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Berrong: Gargantua and the New Historiography

GARGANTUA AND THE NEW HISTORIOGRAPHY

Richard M. Berrong

One major tenet of much modern Rabelais criticism since Screech and Defaux — and even, in certain ways, since Lefranc — is that the *Oeuvres* cannot fully be appreciated by the present-day reader until he acquires familiarity with matters known to Rabelais and his intended audience. As shown again most recently by Gérard Defaux, there are "codes culturels" subtending much of the *Oeuvres,* codes to which Rabelais most definitely was alluding and of which modern readers must therefore be aware if they are to perceive the meanings that Rabelais knew his own readers, familiar with these codes, would derive from his texts.[1]

This is true even for Rabelais's comedy. No one would deny that a reader totally unfamiliar with the currents of the sixteenth century can (and does) find a great deal to laugh at in the *Oeuvres.* As scholars such as M. A. Screech have demonstrated,[2] however, a knowledge of certain matters contemporary with the composition of the novels reveals humor (generally satire) in passages where none had been seen before — at least not since the sixteenth century.

Such would appear to be true of Rabelais's presentation of his narrator, Alcofribas Nasier, in *Gargantua* (1535). Nasier had already appeared as narrator in the first novel, *Pantagruel* (1532), but with *Gargantua* Rabelais makes certain apparently significant changes and additions that would have created comedy — and something more — for his readers.

One thing that distinguishes the narrator of *Gargantua* from his equivalent in *Pantagruel* is the fact that, while the Alcofribas Nasier of the earlier narrative recounts the "faictz et dictz" of one of his contemporaries and acquaintances, someone he personally knows, the narrator in *Gargantua* presents the life of an individual who is a (giant) generation older than himself. This distinction would be trivial if it were not for the fact that Rabelais takes advantage of it to endow the *Gargantua* Nasier with certain characteristics not found in his *Pantagruel* parallel.

Totally unlike his namesake in the first novel, the narrator of *Gargantua* repeatedly demonstrates that he has done research in preparation for the writing of his biography. To obtain information about young Gargantua's wardrobe, he consulted archival documents ("les anciennes pantarches, qui sont en la Chambre des Comptes à Montsoreau"[*G,* 56][3]). To learn about the reception given to Gargantua upon his return from Paris to Utopie, this Nasier read old histories (the "*Supplementi Chronicorum*" [*G,* 213]). To discover more about Gargantua's behavior as a child, he interviewed an eye-witness ("une de ses gouvernantes" [*G,* 55]). When discussing Gargantua's lineage, he is careful to describe and recount the discovery of his source (an ancient manuscript written in "letres cancelleresques" found in a "monument antique" [*G,* 14]). This is distinctly unlike the narrator of *Pantagruel,* who never bothered to explain where or how he obtained his facts; the *Gargantua* Nasier is someone who does not write about past events until he has verified them against archival documents, ancient manuscripts, and even interviews with eye-witnesses. He is very definitely not just a narrator, but an historian.

Not an earth-shaking observation, you say, or even a particularly interesting one... until one recalls the historical context of the *Oeuvres.* What we today take to be standard methodology for historical writing — consultation of archival documents, interviews with eye-witnesses, etc. — was just beginning to be seen in Rabelais's time as a necessary part of historiography. In fact, Rabelais's era saw a considerable change in the very understanding of historiography itself, one which led to the development of modern historiography as we know it today. A few words on this change are therefore in order.

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Through the Middle Ages and into the early Renaissance, the writing of non-contemporary history was understood primarily as an exercise in rhetoric. When historians (or chroniclers, as they more properly were called) undertook to recount the events of an era previous to their own, they generally limited their efforts to repeating commonly-held legends and copying previously-written narratives. Such "histories" were composed primarily to glorify some present monarch (through a flattering presentation of his ancestors, alleged or real), or, more altruistically, to provide moral examples. For all some of these writers claimed to the contrary in their forwards and introductions, the value criteria for their "historiography" certainly had little to do with factual accuracy.[4]

