“Oncques n’y prindrent mal”: prophylaxis and the plague scenes in Rabelais’ *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* – from action to reception

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“The title of this article, “Oncques n’y prindrent mal”, reproduces a citation from the first lines of chapter xxv of the editio princeps of Rabelais’ Gargantua1. It is the culmination of the passage begun in the closing lines of chapter XXIV in which Picrochole leads an assault against Gargantua’s shepherds. The following citation contextualizes the title while uniting the two passages, leaving out added storyline and the chapter break, retaining registers (common to both), borrowed from various war and plague narratives:

[Ch. XXIV] Adoncques sans ordre et mesure prindrent les champs les uns parmy les autres, guastant et dissipans tout par ou ilz passoient, sans espargner ny pouvre ny riche, ny lieu sacré, ny prophane, emmenoient beufz, vaches, taureaux, veaulx, genisses, brebis, moutons, chevres et boucoz: poulles, chapons, poulletz, oyzons, jards, oyes, porcs, truyes, guorretz, abastans les noix, vendangeans les vignes, emportans les seps, croullans tous les fruictz des arbres. C’estoit un desordre incomparable de ce quilz faisoient. Et ne trouverent personne quelzconques leur resistast, mais un chascun se mettoit à leur mercy [...]. [Ch. XXV] Tant feirent et tracassèrent en pillant et larronnant, qu’ilz arriverent à Seuillé : et detrousserent hommes et femmes, et prindrent ce qu’ilz peurent: rien ne leurs feut ny trop chaud
ny trop pesant. Combien que la peste y feust par la plus grande part des maisons, ilz
entroient par tout, et ravissoient tout ce qu'estoyt dedans, et jamais n'en print
dangier. Qui est cas assez merveilleux. Car les curiez vicaires, prescheurs,
medicins, chirurgiens et apothecaires, qui alloient visiter, penser, guerir,
prescher, et admonester les malades, estoient tous mors de l'infection et ces
diables pilleurs et meurtriers oncques n'y prindrent mal. Dont vient cela messieurs?
pensez y je vous pry.:

2 The sense of the citation, “never did they fall ill”, or “never did any evil befall them”
(or yet, the literal rendering, “never took they [any] evil from it”), recalls the
commonplace assertion in times of epidemic that the worst of society, here in question,
always seem to survive, with the evident underlying sentiment that the best of society
often tend to die.

3 Given that contemporary theologians interpreted the plague as an expression of divine
fury, and thus a “marvel” sent by God, and that writers of plague treatises reminded
their readers of this topos, any reflection on epidemics might fall within its confines.
Rabelais knew this, which likely explains why he acknowledges the “rather marvelous”
aspect of the particular “case” (the universal death of the good) or absence of such a
“case” (the universal survival of the bad) that he is describing. Responding to
humanity’s sins, God, furious, simply decides who dies and who lives, and that the bad
survive, while the good die, is indeed marvelous. Still, the acknowledgement of a divine
cause, subsequent to all other causes, is often relegated to the beginning of plague
treatises, quickly giving way to in-depth development of secondary causes, because,
ultimately, caregivers such as “curates”, “vicars”, “preachers”, “doctors”, “surgeons”
and “apothecaries” recognize their own agency and justify their care for patients and
administration of various prophylactic measures through the argument that to ignore
any means offered them is an affront to God.

4 In a similar vein to the understanding of a primary (divine) cause, M. A. Screech has
suggested that “the plague is not the work of God and his saints; it is the work of the
Devil who knows how to look after his own in this world, of which he is Prince”. For
him, the “thieves” and “murderers”, who do not necessarily take any sort of reflected
prophylactic measure, would not ever need to since their assurance in the Devil’s
intervention excludes any other form of preventative “treatment”, of “precautionary
action”. Gérard Defaux, who cites Screech, excludes altogether the primary cause
evoked in medical treatises. For him, the “thieves” and “murderers” at war with
Picrochole are metaphorically the plague: if “war is pestis, the ‘diables pilleurs et
meurtriers’ cannot catch what they have already – what they are already”. Being
simply metaphorical, and thus of the domain of literature, his individual “plagues”
would not need to worry about “preventing the disease”, about any prophylactic
measure belonging to the domain of plague treatises. But Rabelais was a medical
doctor. He knew his plague literature and treatises. It is therefore probable that he was
playing more here with his knowledge of prophylaxis than Screech’s and Defaux’s
arguments allow for; that he too moved his subject beyond primary (divine or
diabolical) causes; that he linked elements of his medical knowledge to his metaphor.

5 Similar to the model of plague treatises, Rabelais’ narrative evokes a brief theoretical
reflection (the marvelous case, and thus the divine cause), before quickly advancing to
an empirical assertion (that the good die while the bad survive). He then asks his reader
to give this some solid thought: “where does this come from? think about it, I pray you”. What
secondary, empirical, causes might be the reason for such an assertion? What
prophylactic measures, if any, do the “thieves” and “murderers” take, which the
caregivers ignore, in order not to “fall ill” in Rabelais’ Gargantua?

