Rabelais Unsheathes the Book: The Linguistic Critique Offered by the Catalog of Saint-Victor’s

Brett Bodemer
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Abstract: In the seventh chapter of Pantagruel, written in 1532, François Rabelais seized on the relationship between titles and books to pose a serious linguistic challenge to the stability of the book and its tenuous role in supporting an architectonic system of knowledge. The chapter consists primarily of a disordered catalog of invented titles, and the author assures us elsewhere that if we wish to grasp his deeper meaning we should examine these titles closely. A first look shows us that he is mocking particular authors and titling conventions, while further exploration reveals the catalog as a whole to serve as a macro-critique of scholastic attempts to order and regiment knowledge. But his critique also operates on the micro-level of the title as a function of naming. A close examination of the titles suggests a disturbing continuum between instable names and stable things, and impugns the integrity of the system’s basic unit: the book. Attempts to make sense of Rabelais’ book-less titles impose the recognition that these titles only “parse” if we make conjectures about the alleged books. Books and titles are co-texts. Reflecting his partiality for linguistic views found in Plato’s Cratylus, Rabelais deploys his titles as models of the regressively self-referential nature of language. In the context of this chapter, focused on an ancient Parisian library, the inference is clear: books are not solid, static monuments, but porous and contingent entities subject to the vagaries of language.

Keywords: Books, Information Science, Libraries, Rabelais, Pantagruel, Titles, Titling

Introduction

In his 1994 *The Gutenberg Elegies: the Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*, Sven Birkerts bewailed the threat posed by electronic communications both to the book and to the practice of reading. He argued that books were moving from “center to margin” and that electronic media, interfering with the “single-focus requirement of reading,” were eroding the “stable hierarchies of the printed page” (200, 201). Birkerts’ critique has not changed much in fifteen years, as evidenced by this excerpt from his 2009 essay in *The Atlantic*:

Why … am I so uneasy about the page-to-screen transfer – a skeptic if not downright resister? Perhaps it is because I see in the turning of literal pages – pages bound in literal books – a compelling larger value, and perceive in the move away from the book a move away from a certain kind of cultural understanding, one that I’m not confident that we are replacing, never mind improving upon. I’m not blind to the unwieldiness of the book, or to the cumbersome systems we must maintain to accommodate it – the vast libraries and complicated filing systems. But these structures evolved over centuries in ways that map our collective endeavor to understand and express our world [italics in original]. The book is part of a system. And that system stands for the labor and
In this paper I will show how François Rabelais, in the seventh chapter of Pantagruel, posed more fundamental challenges to the book and its embeddedness in a system of knowledge. Rabelais also wrote in an era when book technology was in intense transition, and though his critique manipulated one feature of early modern book-production that had gained prominence – titling – the essential target was not format, but the intrinsic slipperiness of language. His ultimate weapon in undermining the scholastic view of books and reading was a satiric catalog in which the handling of imaginary titles offered both a macro and micro-critique. On the macro-level, the catalog challenged the system as a whole, while on the micro-level, suggesting a continuum between instable names and stable things, it impugned the system’s basic unit: the book.

To lay groundwork for Rabelais’ critique and reveal its persisting relevance, we can tease out several aspects of “book” implicit in Birkerts’ remarks above. First of all, we see that Birkerts’ book is an object. Its pages can be turned. Yet when Birkerts writes about the “turning of literal pages” he is also identifying the book as a format, that is, the codex. In essence “leaves bound together between two covers,” the codex started supplanting scrolls in the early Christian era (Kilgour 6) and became the congenial and ‘flippable’ format we all know today. The codex, in its printed and manuscript variants, is also what Rabelais knew.

When Birkerts writes of the book as part of a system of “the labor and taxonomy of human understanding” he moves onto different rhetorical ground than when writes of the book as an object. Here, when one “touches” the system via the book, the touch becomes figurative: the book touched in this sense is no longer a mere object, but intellectual content organized in a particular way, and intercalated in a system with other such entities. It is neither random in its own structure nor randomly situated within a larger structure. These recognitions of organizational principles confer on the container an emblematic status: it embodies all those organizational features and the reading practices that have contributed to their construction and perpetuation. For nearly two thousand years the principal container sustaining these reading practices has been the codex. The book as object, with the codex as format, then, has become an icon, an affective entity that puts one in touch with a more enduring reality. It is not quite clear in Birkerts’ view which of these aspects (object, format, intellectual structure, emblem, or iconic link to the whole) makes his “book” so essential to the perpetuation of reading for “cultural understanding.” It is clear, however, that he expects the loss of such reading to accompany the demise of the codex. For him, codices, and traditional assembles of codices, seem to establish and substantiate a stable intellectual reality. That is why Rabelais and his satiric set of imaginary codices attributed to a germinal scholastic library are so pertinent to our current concerns.