By the fifteenth century, and beginning in Italy, much of this started to change. As legal scholars turned their attention to the history of their own nations' laws, interest was aroused in archival holdings, ancient documents, and contemporary records from the past in general. By the first half of the sixteenth century, French legal scholars and historians such as Budé, Cujas, Alciati, and others, were emphasizing the importance of what we now take for granted as the normal methods of historical research. In the second half of the century, the first great French examples of this modern historiography began to appear: Estienne Pasquier's *Recherches de la France,* Claude Fauchet's *Antiquitez gauloises ou françoises,* etc. These were works whose authors had not been content simply to repeat the tales of previous writers, but who had devoted patient years to the investigation of government archives, libraries, etc. Indeed, one scholar (Jean Bodin) even published an entire treatise on the (now) "correct" way of writing history (*Methodus ad facilem historiarum congnitionem).*[5]

Given this background, it becomes apparent that, for Rabelais's contemporaries (or at least his intended readers) the Alcofribas Nasier of *Gargantua* would have come across not simply as a more developed character than his *Pantagruel* homologue, but as a (would-be) example of the "modern historiographer." With his investigation into archives and manuscripts — and his emphasis upon such activities — the *Gargantua* Nasier would have appeared to Rabelais's readers as someone who very much wanted to be taken as "the very model of a modern historiographer."

Since he goes to such lengths to present himself as a "new historian," it is not out of place to examine his opus — the *Gargantua* narrative — against the criteria of the methodology to which he appears to subscribe.

To begin with, the *Gargantua* Alcofribas Nasier does not seem to be able to keep his facts straight. In Chapter 36, entitled "Comment Gargantua mangea en sallade six pelerins," Nasier recounts the adventures of what he repeatedly describes as *six* pilgrims (*G,* 217, 218). Several chapters later, however, he consistently refers to them as "cinq pelerins" (*G,* 243, 251). After the Picrocholine War when Nasier describes Gargantua taking count of his casualties, he remarks: "Gargantua... trouva que peu d'iceulz [Gargantua's soldiers] estoient peryz in la bataille, exceptez quelques gens de pied de la bande du capitaine Tolmere, et Ponocrates qui avoit un coup de harquebouze en son pourpoinct" (*G,* 271). In the next chapter, however, Nasier mentions Ponocrates' appointment as tutor for Picrochole's son (*G,* 276), and in the chapter after that he lists Ponocrates as one of the recipients of a chateau (*G,* 279). Whether it is because he writes while drinking ("à la composition de ce livre seigneurial, je ne perdiz ny emploiay oncques plus, ny aultre temps que celluy qui estoit estably à prendre ma refection corporelle, sçavoir est, beuvant et mangeant" [*G,* 17]), or because his eye-sight is weak (he transcribes Gargantua's genealogy "à grant renfort de bezicles" [*G,* 23]), or simply because he is not very careful or observant, the Alcofribas Nasier of *Gargantua* has real problems keeping his data straight — problems he does not always overcome.

The comedy of Rabelais's presentation of Nasier is not simply that of the absent-minded professor/historian, however. One of the things that most pre-occupied Renaissance new-historiographers was the reconstruction of an accurate chronology for the events of the past. During, before, and after Rabelais's time they wrote many books with the sole or primary purpose of establishing accurate dates for various historical occurrences. Each new-historiographer was expected to pay close attention to working out the chronology of his material.

The *Gargantua* Nasier seems to be oblivious to the very question, however, unconscious of the chronological problems repeatedly posed by his so carefully-gathered facts. He provides only one actual date — Tubal Holoferne's death, 1420 (*G*, 97) — but a variety of details that would have led any Renaissance historian (and most any reader) to attempt to establish a chronology — and stare with astonishment at the results.

To begin with, Nasier reports that Gargantua's genealogy was found in a "monument antique" on which a Latin phrase (*Hic bibitur*) was engraved in "letres Ethrusques" (*G*,23). For Gargantua's name to be recorded in an era when Latin was still written with the Etruscan alphabet, Gargantua would have to have been born well before the beginning of the Christian era. On the other hand, and only a few pages later, Nasier says that he spoke to one of the "gouvernantes" who tended Gargantua when the latter was one year, ten months old (*G*, 55). If this woman was still alive when Nasier did his research — he provides no dates for his own life, but since he records the death of Tubal Holoferne, he must have been writing at the earliest sometime after 1420 — then Gargantua could only have been one year, ten months old (and hence born) some eighty or ninety years (the longest possible life-span of a normal human being like the nurse) before Nasier's interview with his "gouvernante" (around 1420), a deduction that certainly does not tally with the probable date of the "monument antique" — and hence, the genealogy mentioning Gargantua supposedly found inside it. Does Nasier see any of the implications inherent in the data that he is so busy collecting and transcribing? Apparently not.