The response to this question resides in part in Rabelais’ hybridization of various type
figures recorded to exist in time of plague, copied from various narratives, such as
“thieves” and “spoilers”, the morally lax (“lascivious” and “voluptuous”), “drinkers”,
“rejoicers”, “singers”, “laughers”, “bafflers”, the “unruly” and the “excessive” – none
of whom are observed to die. These figures can be found in varying degrees in two of
the most cited sources of plague literature of all time: the plague narrative in Book II of
Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War8 – even though it is noteworthy to recall that nearly all
the Athenians during the war are claimed to be carried away by the epidemic despite
the precautions they choose to follow9; and the introduction to the First Day of
Boccaccio’s Decameron10. The assertion that the best of society tend to die in times of
plague can also be found in lesser-known plague writings such as Thomas Le Forestier’s
treatise, Le Regime contre epidimie et pestilence11, which Rabelais seems not only to have
known, but to have known quite well12.

In the case of Thucydides and Boccaccio, the assertion makes scientific, epidemiological
sense. Healthy individuals who avoid contaminated individuals are logically less
susceptible of falling sick than the healthy “curates”, “vicars”, “preachers”, “doctors”,
“surgeons” and “apothecaries” who in Rabelais’ novel come to their aid. But Rabelais’
“thieves” and “murderers” come in direct contact with goods belonging to plague
victims as well as plague victims themselves – perhaps just as close contact as those
who offer them aid. Is Rabelais therefore attempting to inform his reader that theft and
murder are the surest of prophylactic measures an individual might take in time of
contagion? Such a concept would be scandalous. Likewise, the villainous characters’
immunity against the disease is also scandalous since Boccaccio’s “mockers” represent
the immoderation to which are opposed the ten joyous and civil characters who choose
to retire to a villa outside of Florence, thereby avoiding its spread, and their own death.
But then again, Rabelais tends to relish such scandals. In the chapter on his “manners
and ways” in Pantagruel, and in the scenes leading up to and during the assault against
the Almyrodes both inside and outside the giant’s throat, Panurge likewise never once
appears to be at risk of catching the plague, though he too murders by sowing the
disease, manipulating a concoction and foods that cause it, and offers no evidence of
following the slightest prophylactic measure at all.

Through this burlesque, paradoxical atmosphere – where evil seemingly prevails over
good; where excessive looting in time of war and plague guarantees prophylactic
nutritional measures and prevails over moderation; where the parody of prophylactic
medicines leads to a contaminative unguent (anti-prophylaxis) that in turn becomes a
purgative; where a giant’s excessive indulging in mouton, pork, mustard and garlic at
once kills, of the plague, massively in the microcosm and purges him, of that same
plague, individually in the macrocosm – Rabelais achieves two of his finest lessons in
prophylaxis: making his readers laugh – and remaining joyous is an excellent
prophylactic measure, as readers of plague literature such as Rabelais well know13;
while making them think – which is an essential lesson in these passages concerning
the plague, as well as all Rabelais’ works, perhaps his ultimate prophylaxis.
Thucydidean and Boccaccian prophylaxis in *Gargantua* (1535)

Immediately prior to the plague narrative in Book II of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, the Peloponnesians enter into Attic country to set up camp before beginning at once to *pillage* and *spoil* the country. Although he translated Herodotus, from whose work he often borrows, Rabelais undoubtedly also knew Thucydides’ work, perhaps in the original, but undoubtedly in Claude de Seyssel's 15th-century French translation, *L'Histoire de Thucydie Athenien*, first printed in 1527. He reproduces variations of Seyssel's verbs (“pilloient” and “gastoient”) in his own short plague narrative in *Gargantua*, reconstructed above (“guastant”, “pillant” / “pilleurs”). He then creates his joyous cornucopia thanks in part to the repetition of at least three homoioteleutons – “dissipans” (A), “abastans” (A), “vendangeans” (A), “emportans” (A), “croullan” (A), “feirent” (B), “tracasserent” (B), “larronnant” (A), “detrousserent” (B), “prindrent” (B), “entroient” (C), “ravissoient” (C), the resonant echoes of which perhaps allow him to emphasize stylistically his echoing of past (plague) narratives. He also adds those whom the “thieves” and “murderers” do not forget to devastate: “ny pouvre ny riche”, the concept of which comes from the passage dealing with the moral delinquency into which the masses fall in time of plague in *L'Histoire de Thucydie Athenien*, and which is confirmed in a similar passage in the *Decameron*; “ny lieu sacré, ny prophane”, the concept of which equally appears in the selfsame passage in the *Decameron*. He moreover adds what the thieves steal: his exaggerated list of animals, as well as the earth's fruits: “noix”, “vignes”, “seps”, “tous les fruicts des arbres”.