Chapter Seven of Pantagruel

Pantagruel, published in 1532, was the first of several satirical novels written by François Rabelais. The novel’s hero is the giant Pantagruel, and its seventh chapter can be read as an indictment of learning passed on via books. The chapter brims with titles, some real but most invented, with the bulk of the chapter consisting of a mock-catalog of titles purportedly seen
in the Library of the Abbey of Saint-Victor. This catalog was privileged by Rabelais himself, for in the prologue to the second novel, *Gargantua*, we are urged to pay retrospective attention to these comical titles, to look for the marrow inside them, and to consider them as boxes containing something “of quite other value than the box promised” (Frame 4). The narrator assures us that below the foolishness of these joyous titles lies something far more serious.

The chapter’s opening sequence gives us images of the futility of textual transmission. The hero has decided to visit the University of Paris, but first performs a marvel in Orléans. By virtue of natural strength he easily lifts a fallen church bell, even though the townspeople had been unable to lift the heavy bell for over two hundred years. The narrator here lists the titles of ancient works on engineering that the frustrated townspeople had consulted in their vain attempts, including books by Euclid, Archimedes, Vitruvius and Heron. The last-named refers to Heron of Alexandria, and thus points us to mother of all textual futility, the once magnificent but now dissipated library of Alexandria.

Once in Paris, Pantagruel takes up residence and diligently studies “all the seven liberal arts” (Frame 153). A few sentences later, we reach the list of titles attributed to the Library of the Abbey of Saint-Victor. The announcement sounds promising but once we start reading the French and Latin titles, we recognize the sarcasm in the opening fanfare: “And he found the Library of Saint-Victor most magnificent …” (Saulnier, *Pantagruel* 37, trans. mine). To render a quick flavor, here are three titles:

*The Elephant Balls of the Worthies*
*The Art of Farting Decorously in Society*, by Master Hardouin
*The Mustard-Pot of Penitence* (Frame 153)

This sample affirms the claim in the *Gargantua* prologue that these titles bear the appearance of being “mockeries, tomfooleries, and merry falsehoods” that might easily be taken as nothing more than “derision and jest” (Frame 3, 4). M. A. Screech assures us that “a large part of the laughter is provoked by the poor quality of the very doggy Latin” (62). One finds deformations of common Latin titles, such as *Ars praedicandi* (The Art of Preaching) turned into *Ars pettandi* (The Art of Farting) (Ouy, *Manuscrits* 331). There are deformations of actual authors, such as Tartaret (Boulenger 218), rendered into Tartaretus, roughly “Shit-tacus.” We also find numerous French titles that mimic the titling idioms of “old drivellers” (Saulnier, *Enquête* 100) whose works were reprinted and still “read in the 1520s and 1530s” (Screech 61). Rabelais is clearly ridiculing certain types of books and particular authors. He is also clearly ridiculing titling idioms and tendencies of his time, for titling stood “more on ceremony after the invention of printing” (Levin xxv) and printing itself had prompted the advent and development of the title-page (Eisenstein 53; Hirsch 3; Febvre 84). I suggest, however, that these miscellaneous targets, though both fascinating and intentional, are all incidental.

**Macro-Critique: Saint-Victor’s, Books, and the Organization of Knowledge**

A macro-critique can be discerned in his inventory if we consider the titles as a whole. In the critical literature, this list has come to be known as the “catalog of Saint-Victor’s” but it might equally well be called an anti-catalog. It is unclassified, unorganized, and gives no
information about locations. In later editions, Rabelais added more titles, some of which included bits of catalog-speak such as the condition of a book or the number of volumes, but no critic yet has discovered any order to the listing of the titles. Secondly, Rabelais had larger and more famous libraries to choose from, so we might justly wonder why he attributed these titles to the holdings of Saint-Victor’s. To understand the broader target, and his indictment of a general system of reading and books, we should pause to look at the intellectual heritage of this institution.

