoir à usaige tel que Nature la créa, qui est pour l'ayde, esbatement et société de l'homme; n'avoir femme est ne soy apoiltronner autour d'elle, pour elle ne contaminer celle unicque et supreme affection que doibt l'homme à Dieu; ne laisser les

> offices qu'il doibt naturellement à sa patrie, à la République, à ses amys; ne mettre en non chaloir ses estudes et negoces, pour continuellement à sa femme complaire (551-52).

In effect, the interpretation offered by Pantagruel suggests that men should not marry simply for sexual satisfaction, as Panurge is wont to do, but for companionship. In this way, he points out the folly of Panurge's view of the married state. At the same time, Pantagruel hints at the folly of those who, in the courtly tradition, would make woman man's greatest goal, an object to be served and revered at all times. Screech says, "The antifeminism of those who would condemn marriage and women out of hand means nothing good to Rabelais. On the other hand Rabelais is not brought to side with those rhetorical feminists who would make the woman the highest end of man's achievement" (The Rabelaisian Marriage, 130).

In fact, this interpretation reinforces the use of rhetoric throughout the Tiers Livre. As Screech notes, "it is often not a question of choosing between two extremes; it is a question of harmonizing them" (The Rabelaisian Marriage, 9). What Rabelais has done with the question of marriage in the consultations which comprise most of the misogynistic elements of the Tiers Livre is to debate the extremes of the question at hand and to harmonize them, as well as to undercut previously accepted notions of how women should be viewed.

It is difficult indeed to accuse Rabelais the author of harboring essentially misogynistic views of women, as some critics have insisted upon doing. The most one can do is to accuse the text of the Tiers Livre of antifeminist ideology. Certainly the chronicle contains negative views of women; however, it contains equally negative views of men, although those views are much more textually subtle. Simply

because certain negative opinions of women exist in the text, it does not necessarily follow that the entire book should be condemned as a piece of anti-feminist propaganda. When approaching a text like Rabelais', one must constantly be aware of the use he made of previous literary and social conventions. At the very least, Rabelais' chronicle points out a fundamental misunderstanding which existed and continues to exist between the sexes. Given the fact that the Tiers Livre was written by a male author in a male-dominated society, it is completely natural to find in the work the accepted stereotypes of women of the era. However, the ambiguity which often surrounds the views of women offered by the male characters, combined with the historical context of the novel, make of the work a defense and attack of women at the same time.

Considering this contextual view of the Tiers Livre, then, it is valid to interpret the dedicatory poem as a sincere appreciation of "l'esprit de la royne de Navarre"; like Rabelais, Marguerite was interested in exploring the relationship between men and women. Rabelais' dedication to Marguerite de Navarre's spirit of inquiry as well as the content of the Tiers Livre point to an author who appreciated and understood the necessary relationship between the extremes of male and female.

CATHY SCHLIFER
THE UNIVERSITY OF KANSAS

NOTES

[1] François Rabelais, Oeuvres complètes, Tome I (Paris: Garnier, 1962), p. 391. All subsequent references to this work will be noted within parentheses in the text.

[2] See M. A. Screech, Rabelais (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979) and The Rabelaisian Marriage (London: Edward Arnold, 1958), as well as Rosalie Colie, Paradoxia Epidemica (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), among others.

[3] L'Esprit Créateur 21 (Spring 1981), 69-87.

[4] Maïte Albistur and Daniel Armogathe, Histoire du féminisme français (Paris: Editions des Femmes, 1977), p. 57. All subsequent references to this work will be noted within parentheses in the text.

[5] Screech, Rabelais, p. 19.

[6] It seems indeed misogynistic that Rabelais elaborates upon an already accepted antifeminist bias in the Tiers Livre. However, we shall see through the course of this study that the ways in which Rabelais uses antifeminist material result in a work which may not be labeled intentionally misogynistic.

[7] Thomas M. Greene, Rabelais, A Study in Comic Courage (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), p. 61.

[8] Edwin M. Duval, "Panurge, Perplexity and the Ironic Design of Rabelais's Tiers Livre," Renaissance Quarterly 35,3 (1982): 381-400.

[9] Rosalie Colie, Paradoxia Epidemica, p. 56.

[10] Edward Benson, "'Jamais vostre femme ne sera ribaulde, si la prenez issue de gens de bien': Love and War in the Tiers Livre," Etudes Rabelaisiennes 15 (1980), p. 65.

[11] Etudes Rabelaisiennes 15 (1980), p. 88.

[12] Diderot, for example, authored an essay entitled "Sur les femmes," in which he claimed women to be victims of their bodies, and especially of their sexual organs, which supposedly hinder a woman's power to think logically.