Rabelais pillages the title examples of each of his five animal families from a passage further along in Boccaccio's narrative (oxen, asses, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens and dogs), leaving out two of the families and inverting the order of two others while exaggerating his scene by specifying male, female, son and daughter: “beufz, vaches, taureaux, veaulx, genisses, brebis, moutons, chevres et boucqs: poulles, chapons, pouletz, oyzons, jards, oyes, porcs, truyes, guorretz”. The bovine, ovine, caprine and poultry groups follow a similar order in both works, albeit Rabelais suppresses the asinine group and displaces the porcine group to the final position. This slight shuffle is not a surprise since it completes Rabelais’ list with one of the groups that “engender” the most “optimal blood” among meats – the second best (or other best) group being beef – according to Galen in his treatise *De alimentorum facultatibus*. Rabelais thereby creates bookends of the strongest possible meats that his “thieves” and “murderers” will need to eat to sustain themselves during their wartime “exercises” of theft and murder, just as they are necessary for the “athletes” (or warriors) whom Galen evokes as exemplary proof of his argument, and whom he also cites between his examples of pork and beef. The thieves’ theft, therefore, of “beef”, “mouton”, “goat”, “pork” and “poultry” is a calculated prophylactic measure. As is their deliberately leaving behind Boccaccio’s “donkeys” and, above all, “dogs”. “Thieves” and “murderers”, they appear nevertheless aware (Rabelais is aware) that ancient and contemporary medical doctors, such as Galen (who held a certain repugnance for the idea of eating donkey or dog meet) and Rabelais himself (who quite expressly left them out of his list) would neither want to eat nor advise eating donkey or dog.

The malevolent “gasteurs” and “pilleurs”, of Seyssel’s translation of Thucydides, amalgamate in Rabelais' text with the “poor” and “miserable” country “laborers”,

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described by Boccaccio, who, having grown as “lascivious” (voluptuous) in their customs as the “city dwellers”, “consume”, rather than keep from danger, whatever is readily available for them to eat – and it is plausible that Rabelais’ gerund “dissipans” originates in Boccaccio’s infinitive “consumare”. Such consuming in Boccaccio’s narrative results in the “oxen”, “asses”, “sheep”, “goats”, “pigs”, “chickens” and “dogs” of the country simply being left to wander from their homes, erring aimlessly through the fields. Here, Boccaccio’s type figures are morally lax pleasure seekers who have grown lazy; but they are not necessarily malevolent. The “gasteurs” and “pilleurs” (Thucydides) amalgamate however with these “lascivious city dwellers” and “countryfolk” (Boccaccio) through the intermediary of the “lascivious” and “voluptuous” individuals cited further along in Thucydides’ narrative, who believe “it to be all the same to do evil or good, given that the good people died just as well as the bad”. Here, Thucydides’ type figures are morally lax pleasure seekers who have grown lazy; and they are indeed malevolent. Finally, the “gasteurs” and “pilleurs” (Thucydides’ transition from war narrative to plague narrative), the “lascivious” and “voluptuous” (Thucydides’ plague narrative), the “consumers” / dissipaters and the “lascivious city dwellers” and “countryfolk” (Boccaccio’s plague narrative) amalgamate with the egoists cited earlier in Boccaccio’s plague narrative who, rather than remain sober or, like some, flee to the countryside, “affirm on the contrary that there is no more certain medicine for such a great evil than to drink a lot and rejoice, singing for any reason, satisfying their appetites upon anything they wish, laughing, and mocking anything that happens, going now to one tavern, now to another, living without rule or measure”.

