

# Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>6</sup> Huchon, Mireille, ed. *Œuvres complètes de François Rabelais*, 998.

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

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

Until now, there has never been an extended investigation of the importance of dramatic farce in Rabelais's writings, yet it is difficult to overstate the importance of this genre for the author's work. Both a leading scholar of late medieval theater, Jelle Koopmans, and a prominent Rabelais specialist, Michel Jeanneret, have recently lamented this absence in Rabelais studies.<sup>9</sup> An important date to highlight when tracing the path of scholarly interest in farce and its function in Rabelais's work is 1911, when two articles appeared in a volume of *Revue des Études Rabelaisiennes* by Gustave Cohen<sup>10</sup> and Emmanuel Philipot.<sup>11</sup> Both articles centered on the interplay between late medieval theater and Rabelais—specifically on the theater of farce and its role in Rabelais's work. Koopmans has observed that Cohen's article in particular, “est resté pendant longtemps, malgré sa date de publication (1911), ... le dernier mot sur la question”<sup>12</sup> [“has remained for a long time, despite its date of publication (1911), ... the definitive word on the subject”], while stressing that there is much that remains to be pursued in Rabelais studies regarding the importance of this theatrical genre in the author's work. Almost a century later, readers of both farce and Rabelais have an impressive body of criticism to draw upon, yet there remains a sizeable gap in understanding both the literary aspects and possibilities of farce, as well as the performative, farcical underpinnings of the author's tales. To grasp the process by which Rabelais built this important corpus of performance-based, oral productions into his own written narrative is to understand a vital aspect of his literary project; the theater of farce represents a crucial subtext in understanding Rabelais's multifarious, polysemic work.

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

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

<sup>10</sup> Gustave Cohen, “Rabelais et le théâtre.”

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Philipot, “Notes sur quelques farces de la Renaissance.”

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

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

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

### Popular Culture and Its Role in Rabelais's Work

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

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

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

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

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

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<sup>14</sup> xvi.

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

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

<sup>17</sup> *Op. cit.*, 175–6.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>20</sup> *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 97.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.

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

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

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

<sup>25</sup> 7.

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

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

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

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

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

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

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>31</sup> 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*, 21.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 19.

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

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

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

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

<sup>36</sup> 29.

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

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

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

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

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

<sup>39</sup> 2.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, 253.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, 254.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, 259.

## The World of Farce

In much the same way that the rhetoric of the Pléiade poets denigrated poets of the *école marotique* to the point that Marot was all but ignored until the twentieth century, the rhetoric of Pléiade dramatists such as Garnier and Jodelle has led to many unfortunate assumptions about the supposed waning medieval theatrical traditions of the first half of the sixteenth century. Theatrical genres such as *farce* and *sottie* have essentially been viewed as holdovers from the fifteenth century, genres better suited to the Middle Ages and out of place in the context of the humanistic and reformist aesthetic ideals of the sixteenth century. Their symbolic death is said to have occurred in 1548 when the Parliament of Paris banned the performance of *mystères* in the city.<sup>43</sup> This is also the watershed mid-century mark as the Pléiade dramatists followed Du Bellay's advice and wrote plays modeled after classical comedies and tragedies. In his *Deffence et illustration de la langue françoise* (1549) Du Bellay speaks of the "ancienne dignité" of comedy and tragedy, a status that has been "usurped" by "Farces et Moralitez."<sup>44</sup> Thus the groundwork was laid for a classically inspired theater with strict conventions and rules such as the three unities, a burgeoning theatrical movement that would find its ultimate expression during the seventeenth century.