Instead, he proceeds with the presentation of more of his findings. When Gargantua was one year, ten months old (Nasier continues), Grandgousier ordered a blue and white wardrobe for him. This fact, Nasier says, he found recorded in "les anciennes pantarches, qui sont en la chambre des Comptes à Montsoreau" (*G*, 56). Here an event contemporary with one remembered by someone still alive (the nurse) is presented as recorded in a book described as "ancien." Things soon become much more blatantly confused, however. At the risk of appearing unduly schematic, I will refer to the year of Gargantua's birth as "x" as we follow Nasier's reconstruction of the giant's later childhood and adolescence.

At the end of Gargantua's fifth year ($x + 5$), Nasier says, Grandgousier decided that it was time to begin his son's education (*G*, 88, 95). To this end he employed the sophist Tubal Holoferne, who spent five years, three months ($x + 10\ 1/4$) teaching Gargantua "sa charte" (*G*, 96), then thirteen years, six months ($x + 23\ 3/4$) going over the *Donat*, the *Faciat*, etc. (*G*, 96). Holoferne then wastes more than eighteen years, eleven months ($x + 43$) teaching Gargantua the *De modis significandi* (*G*, 46-47), and sixteen years, two months ($x + 59\ 1/6$) with the *Compost*, at which point the sophist dies. Any Renaissance historian, and many Renaissance readers accustomed to such studies, would have been quick to reconstruct the giant's chronology from this information: if $x + 59\ 1/6 = 1420$, then Gargantua was born in about 1361 — hardly early enough to have had his birth recorded in a tomb built when Latin was still written with the Etruscan alphabet, and not really early enough for a work containing reference to his baby clothes (made in 1363) to be described as "ancien."

Oblivious to all this, Nasier continues to present the results of his research. Gargantua, he says, spent some time after Holoferne's death studying with Jobelin Bridé (*G*, 97-98). Grandgousier then sent his son to Paris. Upon arriving there (1420+x), Gargantua pays the inquisitive Parisians his *proficiat* "par rys." "Dont fut depuis la ville nommée *Paris,*" Nasier explains, adding that "auparavant on [l'] appelloit *Leucece,* comme dit Strabo, lib. iiij" (*G,* 110). Paris had certainly once been called Leucece, but not after 1420! "Lors [at the time of Gargantua's arrival] estoit... l'oracle de Leucece" (*G,* 112), Nasier adds, further illustrating his unawareness of the chronological confusion that his data is producing. Finally, the narrator maintains that he himself heard Gargantua shout while the latter was a student in Paris (*G,* 153)... yet another impossibility, if Gargantua was a student in Paris while the city was still called Leucece and Nasier — a mere human — was alive after 1420.

Pointing out these chronological inconsistencies is not, it bears repeating, a case of overemphasizing insignificant details. Rabelais's contemporaries were accustomed to paying attention to questions of chronology, and would certainly have done so in a book whose "author" (i.e., the narrator) presents himself as a scientific historiographer writing up the results of his historical research. Rabelais could well have expected, and would seem to have wanted, his readers to notice Nasier's apparent unawareness of the almost constant chronological inconsistencies of the material that he was representing. The author of *Gargantua* must have expected his readers to see Nasier as a would-be "modern" historiographer — but one who is constantly tripping himself up in his own data, unaware of its inconsistencies.

The humor of the absent-minded — and rather unobservant — historian, then. But, as is often — if not, indeed, always — the case in Rabelais, there is also something more serious beneath this comedy. While the aforementioned inconsistencies may be "accidents" on Nasier's part, discrepancies of which he is unaware, there are times when it is very clear that he consciously sets up inconsistencies to deceive — or at least make fools of — his readers. Near the beginning of Chapter 3, Nasier says that Gargamelle "engroissa d'un beau filz et le porta jusques à l'unziesme mois" (*G,* 31). Realizing that some of his readers might view such an assertion with incredulity, he hastens to add: "Car autant, voire d'adventage, peuvent les femmes ventre porter" (*G,* 32). He then strings together in support of this statement several pages of examples drawn from Classical and legal texts, only to finish with: "Moienans lesquelles loys, les femmes veufves peuvent franchement jouer du serrecropiere à tous enviz et toutes restes, deux moys apres le trepas de leurs mariez" (*G,* 35). If we have trusted the narrator's good faith, his research and his knowledge of Classical and legal texts, we seem to be made fools of by the last statement. (Or, to use an expression found in *Gargantua,* "Nous avons le moine.")