Saint-Victor’s antedated even the University of Paris (Ouy, Histoire 86). Founded by William of Champeaux, a distinguishing feature of this Abbey from its inception was its emphasis on studying and teaching (Michaud 400). The figure that would later become famous as Hugh of Saint-Victor arrived shortly after its founding (Chase 30; Knowles 143). Some consider his De sacramentis christianae fidei to be the first of the comprehensive scholastic treatises that came to be known as a summa (Chase 31), while others see it as the “grandmother of all the Summae,” with the honor of grandfather going to the famous logician Abelard (Knowles 143). Tracing this genealogy one step further, William of Champeaux, as founder of the Abbey of Saint-Victor and as Abelard’s former Master, can be seen as great-grandfather of the summae on both sides.

In 1120 Hugh of Saint-Victor wrote the Didascalicon, a small but very influential book (Besson 17-18). Intended as a guide for new students at Saint-Victor’s, it offered a revised, comprehensive outline of education (Taylor 3). In this text, Hugh posited Philosophy as a single whole, encompassing all other arts, including the previously lowly-esteemed mechanica. Reviving the ancient notion of the seven liberal arts, he placed them in a larger context (Guarda 374). Since in his arrangement all knowledge can be conceived of as an ensemble, everything is theoretically amenable to classification in a corresponding schema (Guarda 374). Hugh is credited with laying key groundwork for medieval and even modern library classification (Guarda 374; Besson 8-17). With his conceptions of knowledge, reading, and the seven liberal arts, Hugh of Saint-Victor influenced several generations, generations that labored to increase the production of books, created many new libraries (Guarda 374) and transformed the practice of reading.

Another prominent scholastic figure with early connections to Saint-Victor’s was Peter Lombard (Ouy, Manuscrits 39). Lombard was widely known for his gloses on the Psaltery and the Bible, and for his Libri sententarium, a compilation of earlier auctoritates that reigned as a standard theology textbook until the middle of the sixteenth century (Rosemann 84). Though the glose, or Biblical commentary, was by no means new, twelfth-century scholars produced them with greater intricacy than ever before, and Lombard’s were among the most “highly developed” (Parkes 116). His Libri sententarium adapted many features of the glose: rubrics, sub-headings, and red source-notes in the margins. Such complex, on-the-page appliances were both symptoms and instruments of a shift in the practice of reading, for whereas the monastic lectio involved “steady reading to oneself, interspersed by prayer,” the newer scholastic lectio, “involved a more ratiocinative scrutiny of the text and consultation for reference purposes” (Parkes 115). Accordingly, texts found themselves divided into books, chapters, and paragraphs, and were equipped with running titles, analytical tables of contents, indexes and footnotes, all of which made them easier to search (Parkes 135).

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1 Knowles (171) and Häring (191) present his attendance at the school as fact, while Colish leaves it as undecided (17-21).
not only accommodated the newer style of reading but physically embodied its motivating principles.

Hugh of Saint-Victor and Peter Lombard can be seen as root and stem of a concerted structure of knowledge. This conception informed the shape of education, and its governing principles came to be inscribed in its palpable intellectual products: its codices. These, in turn, were arrayed according to hierarchical strategies that further embodied those principles.

On a macro-level, then, Rabelais’ “scrambled encyclopedia” (Blanchard 87), with no order whatsoever, challenged the notion that knowledge could be ordered, and indicted the library of the very institution whose eponymous intellectual had pioneered faceted library classification.

Micro-Critique: Titles as Naming

At the micro-level of the title, on the other hand, Rabelais challenged the same system from below. His handling of titles as a genre, if we accept his invitation to look inside them, involves us in, and permits us to see, their sheer linguistic trickiness. Titles are not to be trusted as true representations. Worse, they do not stand apart, but bear a contiguous relationship to what they purport to name. This would not be so bad, except that this relationship is reciprocal, and books are then tethered to titles in a relationship that is neither stable nor trustworthy. To explain what I mean, I will explore titling in its linguistic aspect as a naming function, and then examine two titles of the most common type in Rabelais’ catalog.