Understanding the paratextual elements of this passage helps make Rabelais’ joke all the more comical. The “thieves” and “murderers” of Picrochole’s army (who are indebted to both Thucydides’ Peloponnesian War and Boccaccio’s Decameron) steal the very animals that would allow them to eat the exact meats they need in order to “exert” themselves (to exercise their bodies) during battle, while forbidding their adversaries to do so, which is an intelligent prophylactic measure. They moreover carry away male and female, mature and young – entire families of each group – which might be the key point of Rabelais’ list, since it would leave Picrochole’s adversaries at a durable loss if war were to continue. And while obtaining livestock is an intelligent immediate prophylactic measure, obtaining livestock that can reproduce more livestock is all the more durable. Still, Rabelais is not intending to portray his “thieves” and “murderers” as aware of, and adherent to, medical practices of his day, and it is rather their disregard for, or ignorance of, the most essential of prophylactic measures that he is underlining in this passage, and which makes for one of its finest jokes. Renaissance writers held dear the concept of a golden mean, an ideal position between two extremes, thus Boccaccio’s “modo” “et misura”, thus Rabelais’ “ordre et mesure”. Boccaccio’s ten narrators seek to follow this golden mean when leading a life of calm storytelling outside of the excesses taking place in time of plague in Florence. Gargantua seeks to follow (Rabelais seeks to underline) this same golden mean when, on “rainy” days prior to the Picrocholine War, he chooses to build a “beautiful and clear” fire to correct “the intemperance of the air”, while engaging in indoor intellectual and physical activities. While the theft of edible domestic animals is part of all looting whether linked to an epidemic or not, the excessiveness of the theft here matches the excessive disorder brought on due to an epidemic. Rather than follow the
golden mean, the “thieves” and “murderers” imitate epidemic excess – they act as micro-epidemics themselves – all at once in the exaggerated quantity of animals they steal, the reach of their infiltration (“ilz entroient par tout”), the destruction they cause (“ravisssoient tout”) as well as the quantity of death they cause among the helping groups (“tous mors”). The joke therefore is that despite their exhaustive excesses (“tout”, “tout”, “tous”), Rabelais’ diabolical characters universally survive the epidemic, which reminds the reader to what degree he is mocking the very concept of prophylactic measures in this passage. Nevertheless, Frère Jean, “by his prowess”, “defeats” “all those of the army who enter into” his abbey’s “enclosure, up to the number of thirteen thousand six hundred and two”\textsuperscript{28}. And he does this before the end of the chapter.

Ultimately, Rabelais underlines at once his characters’ fortuitous adherence to prophylactic measures and their complete disregard for, or ignorance of, them. His characters manage to steal the exact foods necessary (they steal all foods available) for consumption to remain healthy during battle. They engage in all sorts of excess rather than follow any golden mean, while nevertheless meeting the fate they deserve in the end – for while the plague does not kill them, Frère Jean does. Above all, Rabelais leads his reader to laugh, which in turn is good medicine, among the first of prophylactic measures, more useful against disease than all the theory on prophylaxis that a treatise of the same length as \textit{Gargantua} might offer its reader. Such is also the obvious intention of Panurge’s great success when, in two separate plague scenes in \textit{Pantagruel}, he sows the disease, voluntarily contaminating and murdering others, coming in direct contact with it, and yet “never” takes any “evil from it”.

**Panurge’s plague-sowing: anti-prophylaxis or prophylaxis? \textit{Pantagruel} (1532)**

Plague-sowers were once believed to target specific sites, such as public fountains\textsuperscript{29}; to be of a specific religion, namely Jewish; to belong to specific social classes, now poor, now noble; were unknown to city authorities; carried with themselves unspecified, however poisonous, powders and unguents\textsuperscript{30}. They were also often of a certain age – school-children or students, out for a laugh at others’ expense\textsuperscript{31}. Panurge, whose plague-sowing begins as the wicked childish prank of a Parisian student in chapter XII of the \textit{editio princeps} of \textit{Pantagruel} (“Des meurs et conditions de Panurge”), best fulfills the last of these possible criteria:

Et ung jour que lon avoit assigné à tous les theologiens de se trouver en Sorbonne pour examiner les articles de la foy, il fist une tartre bourbonnoyse composee de force de hailz, de galbanum, de assa fetida, de castoreum, destroncs tous chaux, et la destrampit de sanie de bosses chancreuses, et de fort bon matin engressa et oingnit theologalement tout le treilliz de Sorbonne, en sorte que le diable ny eust pas duré. […] et en mourut dix ou douze de peste, mais il ne sen souciolet pas.\textsuperscript{32}

Waking “very early in the morning to grease and anoint, theologically” (or “theologally”), “the whole trellis-gate of the Sorbonne” with this detestable unguent resembles what other youths are known to have done on holidays when they “entered the schools of the rue du Fourre, played” the game of “paume” and “made refuse”, in the middle of the 15th century, according to Pierre Champion\textsuperscript{33}. Rabelais knew this. His
revisiting of this passage in the definitive edition (1542), in which Panurge “anoists the whole pavement of the rue du Feurre”\[16\], prove it.

But Rabelais does simply not have Panurge sow the plague with common “refuse” as his precursors do. His mixture is a parody of prescriptions proposed in 15th- and 16th-century medical treatises as methods of prophylaxis; his “tartre bourbonnoyse” is rather a tarte bubonnaise, reminiscent both in substance and in name of buboes themselves. In its list of ingredients, the “galbanum” (“gumme, or liquor issuing out of the Syrian Ferula, or Fennell giant”\[35\]) is at once strong in odor, viscous and physically Pantagruelic in size. The “assa fetida (“stinking juyce, or gumme, which issues from the Laserwort”\[37\]) and “castoreum” (“stinking oyle of Bevers stones”\[38\]) reinforce the concoction in both consistency and foul odor. The “estroncs tous chaux” (“fecal matter, consistent and wet”\[39\]) is its major excipient, its loathsome bulking agent. As for the “hailz” (“garlics”), though recommended in 16th century medical treatises for “rustic” individuals\[40\], their use was considered poisonous to those living a life of “idleness”, which is doubtless the situation of the theologians targeted here. Finally, the “sanie de bosses chancreuses” (“pus [extract] of cankered buboes”) is its active principle, its death poison. The finished product is a mixture intending to cause the plague, which it does, rather than one to prevent it. Recognizably modeled upon 16th-century prophylactics, Panurge’s concoction is nevertheless an anti-prophylactic, intending not to preserve but to kill.