The *Gargantua* Nasier does the same thing to his readers just a few pages later. In Chapter 5, he describes the birth of Gargantua: "L'enfant... entra en la vene creuse [de sa mère]," he says, "et, gravant par le diaphragme jusque au dessus des espaules (où la dicte vene se part en deux), print son chemin à gausche, et sortit par l'aureille senestre" (*G,* 49). "Je me doubte que ne croyez asseurement ceste estrange nativité," he admits, so he proceeds to cite Solomon and St. Paul, as well as Classical mythology, to support his assertion. Just as the reader has been convinced to accept the narrator's statement, the latter closes with: "Mais vous seriez bien dadventaige esbahys et estonnez si je vous expousoys presentement tout le chapitre de Pline on quel parle des enfantemens estranges et contre nature, et toutesfoys je ne suis poinct menteur tant asseuré comme il a esté" (*G,* 52). If Pliny was lying when he described "enfantemens estranges et contre nature," does that imply that Nasier has been lying when he said that Gargantua was born through his mother's left ear? What does Nasier mean when he says "je ne suis poinct menteur tant asseuré comme Pline" (as opposed to "Je ne suis poinct menteur comme Pline")? Avonsnous le moine encore une fois?

These very clearly conscious and willed confusions have already been the subject of much critical commentary. In *The Age of Bluff,*[6] Barbara Bowen, making use of Rosalie Colie's *Paradoxia epidemia,* cited such contradictions to develop her thesis that Rabelais employed paradox like certain other Renaissance writers in order to jar his readers into a new perception of the world (not altogether different from the reasoning of the Surrealists). In *Rabelaisian Dialectic and the Platonic-Hermetic Tradition,*[7] George Mallary Masters attempted to relate such paradoxes and contradictions to the Platonic and neo-Platonic dialectic revived during the Renaissance. In *Rabelais au futur,*[8] Jean Paris maintained that such contradictions reflected a Renaissance middle-class mentality that was in conflict with itself because of its new status inbetween the proletariat from which it had arisen and was trying to distance itself and the nobility toward which it was looking for recognition but which was refusing it such acknowledgement. And so on and so forth.

There is one interpretation of these contradictions that is particularly relevant to the present analysis, however. In his article, "Rabelais et son masque comique: *Sophista loquitur,*"[9] Gérard Defaux has argued that Rabelais set up the blatant contradictions noted in the last several pages in order to make of the *Gargantua* Alcofribas Nasier a sophist akin to the *Pantagruel* Panurge. Defaux shows that, like that first Panurge, the *Gargantua* Nasier would seem to delight in using his mastery of language and reasoning to trick others, making fools of and even humiliating them.[10] As a result, and after the narrator has pulled the same trick on the reader several times, this latter begins to come to the conclusion that the *Gargantua* Alcofribas Nasier is not to be relied upon. This Nasier would seem to be much too interested in tricking his audience to be believed by them.

But if this is the case, does it not call into question our previous explanation of his other confusions and contradictions as the result of absent-mindedness and inobservance? Certainly Nasier could have forgotten the exact number of pilgrims between chapters 36 and 41/3. But could he have forgotten, while writing chapter 49, that in chapter 47 he had announced that Ponocrates died during the war?[11] Was he really unaware of all the chronological inconsistencies in his presentation of Gargantua's childhood? Or did he set all of this up, quite consciously, only to see how much of it the reader would swallow before he began to notice what was going on, began to realize that for all the narrator's presentation of himself as a "modern," "scientific" historian, Nasier was actually not one whit interested in being (as opposed to playing) the "model of a modern historiographer"? If at first the comedy of Alcofribas Nasier lies in our laughing at his failure to live up to the standard that he seemed to be claiming for himself, it soon comes from our laughing at ourselves as we realize that, because we saw him so confused, we allowed ourselves to be led along and made fools of by this by no means so absent-minded lecturer. "Maintenant, c'est nous qui avons le moine."