Rather than a dramatic tradition taking its last dying breath in the first half of the sixteenth century, the various types of *théâtre profane et comique* (secular or non-religious comedic theater) were flourishing and experiencing some of the same sorts of changes and evolutions found in other genres due to innovations by humanist- and reform-minded writers such as Rabelais who were adapting these theatrical forms to new uses. Historical documentation attests to the continued popularity of these plays in the sixteenth century; theatrical societies such as the *Basoche* (Paris) and the *Conards* (Rouen) were thriving, with plays being put on during carnival, in the colleges, and at court.<sup>45</sup> The advent of the printing press also contributed to the further dissemination of these plays, a phenomenon that benefits us today, as most versions of fifteenth-century plays exist only in sixteenth-century editions.<sup>46</sup>

The sheer number of extant farces, more than 150 of them, attests to the genre's popularity from the mid-fifteenth century to the mid-sixteenth century. *Maître Pathelin* alone, written around 1485, had been through sixteen editions by 1550.<sup>47</sup> The fact that the four main theatrical collections containing farces were produced in the sixteenth century also points to their continuing popularity during

<sup>43</sup> Mazouer, *Renaissance*, 11. Mazouer refers to this parliamentary decision as "hautement symbolique" ["highly symbolic"].

<sup>44</sup> *Second livre*, chap. 4. Ed. Jean-Charles Monferran, Geneva: Droz, 2001, 138.

<sup>45</sup> Mazouer, *op. cit.*, 18–20.

<sup>46</sup> Jelle Koopmans has done much to dispel the myth of division between medieval and Renaissance theater. See, for example, his article, "L'allégorie théâtrale au début du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle: le cas des pièces 'profanes' de Marguerite de Navarre."

<sup>47</sup> Jean-Claude Aubailly, *Le Théâtre médiéval*, 151.

the Renaissance.<sup>48</sup> The majority of research that has been done until now on farce has been generic in nature, namely establishing what exactly constitutes a farce, as opposed to a *sottie*, a *sermon joyeux*, or a *moralité*.<sup>49</sup> This is more challenging than it may seem, especially when one considers that there is a generic fluidity in these types of plays which resists easy classification. To the modern reader with some basic notions of what distinguishes these different genres, reading the titles of the plays can be a mystifying experience. It is not uncommon to find a play that includes all the attributes of a *sottie* (the presence of a *sot*, a more satirical message, a lack of the dramatic movement characteristic of farce), yet is entitled a farce. Suffice it to observe for now that there simply was not the concern for theatrical taxonomy that would characterize the post-Pléiade theater, not to mention modern scholarship.

Whether a play is entitled “farce” or not, there are some basic elements found in farce from this period that help make it recognizable to the modern reader as a specific genre. Above all else, all actions and dialogue in farce have one goal: the humiliating reversal that comes at the end of the play, which is often coarse and obscene. Typically, the character being tricked is guilty of some form of excessiveness or exaggerated appetite. The *volte-face* that is central to the genre represents a restoration of the status quo, as someone who has stepped beyond certain societal limits is put back in his place. (Women are seldom the object of these punishments, which is attributable to one of the many underlying misogynistic assumptions of the plays, namely that women are simply too skilled at deception to fall prey to it in their turn.)<sup>50</sup> This points to the essentially conservative ethos

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<sup>48</sup> The four main collections are the *Recueil Trepperel*, the *Recueil du British Library*, the *Recueil de Florence* (also known as the *Recueil Cohen*), and the *Recueil La Vallière*. While the first three collections are printed, *La Vallière* is a copied manuscript likely dating from the second half of the sixteenth century. For a detailed description of the collections, as well as information concerning modern editions, see the introduction to André Tissier’s monumental twelve-volume edition of farces, *Recueil de farces (1450–1550)*, vol. 1, 15–21.

<sup>49</sup> Modern scholars have produced some impressive studies that establish farce as a distinct genre. See for example works by Barbara C. Bowen (1964), Halina Lewicka (1974), Jean-Claude Aubailly (1975), Alan E. Knight (1983), Bernadette Rey-Flaud (1984), Konrad Schoell (1992), Charles Mazouer (1998 and 2002), and Michel Rousse (2004).