Still, the schoolchildren’s plague-sowing on the rue du Fourre does not in any durable, physical way hurt their schoolmasters and, albeit an historical account, the reader of literature can understand their plague more as a sign of the changing times – the new displacing the old – like the metaphorical “pandemic”, “Jes Grew”, of Ishmael Reed’s Mumbo Jumbo\[41\]. If Panurge’s plague-sowing is responsible for the death of “ten or twelve” theologians about whom he “does not worry”, for whom he “does not care a crumb”, the murder it causes is more likely intended to be understood metaphorically than literally. In this sense, Panurge’s mixture is not an anti-prophylactic modeled upon any of an innumerable quantity of prophylactics of the day, but rather a purgative medicine (both within the scene and in the effect that the scene is intended to produce upon the reader): it is the only means of affecting a conservative institution such as the Sorbonne, an institution capable of censoring the audacity and laughter that Panurge offers, here and elsewhere. And, once again, the paradox of a character who is brilliantly successful despite being a resolute partisan of the obscene, the socially unacceptable, the immoderate, the excessive, and despite making no effort whatever to follow the slightest prophylactic measure, brings enjoyment to the reader, which is once again excellent prophylaxis.

Finally, the reader might nevertheless envision Panurge’s manipulation of his substance as a prophylactic measure within the context of mithridatism: having come in close contact with the disease – having sown it –, he renders himself immune to it. If such is the case, it is no surprise that he does not fall ill in the passages that close Pantagruel when he provides the giant with food enough to make a plague reign with fury in his throat\[42\], causing the death of “more than twenty-two hundred thousand persons in eight days”\[43\].
Prophylaxis or contamination? macro- and micro-perspectives

19 If we might understand Panurge’s inability to fall ill with the plague as a natural result to self-mithridatizing, we might similarly understand Pantaguel’s inability to fall ill with it in the closing scenes of the novel as a natural result to certain foods that Panurge sends him it – “for it is so much simpler to preserve a man before he falls sick than it is to heal him when he is infected and nearly half-dead”, according to Thomas Le Forestier. The giant does however fall sick himself with what appears to be gonorrhea (“une chaulde pisse”) despite a lack of any logical link to it at all. On the macrocosmic level (that of the body of the giant), Panurge’s administration of such nourishment is an intelligent, if not caring, prophylactic measure – a primitive method of immunization. On the microcosmic level (that within the body of the giant), it causes a contamination of monumental proportions.

20 This first phase of the process of immunization or contamination begins during the wedding festivities of the once King Anarche, newly transformed, thanks to Panurge, into a “bon crieur de saule vert”:

Et deux jours après Panurge le maria avecques une vieille lanternière, et luy mesmes fist les nopces à belles testes de mouton, bonnes hastilles à la moustarde, et beaux tribars aux ailz, dont il en envoya cinq sommades à Pantaguel, lesquelles il mangea toutes, tant il les trouva appetissantes [...].47

21 Pantaguel indulges in an excessive dose of “mouton head” and pork, roasted with either “mustard” or “garlic”, which are both noted for having beneficial prophylactic or therapeutic properties when taken with moderation for robust individuals such as Pantaguel. As for the named meats, both also, as already noted, have nutritional value for the body, capable of aiding in the fight against disease for individuals who ingest them with moderation. But moderation is not the concern of a giant of Pantaguel’s excessive proportions – at least, not from a non-giant’s perspective. Thus, the ensuing plague remains unbeknownst to him, and yet kills an extraordinary however literally incalculable quantity of individuals in his throat.

22 The period of incubation – whether it be the time-lapse between the administration of the immunization and its side-effects or between the moment of contamination and the first symptoms of the disease – coincides with the time-lapse between the marriage dinner and the rainy day preceding the assault of the Almyrodes by Pantaguel’s army. Panurge brings the newly united couple to Pantaguel, who gives them “a little loge” to make their household. He then enters, with all his gang, “es terres des Dipsodes”, where all the inhabitants, except the Almyrodes, give themselves straightaway. During this second phase of the process of immunization or contamination, whether side-effects or signs of the disease, they remain imperceptible.