Beneath this second layer of comedy, there may be still another level of satire. If we allowed ourselves to mistake Nasier for a sincere — if addlepated — historian because of his claims to have followed "new historical" methodology, and therefore trusted him and his works when he and they certainly did not merit any trust, might we not be guilty of a somewhat similarly misplaced confidence with regard to those who solicit our credulity with declarations of scientific historical procedure? Certainly Rabelais was not opposed to the new methodology and criteria being developed during his lifetime by the great French legal historians. What he may have objected to, however, were their claims to be producing "scientific," "true" historiography. Their methodology and intentions were all very well and good, of course, but this methodology was still being applied by human beings [illegible] subject to all the faults and flaws that went with human nature. The *Gargantua* Alcofribas Nasier is an exaggeration of these flaws, granted; comic satire calls for exaggeration. His flaws — over-sight, inattention, excessive "playfulness," (drinking, bad eyesight) — will be present (toutes proportions gardées) in any practitioner of the new historiography, however... or so Rabelais would seem to be saying. One can improve the methodology of historical research, but one cannot fundamentally alter the human nature of the person who will apply this methodology.

There is yet another problem with the writing-up of historical research, one that Rabelais also seems to invoke in *Gargantua*. Near the end of the narrative, in Chapter 56, Nasier presents an enigma in verse "qui feut trouvé au fondemens de l'abbaye [de Thélème] en une grande lame de bronze" (*G*, 305; note the parallel with the *Franfreluches antidotées* found in a "monument antique" and presented by Nasier in Chapter 2). After Gargantua and Frère Jean read it over, the latter turns to the former and asks: "Que pensez vous, en vostre entendement, estre par cest enigme designé et signifié?" "Quoy? (dist Gargantua). Le decours et maintien de verité divine." "Par sainct Goderan (dist le Moyne), je pense que c'est la description du jeu de paulme" (*G*, 313).

Even with the best of intentions, Gargantua and Frère Jean cannot agree on the significance of this "historical text." While the artifact itself still exists, its makers — both the individual and the culture — no longer do, such that Gargantua and Frère Jean have lost the context that would allow them correctly to interpret the intention behind this fragment of the past.

The same thing occurs earlier in *Gargantua*. Alcofribas Nasier can discover from "des anciennes pantarches qui sont en la Chambre des Comptes à Montsoreau" (*G*, 56) that Grandgousier outfitted his infant son in a wardrobe of blue and white. The significance of these colors for Gargantua's father — and hence his motives in choosing them — are not so easy to discover, however. Nasier decides that Grandgousier dressed his son in blue and white to indicate that the child's birth "luy estoit une joye celeste" (*G*, 64), but he has no way of proving this other than by trying to show that white has always meant "joy" to all peoples (Chapter 8) — a very unconvincing manoeuvre.[12]

Similar problems occur with the explanation of the origins of the word "Paris." Alcofribas Nasier attributes it to the exclamations of the inhabitants — "Nous sommes baignez par rys!" — upon being drenched in Gargantua's urine (*G*, 110). Even he admits, however, that another writer (Joaninus de Barranco) was able to derive the city's name from a Greek word allegedly used to describe the capital's inhabitants: "Parrhesiens..., c'est à dire fiers en parler" (*G*, 110). It is all very well and good to do archival research and archeological exploration in order to retrieve artifacts and documents from the past. The problem, however, is that one can do little more with these artifacts and documents than describe or transcribe them. Once they are no longer in their historical context, once they have outlasted the individuals and the culture that created them, their significance (what they were meant by their creators to mean) becomes very difficult, if not impossible, to determine.

Already in *Pantagruel*, written several years before, Rabelais had expressed a similar opinion through his protagonist. In Chapter 9 bis, Pantagruel had condemned the writings of Medieval commentators upon the *Pandectes* as "sottes et deraisonnables raisons et ineptes opinions." One of the reasons why Pantagruel found these commentaries upon the Roman law code to be so faulty is that "au regard des letres de humanité, et de congnoissance des antiquitez et histoires," these commentators "en estoient chargez comme ung crapault de plumes, et en usent comme ung crucifix d'ung pifre: dont toutesfois les droictz sont tous plains, et sans ce ne peuvent estre entenduz" (*P*, 58-59). Without a thorough knowledge of the culture in which and during which they are produced, how can one pretend to be able to understand the meaning of the *Pandectes* (the ideas that the Code's authors intended to convey)?