<sup>50</sup> There is much more to be said about representations of women on the stage in farce, which is beyond the purview of this study. Most farces are domestic and deal with marital infidelity. A cuckolded husband is almost always considered comical, while a deceived wife would not be. This points to one of the central insecurities of the patrilineal society presented in farce, as men are always in danger of being undermined and subverted in their attempts to maintain domination and control. The fact that in most, if not all, of these plays, it would be cross-dressed men playing the female roles adds a whole new layer of critical interest to questions of gender in farce. A useful volume which explores these questions is Viviana Comensoli and Anne Russell’s *Enacting Gender on the English Renaissance Stage*. My thanks to one of my readers for bringing to my attention the fact that farce does seem to destabilize the patriarchal hierarchy with female characters who are always undermining male authority.

of farce—despite certain subversive elements (for example, it is almost always someone in a higher social position who is punished by his social inferior), the dramatic movement of farce points to a reestablishing of norms that have been transgressed.<sup>51</sup>

In the same way that there has been an ongoing debate in early modern popular culture studies over whether this culture is primarily conservative or radical, particularly when considering popular festive forms, studies on farce, a genre which figures prominently as a popular festive form, have also taken up this issue, with differing conclusions. In her seminal study on farce, Barbara Bowen argues for a more conservative attitude governing the action of farce. As she observes, “au lieu de se moquer féroce­ment de quelqu’un ou de quelque chose, le Pape, la corruption de l’Eglise, l’auteur de farces traite toute l’humanité avec un humour légèrement satirique mais surtout tolérant”<sup>52</sup> [“instead of savagely satirizing someone or something, be it the Pope or corruption in the Church, farce’s authors treat all humanity with humor that is perhaps lightly satirical, but especially tolerant”]. The issue of tolerance is central, as the primary attitude expressed in farce is one of both tolerance and resignation. As Bowen further notes,

[Les personnages] acceptent la vie comme elle est, et le caractère humain comme il est. Ils se plaignent ... mais eux se plaignent du froid, de la faim, de l’injustice, sans s’attendre à ce que tout change en mieux. ... Leurs auteurs ne s’occupent pas des aspirations des intellectuels, mais de la vie des petites gens, qui ... avaient le don d’accepter avec résignation toutes les anomalies que pouvait présenter leur vie pour un observateur détaché. ‘Acceptation’ est donc le mot-clé de cette perspective sur la vie. ... Réduire la vie à ses aspects les plus simples, et en rire, voilà le vrai moyen de la supporter.<sup>53</sup>

[[Characters] accept life and human nature as they are. They complain ... but they complain about the cold, hunger, and injustice without expecting it all to change for the better. ... The authors of farce were not interested in intellectual pursuits, but in the lives of the little people, who ... had the ability to accept

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<sup>51</sup> As Michel Rousse has observed, while farce does provide the occasional “rire utopique et libérateur ... l’ordre établi reste tout-puissant” (255) [“utopian and liberating laugh ... the established order remains all-powerful”]. Many scholars of early modern popular culture have debated the potentially subversive nature of this culture (Bakhtin, Muchembled, Burke, Zemon Davis, etc.); as far as farce is concerned, Michel Rousse offers a compelling summation: “[la farce] ne colporte pas une conscience politique des problèmes sociaux en cause. La farce ne se veut qu’exceptionnellement critique à l’égard des institutions, et l’expression d’une opposition claire au système social en vigueur est pratiquement absente” (260) [“[farce] does not advertise a political consciousness of the social problems being considered. It is a genre that is only rarely critical towards institutions, and unequivocal expressions of opposition to the social system in place are almost entirely absent”].

<sup>52</sup> *Les Caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française*, 8.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 16–17.

resignedly all the troubles that a detached witness could observe about their lives. 'Acceptance' is thus the key word for this view on life. ... Reducing life to its most simple traits and laughing at them is the correct way of dealing with it.]