23 The third phase occurs when Pantaguel and his army are heading to storm the territory of the Almyrodes and are “seized” by either “a heavy shower of rain” (“une grosse houzee de pluye”), which is Alcofribas’ point of view, and which is coherent in that he shall soon witness the epidemic effects of the contamination upon entering the giant’s body; or by “a slight shower” (“une petite venue”), which is Pantaguel’s point of view, and which is also coherent since he shall soon feel the local side-effects of his recent gormandizing, whether gonorrhea or indigestion, but not the plague. In either case, the planet’s bad weather is a macrocosmic sign that marks a microcosmic reality –
either the onset of side-effects in the process of immunization against the plague or the proliferation of the plague itself in Pantagruel’s throat.

24 Foreboding the present danger, and finding no room left under the “shelter” that Pantagruel’s “tongue” has become, Alcofribas climbs over it “as well as he can”, and “enters into his mouth”. He walks a considerable amount of time, admiring “great rocks”, which resemble “Danish mountains, great prairies and forests”, and “strong and big cities”, talking to a cabbage planter and a man setting traps to catch pigeons. The cabbage planter is a prime case of microcosmic prophylaxis or anti-prophylaxis, depending upon one’s perspective – one of the most mischievous and perhaps unperceived jokes in the final chapters of *Pantagruel*. Alcofribas’ stumbling upon him is not arbitrary: “le brouet des choux laîche le ventre”, according to Arnaud de Villeneuve, who follows Galen but with an emphasis in French, from the Latin, on the concept of the “ventre” as a windy place, a place that stores wind. The planter of cabbage sells his product in the city of “Aspharage”, in the giant’s throat (his “gorge” or “gosier”). The cabbage therefore produces a broth in the giant’s esophagus, or stomach, which in turn releases the “winds” from his “abyss”, thereby increasing the quantity and perhaps quality of the plague stored up in the microcosm that he is. But it also allows him to purge himself of those same pestilent winds, which may otherwise have caused him personal harm. The cabbage planter therefore serves as a microcosmic complement to Panurge’s administration of a preventative against the plague to Pantagruel or to his sowing it, from the macrocosm. He either aids in preventing the giant from falling ill or is part of the cause of the general contamination.

25 When Alcofribas finally arrives at the gate of Aspharage, the process of immunization or contamination is in its fourth, full-blown stage:

Et la cause de la peste a esté pour une puante et infecte exhalation qui est sortie des abymes depuis na guiere, dont ilz sont mors plus de xxii. cens mil le personnes, depuis huyct jours. Lors je pense et calcule, et trouve que cestoit une puante alaine qui estoit venue de le stomache de Pantagruel alors quil mangea tant d’ailla de / comme nous avons dit dessus.

26 The narrator enumerates the demographic losses, which is commonplace at the close of any plague narrative, before reminding his reader of the initial cause of the disease: “a stinking breath that came from Pantagruel’s stomach at the time when he ate so much garlic sauce”. But, as we know, the giant is of a robust nature, and Panurge’s “aillade” never causes him much harm – which is not the case of the evidently far less robust creatures who make up the inhabitants of his throat. Whether intended or not, Panurge administers a prophylactic to the former while contaminating the latter and once again, “he does not worry about it”, which is humorous, and which is therefore, once again, excellent prophylaxis for Rabelais’ reader.

Pensez-y, je vous prie: the ultimate prophylaxis

27 Rabelais borrows type-figures from past plague narratives, who steal animals and murder type-figures from other past plague narratives, and the animals they steal are those whose meats offer them the nutritional value needed to battle against disease while they exert themselves in battle. He has Panurge (now a contaminator) cause a plague that instantaneously purges the Sorbonne of some dozen theologians (now a metaphorical healer), and he does so with a parodic concoction (anti-prophylaxis) of
preventative medicines (prophylaxis). He also has Panurge contaminate Pantagruel with a plague that wipes out a massive proportion of the inhabitants of his throat, but which equally acts as a preventive nourishment, a form of immunization against the disease, thanks to which he happily survives. These various paradoxes lead us to Rabelais’ finest evident lesson in prophylaxis: that there is no better means of guaranteeing oneself a long healthy life than laughter, “le propre de l’homme”. But there is another lesson in prophylaxis to be learned in these plague scenes of Gargantua and Pantagruel, perhaps the ultimate prophylaxis Rabelais could prescribe: abstract thought, which is also “le propre de l’homme”.

In two of the three plague scenes considered in this article, Rabelais directly evokes his narrator’s thought process or demands that we think: “Lors je pense et calcule, et trouve”, “Dont vient cela messieurs? pensez y je vous pry”. This incoherent disease – the plague of the 16th century – invites, demands our reflection. Alcofribas is informing his reader of a logical deductive process: “to think and to calculate, and to find” (the comma, an oblique in the 1532 edition, is essential), thereby once again putting into cause the dogmatic medicine of his time which assigned a cause to symptoms; thereby also asking his reader to think about other possible causes. If “laughter is proper to man”, so too is thought. Both are vital to having a long healthy life. Rabelais is therefore an excellent medical doctor by being an excellent romancer, bringing good health to his readers not through theory, but in practice: making us laugh, praying us to think, furnishing us with the prophylaxis that intellect is, which brings us pleasure, which gives us good health. And he does this thanks to books that he wrote nearly five centuries ago. Think about this, I pray you.

