

## RABELAIS, FRANCOIS

**Francois Rabelais.** Francois Rabelais (1495-1553) was born in the province of Touraine, and by an uninterrupted progression passed through religious education and into monkhood as a Franciscan friar in the convent of Fontenay-le-Comte. From the start, though, Rabelais' passion had been for learning, and he had rapidly found his way into the study of Greek, Hebrew and Arabic. This scholarly turn alienated the Franciscans, who had come to prefer poverty to learning, and were glad to see Francois join the Benedictine order, which soon he left in order to serve as a simple parish priest. Needing more income he then turned toward the study of medicine, which was to become his career, and in the course of which he grew close to many of the opinion shapers of his time, like Clément Marot or Maurice Scève. Through a series of partially realized writings, which were the true muscle of Rabelais' daily life, he created two remarkable works, *Gargantua* (1534) and *Pantagruel* (1532), which established his reputation.

**Main Themes of his Work.** The basic outline of Rabelais's writings is simple: talk, philosophy, anecdote, history, gossip, scandal, and a hearty secular philosophy of 'do what you will,' 'fais ce que voudra,' weave their ways around a tale involving Gargantua (a hero out of Arthurian legend), his immense and grossly vulgar son, Pantagruel, and Pantagruel's buddy in arms, Panurge. It characterizes the subordination of plot to tale and brilliant chatter that much of the long work of Rabelais is devoted to the tricky question of whether Panurge should get married.

**The Cultural Position of Rabelais:** Rabelais—like all the authors included earlier—thought and worked in a firm and still orthodox Christian tradition. The mediaeval perspective from which he emerged to a secular career, clung to him in his scorn for women, common among mediaeval men, his deep sense of allegory, and the heavy coarseness of much of his imagination—how about the hero who floods Paris by pissing copiously from the summit of Notre Dame Cathedral? On the other hand, though, Rabelais builds on a pagan joie de vivre and a love of secular life which allies him with many post Christian energies of French literature.

### Reading

#### **Primary source reading**

*The Complete Works of Francois Rabelais*, tr. Frame, 1999.

#### **Secondary source reading**

Bahtin, M., *Rabelais and his World*, 2013.

#### **Further reading**

Febvre, L., *The problem of unbelief in the 16th century*, 1982.

#### **Original language reading**

Faure, Paul, *La Renaissance*, 1999.

#### **Suggested paper topics**

Much of the material, in Rabelais's work, is taken from rough scenes of life, one might say from the scatological imagination. Are you surprised at this turn of sensibility in one who was for a long time a Franciscan friar? Is there a broadly scatological tenor to some late Mediaeval and Renaissance art?

How would you characterize the 'freedom' that Rabelais considers of supreme importance in life? Is it a freedom for license, the freedom of justified self-control, or the freedom of a society in which individuals feel mutual respect for one another? Does Rabelais' sense of freedom derive from his particular religious training?

**Excerpt** <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/rabelais.html>

Now every method of teaching has been restored, and the study of languages has been revived: of Greek, without which it is disgraceful for a man to call himself a scholar, and of Hebrew, and Latin. The elegant and accurate art of printing, which is now in use, was invented in my time, by divine inspiration; as, by contrast, artillery was inspired by diabolical suggestion. The whole world is full of learned men, of very erudite tutors, and of most extensive libraries, and it is my opinion that neither in the time of Plato, of Cicero, nor of Papinian were there such faculties for study as one finds today. No one, in future, will risk appearing in public or in any company, who is not well polished in Minerva's workshop. I find robbers, hangmen, freebooters, and grooms nowadays more learned than the doctors and preachers were in my time.

Why, the very women and girls aspire to the glory and reach out for the celestial manna of sound learning. So much so that at my present age I have been compelled to learn Greek, which I had not despised like Cato, but which I had not the leisure to learn in my youth. Indeed I find great delight in reading the *Morals* of Plutarch, Plato's magnificent *Dialogues*, the *Monuments* of Pausanias, and the *Antiquities* of Athenaeus, while I wait for the hour when it will please God, my Creator, to call me and bid me leave this earth.

Therefore, my son, I beg you to devote your youth to the firm pursuit of your studies and to the attainment of virtue. You are in Paris. There you will find many praiseworthy examples to follow. You have Epistemon for your tutor, and he can give you living instruction by word of mouth. It is my earnest wish that you shall become a perfect master of languages. First of Greek, as Quintilian advises; secondly, of Latin; and then of Hebrew, on account of the Holy Scriptures; also of Chaldean and Arabic, for the same reasons; and I would have you model your Greek style on Plato's and your Latin on that of Cicero. Keep your memory well stocked with every tale from history, and here you will find help in the *Cosmographies* of the historians. Of the liberal arts, geometry, arithmetic, and music, I gave you some smattering when you were still small, at the age of five or six. Go on and learn the rest, also the rules of astronomy. But leave divinatory astrology and Lully's art alone, I beg of you, for they are frauds and vanities. Of Civil Law I would have you learn the best texts by heart, and relate them to the art of philosophy. And as for the knowledge of Nature's works, I should like you to give careful attention to that too; so that there may be no sea, river, or spring of which you do not know the fish. All the birds of the air, all the trees, shrubs, and bushes of the forest, all the herbs of the field, all the metals deep in the bowels of the earth, the precious stones of the whole East and the South -- let none of them be unknown to you.