Such a description of farce recalls Burke's description of popular culture as being characterized by an attitude that "the system could not change." In all of this, there is little to be found that is radical or subversive, or even political. As Bowen concludes, "La peinture du ménage est pessimiste, mais d'un pessimisme plutôt résigné que satirique"<sup>54</sup> ["The portrayal of domestic life is pessimistic, but with a pessimism that is more resigned than satirical"]. The world of farce does not move beyond the quotidian and the domestic, and the ultimate conservatism of the genre is found in the pervading pessimism that does not promote change, but instead scorns anything that could be construed as new or innovative.

Farce has been referred to as a realistic genre, owing to the fact the plays are set in domestic milieus with characters drawn from the *menu peuple*: husbands and wives, lascivious monks and lazy servants, petty nobles and miserly merchants. Characters in farce are motivated by base, frequently sexual, desires, making it a profoundly anti-courtly genre that allows no room for lofty motives. Jean-Claude Aubailly distinguishes farce's subject matter from that of other popular forms by the choice of its victims:

La farce, genre propre au théâtre bourgeois et populaire, semble s'être fort peu souciee des classes auxquelles elle n'était pas destinée. Elle met beaucoup plus rarement que le fabliau et la nouvelle la noblesse sur la sellette, et lorsqu'elle le fait, c'est sous les traits de quelques types bien individualisés.<sup>55</sup>

[Farce, a genre particular to bourgeois and popular theater, apparently pays little attention to the classes to which it is not destined. It places the nobility on the hot seat much more rarely than the *fabliau* and the *nouvelle*, and, when it does, only a few, highly individualized character types are presented.]

Not only does farce avoid using characters that represent the larger social institutions of the nobility and the clergy, but also the characters found in farce are essentially anonymous individuals. As we will see, this is a crucial difference between traditional farce and Rabelais's farcical reformulations of the genre.

The characters that are punished in farce are those who attempt to move beyond acceptable social boundaries and must be brought back. The laughter of farce is always evoked at the expense of the character being punished, and there are certain commonalities among the seemingly endless parade of victims in farce. Aubailly observes, "[le] seul souci [de la farce] est de faire rire de tout ce qui ne respecte pas une éthique populaire de la juste mesure, du bon sens et de la

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>55</sup> *Op. cit.*, 186

connaissance raisonnée de soi”<sup>56</sup> [“[the] only concern [of farce] is to make fun of all those who do not adhere to a popular ethical code based on equity, of good sense and of carefully considered self-knowledge”]. It is precisely this “éthique populaire” which will be the primary field of investigation of Chapter 1, which focuses on the ethics of farce. Aubailly’s formulation of an ethics based on “la juste mesure” is important, both in understanding farce and in observing the ways in which Rabelais transforms the genre in his own work. Aubailly’s insistence that in farce the audience is intended to laugh at those who lack a “connaissance raisonnée de soi” [“carefully considered self-knowledge”], also recalls Panurge’s *philautia* in the *Tiers Livre*, a book whose structure, in many ways, resembles a highly elaborate farce.

The motto of farce is “à trompeur, trompeur et demi,” a message that underscores the cynical side of farce, as it is a form of theater populated with conmen and hucksters. There are no heroes or villains in these plays; as *Pathelin* illustrates, due in part to its unusual length (all other farces contain only one reversal, while *Pathelin* contains three), the trickster can quickly become the victim and roles are essentially interchangeable. This interchangeability helps elucidate why farces, while they can seem cruel, are actually intended to be lighthearted. As Aubailly explains concerning the laughter evoked at the expense of the victims of farce, “ce n’est pas un rire vengeur ou correcteur que la farce suscite à leur égard, mais plutôt une reconnaissance souriante faite de pitié bonhomme. Le rire n’est pas ici une arme, mais un pardon”<sup>57</sup> [“farce does not produce vindictive or corrective laughter aimed at them, but rather a smiling recognition of good-natured pity. Laughter is not a weapon here, but forgiveness”]. Thus, while a character punished in farce has in fact transgressed in one form or another “une éthique populaire de la juste mesure” [“a popular ethical code based on equity”], the punishments meted out are not meant to be cruel, nor is their punitive quality meant as a moral corrective, beyond the obvious restoration of the status quo at the end of the plays. Alan E. Knight has observed that the actions of characters in farce “change nothing essential.”<sup>58</sup> It is for this reason that asserting that the plays can be read as revolutionary, or even satirical, is highly problematic. All of the “world-upside-down” enactments which form the central intrigue of farce merely provide for a reestablishment of societal norms, and the laughter of farce is not used as a satirical weapon as it is in Rabelais’s work.