NOTES

2. Gargantua (1535), op. cit., f. F. [vi] v°-[vii] v°. Italics are mine in this citation; boldface is mine in all citations.


8. Thucydide, *L’Histoire de Thucydide Athenien, de la guerre, qui fut entre les Peloponnesiens et Atheniens*, translated by Claude de Seyssel, Paris, Josse Bade, 1527, f. LIX r°: “Et outre tous les maulx et dommaiges que fist celle peste, à l’occasion d’icelle commenga en nostre cité une mauvaise coutume qui s’est depuis estendue à plusieurs aultres choses plus grandes, pourtant que l’on n’a maintenant point de honte de faire des choses publicquement que l’on eust auparavant voulu estre secretes, pourtant que on les eust tenue à lascivite et à volupté. […] Ains tout ce que pour l’heure ilz trouvoient plaisant et delectable à l’appetit humain, ilz reputoient utile et delectable à l’appetito, che si potesse, et di cio che aveniva ridersi et beffarsi, essere medicina certissima a tanto male, et così, como il dicevano, mettevano in opera allor potere, il giorno et la notte, hora a quella taverna, hora a quell’altra andando bevendo, *senza modo, et senza misura*."

9. And that only a minimal amount of the population develops a form of immunity against it. See *ibid.*, f. LIX r° (which accords on this point with the original).


11. Thomas Le Forestier, *Le Regime contre epidemie et pestilence* (1495), op. cit., f. f ii: “Oultre plus que les medicins et cirurgiens sont gens au danger comme autres et plus largement à la raison de la frequentation et communication. Et pour éviter le danger et non sans cause ilz ne se veulent pas abandonner, sinon par amour, pitié et charité”.


13. See, for example, T. Le Forestier, *Le Regime contre epidemie et pestilence*, op. cit., f. c i: “Sur toutes les choses qui vous peuvent advenir […] gardez que vous soyez joyeux et prenez toujours vostre refection en toute joyeuseté […]”

14. For the influence of *L’Histoire de Thucydide Athenien* on the introductory chapters of Rabelais’ *Pantagruel*, see *La Peste à la Renaissance*, op. cit., p. 431-469.


17. One might wonder if this game of homoioteleutons in Rabelais’ *Gargantua* is – consciously or subconsciously – at the origin of a similar however more developed game in Paré’s “description” of the disease in the first chapter of his *Treatise on the plague*. On this point, see *La Peste à la Renaissance*, op. cit., p. 594-599, and the studies cited therein.

18. *Ibid.*, f. LIX v°: “Les pouvres gens ausquelle parvenoient les biens des riches, ne pensoient fors a les despendre bien tost en toutes choses de plaisir et de volupté.” For the *Decameron*, see the following note.

leggierc, perciò che ciascun (quasi non piu viver dovesse) haveva si come se, le sue cose messe in 
abbandono, di che le piu delle case erano divenute comuni, et cosi l'usava lo straniere, pure che 
ad esse s'avenisse, come l'havrebbe il proprio signore usate, et con tutto questo proponimento 
bestiale sempre gl'infermi fuggivano allor potere. Et in tanta affli ttione et miseria della nostra 
citta, era la reverenda auttorita delle leggi 
cosi divine come humane 
tutta per li ministri et executori di quelle, liquali, sí come glialtri huomini erano tutti o morti, o 
infermi, o sí di famigli rimasi stremi, che uficio alcuno non potean fare, per laqual cosa era a 
ciascuno licito, quanto a grado gliera dadoperare."

20. Ibid., f. 5 r°-v°: “Perche adivenne che 
i buoi, gliaisini, le pecore, le capre, i porci, i polli et i 
cani”.

21. Ibid. (further along in the same chapter), f. 77 r°-v°. “De Pedestrium animalium nutrimento”, f. 77 r°-v°.

22. Ibid. (further along in the same chapter), f. 83 v°: “[…] anzi in luogo di quelle, s'usavan o per li piu risa et motti, et festeggiar compagnevole […].”

23. Boccaccio, Il Decamerone (1527), op. cit., f. 3 r°-v° (see supra, note 10). See also, further along in 
the same narrative, f. 4 v°: “[…] anzi in luogo di quelle, s'usavan per li piu risa et motti, et
festeggiar compagnevole […].”

24. Rabelais, Gargantua (1535), op. cit., ch. XXII, f. F ii r°. “Oncques n'y prindrent mal”: prophylaxis and the plague scenes in Rabelais' G...

34. Rabelais, Pantagruel, Œuvres complètes, ed. cit., ch. xvi, p. 273: “Un jour que l’on avait assigné à yceuls se trouver en la rue du feurre, il feist une tartre borbonnoise [...].”