Titling is a form of naming, and an important text for examining Rabelais’ views on language is Plato’s Cratylus (Guana 39). If we consider three aspects of the Cratylus - the primacy of thing to name in the order of truth, the representational relation of name to thing, and the ultimate circularity of names – it is possible to view Rabelais’ titles as microcosms of problems raised in the dialog. Rabelais’ titles suggest an abrogation of the proposed divide between an order of instable and unreliable names and an order of stable, truthful things, bringing the correlate implication that instability then inheres in both.

In the Cratylus, Socrates mediates a dispute between Cratylus and Hermogenes. Cratylus holds an extreme version of the view that names bear a natural truth; that he who knows names also knows the things expressed by them (435d). Hermogenes, on the other hand, holds an extreme version of the counter-view, and is convinced that names are only correct through “conventional agreement” (384d). Socrates at first appears to lean more towards Cratylus. He posits a more nuanced view in which things are stable, and names, while variable, admit of bearing truth (391b).

But then Socrates distances himself from the natural position of Cratylus by presenting an exaggerated version of it. He posits hypothetical legislators who knew the true natural names of all things and were able to put them into sound and syllable (389d). He asserts that such primordial imposers of names must have been “considerable persons” (401). He and Hermogenes go on a tour of proper names that should demonstrate this relation – names of gods, rivers, and the like – but in many cases the relation is only established through tortured etymology. While names as instruments should characterize what they name, Socrates points out that some names may be wrongly assigned (431b).

Socrates then reverts to a stronger version of the view in which things and names belong to separate orders, things being stable, primary and true, while names are variable and secondary. He privileges the former as a source of knowledge (439b), and cites two weaknesses
of language in support of this preference. The first is the circular self-substantiation of lan-
guage, the fact that names can only be judged by means of other names (438d). His second 
indictment applies to the analysis of language, for one cannot reduce names farther than “the 
names which are the elements of all other names and sentences” (422b).

As instances of naming, Rabelais’ titles highlight several of these issues. If he had not 
invited us to take the titles seriously, we might even be tempted to look past them. For instance 
one might dismiss the issue of true or false representation by simply declaring that Rableais’ 
titles name nothing and therefore cannot represent anything either truly or falsely. But as he 
has asked us to look closely into his titles, we should not sidestep the problem so glibly. If 
we extend our consideration to the roles of titles, we are not on spurious ground, especially 
in thinking of an era when book-selling was expanding its repertoire of marketing techniques. 
As one French critic bluntly put this aspect of titling a century later, titles are “pimps” of a 
work (Grivel 174). If we took Rabelais’ titles as naming actual books, then we would need 
to be on guard for their truth as representations, and the issue in respect of the fictitious titles 
is certainly latent.

It might also be tempting to dismiss the issue of a title’s relation to a book by pointing 
out that titling is an especially privileged form of naming. Each new book, after all, offers 
a chance to create a neologism (Ricardou 143). In fact, the title-giver is in the lofty situation 
of Socrates’ primordial imposer of names, and is able to invent a proper noun that not only 
identifies, but characterizes the nature of the named. Surely, then, a title stands on more 
solid ground than most names.

But it is another aspect of titling that proves more troublesome and troubling. Titles not 
only identify and characterize, but are linked to texts interpretively. Remigius of Auxerre in 
the tenth century felt that a title was “the key to the work which followed it,” (Minnis 19) 
and that a title illuminated a work in the same way that the sun illuminates the world. This 
has a curious implication. Remove the sun from the world, and the world will not be the 
same. Just so, remove the title, and the reading of the text will not be the same. More disturb-
ingly, however, this illuminative relation operates in the other direction, for often the 
meaning of a title can only be grasped through a reading of the text. Thus, titles are not inde-
pendent, but should be characterized as co-texts (Ricardou 144).

This, I believe, is the hidden point Rabelais is trying to get us to see by having us look inside 
his titles. The ramifications are catastrophic for a view of books, knowledge and 
reading as comprising a stable structure. If the book does not stand separate from its name, 
then it is subject to the instable and unreliable order of names. And if the building block of 
the structure of organized knowledge and reading – the book – is undermined by its own 
name, the integrity of the rest of the structure is also cast into doubt.