Chapter 2 will center on an examination of language and linguistic manipulation in farce. The primary weapon of a trickster in farce is not the traditional *bâton*, but rather the skillful use of language. I propose three general categories for these ruses: the language of confusion, the language of seduction, and the language of prevarication. In each case, a victim in farce is deceived by failing to recognize the separation between signifier and signified, the ironic space between words and what they represent which is exploited by the victim’s aggressor. The archetypal

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, 189.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 182.

<sup>58</sup> *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama*, 51.

example of this is when Pathelin succeeds in tricking the draper Guillaume first by enticing him with promises of generous payment, and then by confusing him with an elaborate polyglot performance which convinces the merchant that Pathelin is delirious and dying when he comes for payment.

This assessment of the language of farce underscores the fact that this purportedly simplistic genre is much more complex than previously understood, and serves as an extremely useful and effective tool for understanding the debates concerning language and meaning that preoccupied humanists generally and Rabelais specifically.<sup>59</sup> The genre of farce became a dominant theatrical form in France in the mid-fifteenth century, at a time when the *querelle des universaux* between the realists and the nominalists was reaching its peak. The debate centered on the nature and meaning of language, and more specifically, on whether language was connected to anything outside of itself. In modern linguistic terms, it was a debate over the relationship between signifier and signified, and whether there is a direct (and even divine) correlation between the two. Farce reinforces the position of the nominalists, who maintained that there was no link between words and any transcendent meaning. In the theater of farce, tricksters succeed in their ruses by exploiting the space between signifier and signified, conning their victims by manipulating the inherently ambiguous nature of language. In all farces, tricksters triumph by confusing, seducing, or deceiving their victims; each of these strategies is made possible by the malleable nature of language.

### Rabelais's Appropriation and Transformation of Farce

In the second part of this book, the focus will be on the complex process by which Rabelais appropriates the theatrical genre of farce into his own writing. The sheer number of explicit references to farce in Rabelais, especially to the *Farce de Maître Pathelin*, serves to highlight its prominence within the narratives. Beyond the explicit mentions of farce, there are a good number of episodes that read like farces, especially in his first work, *Pantagruel*. Other scholars have noted the existence of farcical structures in Rabelais. In *The Age of Bluff*, Barbara C. Bowen writes, "Rabelais expresses serious views on religion and other matters in a context of farce."<sup>60</sup> Carol Clark focuses much attention on the parallels between farcical, theatrical scenes in Rabelais and their popular, theatrical counterparts, writing, "Many chapters of [Rabelais's] book are remarkably dramatic in character. . . . They also include telling 'stage directions.' . . . R. Lebègue is clearly right to say that

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<sup>59</sup> Just as Olga Anna Duhl has shown that the *sottie* is a "chambre de rhétorique" (208) intimately connected with rhetorical debates such as the *querelle des universaux*, I wish to show that farce also provides an intriguing field of investigation for questions concerning the nature of language which were of great interest among intellectuals during the period in which these plays were being produced.

<sup>60</sup> 29. In the same study, she also draws a connection between the Dindenault episode in the *Quart Livre* and the *Farce du marchand de pommes* (91).