37. R. Cotgrave, A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues, op. cit., “Asse fetide”.

38. Ibid., “Castoreum”.


40. Ambroise Paré, Vingtdeuxiesme Livre, traitant de la Peste (1585), op. cit., ch. vii, p. VIII. XL: “Les auxx sont souverains aux rustiques et villageois [...]: au contraire ils nuisent aux delicats, comme femmes, enfans, et choleriques, et à ceux qui vivent en oysiveté, et qui ont le sang aisé à s’enflammer: partant à icheux les auxx seroyent poison, au lieu qu’ils sont medecine aux rustiques, ausquels tels remedes ainsi forts sont propres [...].”

41. Ishmael Reed, Mumbo Jumbo, New York, Doubleday, 1972, p. 4 et passim.


43. Rabelais, Pantagruel (1532), op. cit., ch. xxii, f. Q ii v°: “plus de xxii. cens mille personnes / depuis huyct jours.”

44. On this point, see G. Defaux’s edition of Pantagruel, ed. cit., p. 522, n. 19.

45. Thomas Le Forestier Le Regime contre epidemic et pestilence (1495), op. cit., f. d. i v°: “car trop plus est aise a preserver l’homme avant que il soit malade que il n’est à le guerir quant il est infect & pres que de demy mort [...].” See also the ingredients of the prescriptions proposed by Le Forestier (f. d. i r°) and Ambroise Paré, Vingtdeuxiesme Livre, traitant de la Peste (1585), op. cit., ch. IX, p. VIII. XLIII.

46. Ibid., ch. xxiii, f. Q iii v°, and repeated on the following page.

47. Ibid., ch. xxii, f. Q [i] r°-v°.


49. For mustard, see Ambroise Paré, Vingtdeuxiesme Livre, traitant de la Peste (1585), op. cit., ch. xxvii, p. VIII. LXXII: “Aussi la portion suyvante a esté experimentee avec heureux succez, et est principalement propre pour les rustiques. Prenez moustarde acre (et non faict de moust)
demi once, deslayez-la en vin blanc et un peu d’eau de vie, et y meslez le gros d’une febve de theriaque ou methridat : puis l’ayant beüe, se faut pourmener et suer, comme d essus est dict.” For garlic, see supra, n. 40.

50. Rabelais, Pantagruel (1532), op. cit., ch. xxii, f. Q ii r°.

51. Ibid., f. Q ii r°.

52. Ibid.

53. Arnaud de Villeneuve, Regimen sanitatis en françois. Souverain remede contre lepydimie Traictie pour congoistre les urines. Remede tresutile pour la grosse verole, Lyon, Claude Nourry, 1514, f. g. iii [6th page].


56. On the humanists well-known understanding of the term “stomach”, in its technical sense, as the esophagus according to the Greeks, see Romain Menini, “Mots de gorge”, art. cit., § 19.

57. Rabelais, Pantagruel (1532), op. cit., ch. xxii, f. Q ii v°.

58. Thucydides, L’Histoire de Thucydide Athenien (1527), op. cit., f. CV r°: “[…] il morut de celle peste plus de quatre mil et. iiii. c. combatans dordonnance. et de trois cens hommes de cheval sans le remanant du peuple qui fut inumerable.” Boccaccio, Il Decamerone (1527), op. cit., f. 5 v°: “[…] oltre a cento milia creature humane”.


RÉSUMÉS

Cet article examine trois scènes de peste tirées des deux premiers livres de Rabelais. La question que pose Alcofribas dans le chapitre XXV du Gargantua (1535) est essentielle : pourquoi les individus qui portent secours aux pestiférés meurent-ils tous, alors que les « pilleurs » et « meurtriers » ne tombent jamais malades ? Suivent-ils des mesures prophylactiques pour ainsi l’éviter ? Nous examinons ensuite l’usage ou le mésusage de la prophylaxie chez Panurge, le grand semeur de peste du Pantagruel (1532). Comment parodie-t-il les recettes des régimes prophylactiques afin de semer, et non de prévenir, la maladie ? Que fait-il pour entraîner une peste dans la gorge de Pantagruel tout en l’empêchant d’en tomber malade ?

This article considers three plague scenes in Rabelais’ first two books. The question that Alcofribas asks in chapter XXV of Gargantua (1535) is essential: why do the individuals who offer aid to the infected in time of plague all die, while the “thieves” and “murderers” never fall ill? Do they follow prophylactic measures to avoid it thus? We then examine the use or misuse of prophylaxis by Panurge, the great plague-sower of Pantagruel (1532). How does he parody recipes of prophylactic regimes in order to sow, and not prevent, the disease? What does he do to cause a plague in Pantagruel’s throat while also keeping him from falling ill?
INDEX

Keywords: plague-sowers, Thucydides, Boccaccio, Rabelais, prophylaxis
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