I will demonstrate the difficulty and its scope by grappling with two of the titles of the 
most common type found in the catalog of 1532. First: Le Creziou de Contemplation [The 
Crucible of Contemplation]. Here we have two nouns, marked with the capitalized spelling 
conventions of proper nouns, in the basic syntactical construction of “The X of Y.” When 
we assay the leap from grammar to semantics, we encounter various ambiguities. Though 
the definite article carries its own gray areas (universality vs. particularity) the core problem 
for us lies in a two-letter preposition: in French, de and in English, of. ²

² Of, when used to indicate possession, is a periphrastic construction derived from French. The French de, traceable 
to the Latin de, among its various functions, can mark the point of origin or departure (“je viens de Paris”) [I come
Described grammatically, “The X of Y” construction is a noun phrase with a modifier prepositional phrase following the head noun (Celce-Murcia 303). It can indicate possession, agency, material, or even destination. To probe these semantic possibilities we can first look at a well-known Latin title of this type: *Malleus maleficarum*, or The Hammer of Witches. If this title is taken as indicating possession, it suggests that there is a hammer and that this hammer belongs to witches. If taken as indicating agency, it suggests that there is a hammer – one that has been made by witches. If taken as indicating material, it suggests that there is a hammer, and that it has been made out of witches. Yet it is only the text of this Inquisitor’s manual that reveals which one is intended: that there is a hammer and it is meant to be used against witches. It is also the text that identifies itself as that hammer (Levin xxvi).

So what do we find when we try to parse meaning from *The Crucible of Contemplation*? Is there an entity, contemplation, that possesses a crucible? Or is contemplation an agent that has created a crucible? Or is there a substance, contemplation, that has been forged into a crucible? Or perhaps, as with the *Malleus Maleficarum*, the alleged work itself is the crucible. Turning attention to a second title of the same type, *La Couillebarine des Preux* [The Elephant-testicle of the Valorous, trans. mine], we find it even more difficult to parse, for the first noun is one of Rabelais’ neologisms. By frequently proposing such “no-things” Rabelais not only comically subverts the titling tendency to reify through noun formations, but invites any rigorous reader into an attempt to understand what might be meant. Is there such a thing as an elephant-testicle, and does it belong to the valorous? But, then, why only one elephant-testicle to be shared by all? Perhaps elephant-testicle is a mass, qualitative noun, and might be more accurately translated as *The Macho of the Valorous*, or more medically, *The Testosterone of the Valorous*. Or should we take the preposition as one of agency, the elephant-testicle having been created by the valorous? Or have the valorous been compacted together and made into an elephant-testicle? Or maybe the elephant-testicle is something to be wielded by or against the valorous?

To decide between the alternatives, we would need recourse to the named text. If such a text existed we might illuminate it by way of our title, or conversely, our title by the text. But our co-text has no text. There is no relation of name to thing, because we have nothing but the name. Though it might be objected (as noted before) that this void-behind-the-billboard is irrelevant because Rabelais’ titles are satirical in intent, the effort to understand the titles has raised a doubt with huge implications, and the persistent repetition of this pattern (25 out of 26 French titles in the 1532 edition) begs us to consider the status of titling beyond the imaginary catalog. Can one truly posit for titles and text the clear separation of name and thing as proposed by Socrates? If a title requires a book to make sense, or conversely, if a book requires a title to make sense, then one no longer has thing and name, but rather a circular loop: what purports to be a name is a part of the thing it names and what purports to be named merely forms the larger portion of its name. If name and named are of one order, the stability and truth associated by Socrates with the named is now compromised by the instability associated with names.

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from Paris], like a complement of material (une statue *de marbre*) [a statue of marble], or introduce a noun complement (Brunot 425-26). In the second half of the sixteenth century *de* as the chief element in the partitive construction became a real article (Brunot 226). The French *de*, in its turn, derived from the Latin *de*, which, even in early Latin translations of the Bible, was being put to new uses, for example, constructions of the type, “Le Dieu de majesté” instead of the traditional Latin adjective-formation, equivalent to “Dieu majestueux (Brunot 426).
Rabelais has opened a door whereby we may see that a name, even a privileged name such as a title, is no guarantor of stable truth. A text that has been named, and which, by its further transformation into a physical book, might seem to have achieved the “stability of the printed page,” is still challenged by its own name and subject to all the vagaries of language. Attempts to organize codices into libraries are contingent, and efforts to bind texts into annotated and indexed codices are fugitive. Released from the notion of the book as an integral organizing construct, what remains are myriad co-texts, loose as quicksilver.

Rabelais has shown us, contra the scholastics of any era, that reading was never as stable as it used to be.

References


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