Rabelais's dialogue 'fait de certains chapitres d'excellentes scènes de théâtre'<sup>61</sup> ['makes wonderful theatrical scenes out of certain chapters']. In Gérard Defaux's edition of *Pantagruel*, episodes such as the *écolier limousin* and Thaumaste are full of commentary such as, "Nous sommes au théâtre"<sup>62</sup> ["We are at the theater"], "nous sommes en plein théâtre"<sup>63</sup> ["we are right in the middle of a play"], "[cela] appartient au répertoire théâtral"<sup>64</sup> ["this belongs to the theatrical repertoire"], etc. More recently, Bowen has asserted, "there can be no doubt that [Rabelais's] four books are profoundly theatrical."<sup>65</sup> The second section of this book is devoted to the theatrical and, more specifically, farcical nature of Rabelais's creation. Such an exploration will show the ways in which the author profoundly alters the genre in his own work, as well as illustrate how an understanding of the presence of farce enriches the reader's appreciation of the *Chroniques*. Not only does the reformulation of farce alter and revolutionize it, but the presence of farce also contributes to Rabelais's distinct, hybrid form of humanist satire.

An overview of the ways in which farce functions in Rabelais's books illustrates the radicalization of this primarily conservative genre. Beyond the obvious example of generic transferal, as theater is transcribed into prose, the reformulation of farce in Rabelais takes place on two primary levels. First, the subject matter is altered in important ways. The setting of farce is primarily a domestic one, with disputes between spouses and other characters such as imbecilic servants and lascivious monks. This private, anonymous setting is replaced by the much more public, ideologically charged settings of Rabelais's farce-like scenes. Second, the ethos of farce is conservative; the humiliating reversals that characterize the genre do not call into question social norms, but rather serve to reinstate them. Rabelais turns these comedic reversals on their head, and whereas in farce the victim is always someone who has transgressed the status quo, Rabelais takes aim at established societal institutions in the areas of education, law, and theology, effecting humiliating reversals on characters who reflect these institutions. In doing so, Rabelais becomes a major contributor to an early sixteenth-century literary phenomenon in France, as humanist writers begin refashioning so-called popular or medieval genres as ideological weapons, exploiting their satirical potential and creating new forms of polemical discourse.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>61</sup> *Op. cit.*, 105. In Lebègue's *Le théâtre comique en France de Pathelin à Mélite*, he observes in regards to *Pathelin*, "En lisant Rabelais, nous avons l'impression qu'il savait par cœur cette farce" (39) ["While reading Rabelais, one gets the impression that he knows this farce by heart"].

<sup>62</sup> *Pantagruel*, 134.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>65</sup> *Enter Rabelais, Laughing*, 53.

<sup>66</sup> As noted previously (footnote 4), Jeff Persels has notably produced some very interesting scholarship on this topic. For the most recent study on changes in satire during the French Renaissance, see Bernd Renner's edited volume, *La Satire dans tous ses états*. Of particular interest for the present study, see Part II, "La Satire fait du théâtre" with articles by Beam and Hayes.

The third chapter will address the farcical episodes of the first two books. Both *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua* begin in a theatrical mode, with a narrator, Alcofribas Nasier, addressing the reader in the prologues of both works and sounding very much like a street performer or vendor. Both works also end with the adversaries of Rabelais's giant heroes, King Anarche and King Picrochole, being punished in farce-like fashion.<sup>67</sup> Beyond this general framework, both books contain episodes which resemble farce, from Pantagruel's encounter with the *écolier limousin* (*Pantagruel* ch. 6) to Janotus de Bragmardo's farcical harangue to Gargantua and his companions (*Gargantua* ch. 18–20). In between these two episodes we find other farce-like constructions, such as Pantagruel's first encounter with Panurge (*Pantagruel* ch. 9), the prince's arbitration of the lawsuit between Baisecul and Humevesne (*Pantagruel* ch. 10–13), Panurge's besting of Thaumaste (*Pantagruel* ch. 18–20), and his failed seduction of a Parisian Lady (*Pantagruel* ch. 21–22). In the first two books, these episodes are all structured fundamentally like farces, not just in the general sense but in the theatrical sense as well. Examining them collectively, it becomes clear that the spirit of farce pervades the author's work, and highlights how farce is used as an ideological weapon in the tales of Gargantua and Pantagruel to attack the corruption of the Sorbonne and scholastic learning, the arcane legal system of early modern France, and to set out the principles of Erasmian, evangelical humanism.