This passage from *Pantagruel* could well serve as an epigram for all critical works that attempt to deal with the *Oeuvres*. Even the casual reader, looking to pass some agreeable hours and with no particular knowledge of or interest in the French Renaissance, will always be able to get something — indeed, a great deal — from Rabelais's novels. The more we know about the issues of his day, however, the more we familiarize ourselves with the contemporary "cultural codes" to which Rabelais continually alludes, the more intended meaning and pleasure we will be able to derive from his texts. Rabelais's writings certainly have that which speaks to men of all times (or at least of the last four centuries), but they become immeasurably richer for those who have studied the particular era in which they were composed. The *Oeuvres* even become funnier — and, at the same time, more serious — when we are aware of the developments off of which Rabelais played. Was it not Goethe — himself a great admirer of Rabelais — who once counseled a young writer: "To be of all times, you must first be of your own?"

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NOTES

1 A bibliography of critical works on the *Oeuvres* devoted to demonstrating this tenet would run on for some length, in the process including some of the best Rabelais scholarship. The point has most recently been argued — with great success — by Gérard Defaux in his *Le Curieux, le glorieux et la sagesse du monde dans la première moitié du XVI^e siècle* (Lexington, Ky.: French Forum Press, 1982). But see most any work by Defaux or M. A. Screech.

2 As, for example, in *The Rabelaisian Marriage* (London: Arnold, 1958).

3 In this essay, all quotations from Rabelais's narratives are taken from the editions published by Droz in their Textes littéraires français series: *Pantagruel*, ed. V. L. Saulnier (Geneva, 1965); *Gargantua*, ed. Ruth Calder and M. A. Screech (1970). These texts are based on the first known editions of the two narratives.

4 One can see this in even so late a work of "historiography" as Jean Lemaire de Belges' *Illustrations de Gaule et singularitez de Troye* (c. 1512). In the Introduction, the author assures his readers that the following work is a "narration... antique et veritable," from which have been "extirpées" "toutes erreurs et scabrositez, qui parauant rendoient [le jardin de l'histoire de la France] sterile et malgracieux" (p. 8). In fact, however, the following narrative simply repeats the same unhistorical legends that had been the stock in trade of French "historians" for centuries before. (Cf. Jean Lemaire de Belges, *Oeuvres*, ed. J. Stecher [1882; rpt. Geneva: Slatkine, 1969], I) On early Renaissance "rhetorical" history (primarily Italian), cf. Nancy S. Struever, *The Language of History in the Renaissance* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), especially pages 40-63.

5 On the development of modern historiography in France and its forerunners, cf. Donald R. Kelly, *Foundations of Modern Historical Scholarship: Language, Law and History in the French Renaissance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970); George Huppert, *The Idea of Perfect History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1970); Claude-Gilbert Dubois, *La Conception de l'histoire en France au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: Nizet, 1977), particularly helpful for its extensive bibliography.

6 Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972.

7 Albany: State University of New York Press, 1969.

8 Paris: Seuil, 1970.

9 *Etudes Rabelaisiennes*, XI (1974), pp. 89-136.

10 Defaux's presentation of Panurge as sophist is contained in the already classic *Pantagruel et les sophistes* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973).

11 It is very difficult to dismiss any of these inconsistencies as the result of authorial oversight. In her recent and very thorough study, *Rabelais grammairien*, Etudes Rabelaisiennes, XVI (Geneva: Droz, 1981), Mireille Huchon demonstrates the detailed and painstaking care with which Rabelais made revisions and alterations in subsequent editions of his works. Given her findings and the fact that Nasier's inconsistencies remain uncorrected through all the editions of *Gargantua* published under Rabelais's supervision, one is very much forced to come to the conclusion that these inconsistencies are in the narrative because Rabelais consciously wanted them to be there.

12 This passage has also been the subject of considerable critical commentary. Jean paris (*Rabelais au futur*, pp. 111-126) and Michel Beaujour (*Le jeu de Rabelais* [Paris: L'Herne, 1969], pp. 160-169) both interpreted it as a flat declaration by Rabelais of the contingency of the signifier/signified bond (i.e., as ironic). On the other hand, Screech has assembled considerable historical documentation to argue the opposite ("Emblems and Colours: The Controversy Over Gargantua's Colours and Devices," in *Mélanges d'histoire du XVI^e siècle offerts à Henri Meylan*, Travaux d'Humanisme et Renaissance, CX [Geneva: Droz, 1971], pp. 65-80). All of these critics treat the passage as a direct statement about language by the author, rather than as one of Rabelais's ways of presenting his narrator. (This latter approach is demonstrated by Defaux in his article cited in footnote 9 above.)