In some significant ways, these early farcical episodes are very similar to traditional farces, yet there are important differences that distinguish them from their popular counterpart. The victims of Rabelais's farces, from the *écolier limousin* to Janotus, are all guilty of some form of exaggerated appetite or behavior, a fundamental characteristic of traditional farce. But while each episode contains multiple echoes of dramatic farce, there is also a pronounced refashioning of the genre at play in the *Chroniques*. The humor of these farcical episodes is clearly satirical and ideologically motivated, while satire and ideology are almost (but not entirely) absent in traditional farce; rather than offering lessons about the importance of remembering one's place in society, the didactic elements of the episodes are motivated by humanist and evangelical concerns. Rather than seeking to reestablish traditional customs, these farcical episodes insist on reforms of current beliefs and practices.

The final chapter examines the more complex examples of generic appropriation and reformulation in Rabelais's *Tiers* and *Quart Livres*. In these works, the nature

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<sup>67</sup> At the end of *Pantagruel*, Anarche becomes a “crieur de saulce vert” (*P* 31:329) [“crier of green-sauce”], while in *Gargantua*, at the end of the war with Picrochole, the choleric ruler flees and it is rumored that he has become a “pauvre gaignedenier à Lyon” (*G* 49:132) [“penny-laborer in Lyons”]. Both of these reversals of fortune resemble the punishments of traditional farce, not to mention the very explicit connection, in the case of Anarche, with Lucian's Menippean satire (cf. Epistemon's view of the afterworld, *P* ch. 30). All references are taken from Mireille Huchon's edition of Rabelais's works; abbreviations are as follows: *G* for *Gargantua*, *P* for *Pantagruel*, *TL* for *Tiers Livre*, and *QL* for *Quart Livre*. All textual citations list the chapter followed by the page reference.

of farce is radically altered in new ways. In the *Tiers Livre*, Panurge is utterly transformed from his previous incarnation in *Pantagruel*. Instead of being bold and brash, a trickster *par excellence*, he is cowardly and fearful. His “perplexité”—namely that if he marries, he will be cuckolded, beaten, and robbed by his wife—mirrors the central concerns of all husband characters in traditional farce. Just as the mantra of farce is “à trompeur, trompeur et demi,” Panurge, the triumphant *farceur* of *Pantagruel*, is consumed with the fear that he will now become the “trompeur trompé.” Thus, from the very beginning, there is a pronounced presence of farce that helps elucidate the structure and meaning of the *Tiers Livre*. As will become clear, there is a complex farce imbedded throughout this work, but it is Pantagruel who assumes the primary role of the trickster in the *Tiers Livre*.

Pantagruel's central ruse in the *Tiers Livre* is the set of spurious consultations he encourages Panurge to seek out, all of which are meant to provoke the giant's wayward companion. Edwin Duval has convincingly demonstrated that almost all of the consultations Pantagruel suggests to Panurge in the *Tiers Livre* are meant to be ironic, a complex strategy employed in a failed attempt to cure Panurge of his *philautia*.<sup>68</sup> There are numerous textual indicators that what is transpiring is, in fact, a theatrical performance meant to reverse Panurge's excesses. In contrast to the farcical episodes in Rabelais's earlier works, at the end of this elaborate, multi-layered farcical production, there is no reversal and Panurge remains as self-absorbed as in the beginning. In the end, Pantagruel's farce-like performance fails to offer the type of closure found in the earlier works and leaves the reader in the same state of perplexity as Pantagruel's intended victim. Thus, there is an open-ended, unresolved quality to the *Tiers Livre*, which highlights a profound difference between this book and the farcical nature of the previous works.<sup>69</sup> For example, while Pantagruel's adjudication of the dispute between Baisecul and Humevesne ends with a resolution meant to satirize contemporary legal practices, the trial of Bridoye in the *Tiers Livre* (ch. 39–43) presents an entirely different outcome. Like its predecessor in *Pantagruel*, the episode is highly dramatic and farcical, yet the reader is left wondering who exactly is being punished or attacked. Pantagruel's proposed solution highlights the irresolvable nature of this dispute.

Such irresolvable conflicts form the central problem posed in the *Quart Livre*. In his dedication to Odet de Chastillon at the beginning of the *Quart Livre*, Rabelais likens the relationship between doctor and patient (and by extension, between author and reader) to that of a “farce jouée à trois personnages: le malade, le medicin, la maladie”<sup>70</sup> [“farce played by three characters: the sick person, the doctor, the illness”]. In the same dedication, the author once again refers to

<sup>68</sup> See chapter 5 of *The Design of Rabelais's Tiers livre de Pantagruel*.

<sup>69</sup> This is a key aspect of Renner's thesis of a “split” between Rabelais's first two “monologic” books and the more open, “dialogic” *Tiers* and *Quart Livres*. See ch. 3 of *Difficile est saturam non scribere*, in particular the section “Le Tiers Livre: atmosphère de doute et floraison du paradoxe,” 245–72.

<sup>70</sup> Huchon, 518.

*Pathelin*. It is apparent from the outset that farce serves an important purpose in this final authentic book of the *Chroniques*. In particular, farce plays a central role in understanding the nature of the ideological aporias presented in the *Quart Livre*. Of the many encounters during the voyage of Pantagruel and his companions, one of the very first is with the sheep merchant Dindenault (ch. 5–8). The encounter between Dindenault and Panurge is the most explicit of the farce-like episodes in this book, including a portion where the narrative form itself is replaced by the dialogue format of theater.<sup>71</sup> There are troubling elements contained within this farcical performance, which are again echoed and expanded upon in the story of Lord Basché and the *chicanous* (ch. 12–15). Instead of farce serving as a satirical weapon to punish those guilty of excesses condemned by humanists (as in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*), or as a tool meant to help a cherished companion (as in the *Tiers Livre*), in these chapters (and elsewhere in the same book), farce becomes tragic, and the violence it produces is unrestrained and gratuitous. This points to a reconsideration of the genre by the author, as farce is transformed in the *Quart Livre* into yet another example of pointless, irresolvable conflict.

Yet if a negative, cynical view tends to dominate the farce-like episodes of the *Quart Livre*, it is also true that the book closes with a final comedic, cheerful farce in which Panurge shits himself, offering an elaborate explanation for his soiled state that is purely Rabelaisian. The tragic and pessimistic tone which dominates the farcical chapters in the first part of the book is replaced in this concluding scene by a more positive message in which—as is so often the case in traditional farce—all are invited to drink: “Beuvons.” Thus the author seems to go full circle, returning to a positive view of farce, a genre which allows the author the freedom to satirize and attack institutions and attitudes opposed to the liberal and generous spirit of *Pantagruélisme*.<sup>72</sup>

Throughout the tales of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* and in a variety of ways, Rabelais puts traditional farce to radical new uses that often make it subversive in his own work. Clearly, the humanist and evangelical context of Rabelais’s work, as well as its narrative format, alters the meaning of farce, but the reverse is true as well. The appropriation of the dramatic genre of farce changes our reading and understanding of his humanist satire. In Rabelais’s books, farcical episodes serve to undermine the power structures of existing institutions by imposing humiliating reversals on their representatives. Recast in a humanist context, farce becomes a vehicle for change, attacking the status quo and positing alternatives to existing legal, educational, and theological systems. Through highlighting the lack of division between high and low cultures and underscoring the interplay between

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<sup>71</sup> Bernadette Rey-Flaud has written an engaging article comparing this episode with *Pathelin*. See “Quand Rabelais interroge la Farce.”

<sup>72</sup> I do not share Renner’s more negative interpretation of this concluding episode that this is a case where “la farce univoque s’est discréditée par ses propres mécanismes de ridiculisation” (*Difficile*, 353) [“univocal farce is discredited by its own means of ridicule”].

