Rabelais' Radical Farce:
A Comparative Analysis of
the *Ecolier Limousin* Episode
and the *Farce de Maître
Mimin Etudiant*¹

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Parmi les intertextes qui imprègnent les écrits de Rabelais, le théâtre de la farce a une fonction dont l'importance n'a toujours pas été suffisamment approfondie. Les histoires de Gargantua et de Pantagruel sont littéralement farcies de références au genre, et beaucoup d'épisodes dans les Chroniques sont structurés comme des farces. Rabelais apprécie énormément la farce et la connaissance intime qu'il en a imprègne la composition de son œuvre d'une façon importante. Le premier épisode farcesque dans l'œuvre rabelaisienne, la rencontre de l'écolier limousin (Pantagruel, chapitre 6), sert à illustrer cet assemblage de la farce théâtrale et de la satire humaniste que l'on retrouve à travers les écrits de Rabelais. En comparant cet épisode à la farce de Maître Mimin étudiant, nous explicitons le rapport entre les épisodes farcesques des Chroniques et la farce dramatique, soulignant non seulement comment Rabelais s'approprie la farce, mais de façon plus importante, comment il transforme et radicalise le genre en l'introduisant dans un nouveau contexte humaniste. Là où la farce châtie les écarts sociaux du protagoniste, sa démesure, au nom d'une norme conservatrice, les Chroniques censurent la démesure des institutions du statu quo telle que la Sorbonne, au nom d'un idéal humain et social. Il en résulte une forme nouvelle de farce, aussi bien qu'une nouvelle forme de satire humaniste.

**“Voilà de grandz motz!” (v. 142)
Farce de Maître Mimin Étudiant**

Almost a century ago, two articles appeared in a volume of *Revue des Études Rabelaisiennes*, by Gustave Cohen² and Emmanuel Philipot.³ Both articles centred on late medieval theatre and Rabelais—specifically on the theatre of farce and its role in Rabelais' work. Jelle Koopmans notes that Cohen's “Rabelais et le théâtre” “est resté pendant longtemps, malgré sa date

de publication (1911) [...], le dernier mot sur la question,”⁴ while stressing that there is much more to be said about this important influence on Rabelais’ work. The tales of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* clearly show that Rabelais had many ways of appropriating theatre into his work, but that he both radicalized and transformed it in the process.⁵ Rabelais was well versed in the theatre of farce, a knowledge that profoundly affected his work. To grasp the process by which he built this important corpus of performance-based, oral productions into his own written narrative is to understand a vital aspect of his literary project; the theatre of farce is a crucial subtext in understanding Rabelais’ work.

Rabelais’ use of dramatic farce offers a fascinating manifestation of cultural transferral. His books were written towards the end of a watershed era of this theatrical genre in France, from approximately 1450 to 1550. There remain over 150 extant French farces dating from this period, the most well known being the *Farce de Maître Pathelin*. Rabelais alludes almost two dozen times in his work to *Pathelin*, and as Koopmans has noted, “Rabelais cite soit directement soit indirectement, textuellement et librement, des centaines de passages [des farces], voire plus, parfois directement, parfois indirectement.”⁶ It is not a coincidence that in one of only two instances of authorial self-reference within the work, the text refers to a farce in which Rabelais took part while a medical student at Montpellier (*Tiers livre* ch. 34).⁷ Records confirm the autobiographical reality behind this, as Rabelais, like so many students in France, participated in a theatrical group that put on productions of farce such as *Celui qui espousa une femme mute*.⁸ These references point to an underlying farcical, theatrical spirit that informs Rabelais’ work. Moreover, farce becomes a central structuring mechanism for many of the episodes in *Gargantua* and the *Pantagrueline* chronicles.⁹

An overview of the way farce functions, both in its original dramatic format and, more importantly, in Rabelais’ books, illustrates the radicalization of this primarily conservative genre. Beyond the obvious example of generic transferral, as theatre is transcribed into prose, the radicalization of farce in Rabelais takes place on two primary levels. First, the subject matter is altered in important ways. The setting of farce is primarily a domestic one, with disputes between spouses and additional characters such as imbecilic servants and lascivious monks. This private, anonymous setting is replaced by the much more public, ideologically charged settings of Rabelais’ farce-like scenes. Second, the ethos of farce is conservative; the humiliating reversals that characterize the genre are done not to call into question social norms, but rather to reinstate them. Rabelais turns these comedic reversals on their head, and whereas in farce the victim is always someone who has transgressed the

status quo, Rabelais takes aim at established societal institutions in the areas of education, law, and theology, effecting humiliating reversals on characters who reflect these institutions.

The first farce-like scene in Rabelais' work, Pantagruel's encounter with the *écolier limousin* (*Pantagruel*, ch. 6), serves to illustrate a conflation of theatrical farce and humanist satire that helps define the author's work. Comparing this episode to a farce like *Maître Mimin étudiant* will serve to demonstrate the specific relationships between Rabelais' farcical episodes and dramatic farce,¹⁰ illustrating both how he appropriates farce into his work, and more importantly how he transforms and radicalizes it by introducing it into a new, humanist context.¹¹

An overview of this farce will help to illustrate some of the essential characteristics of the genre. The *Farce de Maître Mimin étudiant*¹² begins with a domestic crisis: a mother and father learn that their son, whom they have sent to school to become a lawyer, has altogether abandoned French for an incomprehensible form of kitchen Latin. Unable to make him communicate in French, Maître Mimin's mother devises a stratagem to return her son to his former state: since birds are domesticated by being caged, and can thus be taught to speak as well, she shuts him up in a bird cage. The mother's stratagem is a success and the farce ends with everyone celebrating Maître Mimin's linguistic reversion.

Likely dating from around 1480–1490, this farce was originally produced in Normandy, possibly in Rouen.¹³ While the play's protagonist—an ignorant student who pretends to be erudite—suggests that the dramatist and intended audience may have been students, André Tissier observes, “la farce de Maître Mimin n'est pas une farce écrite par des maîtres ou des écoliers pour être jouée dans un collège: le latin n'est ici que jargon. Le public n'a pas à comprendre ce latin; et le Magister prend soin d'annoncer ce que va dire Mimin ou d'expliquer ce qu'il dit. Cette farce pouvait être jouée devant n'importe quel public.”¹⁴ Whether this play was performed before a general audience or a more educated one, Mimin's ridiculous Latin is an inside joke for those urban collegians and future lawyers who both wrote and performed such farces.

Within the ethical economy of farce, Mimin is guilty of *dém mesure*, excess, or immoderation, an offense that stigmatizes all victims in farce. In exchanging his maternal tongue for Latin, he has disrupted family hierarchy and equilibrium. Mimin's parents have provided him the means for an education, and now their son's newly-acquired education is causing them to be alienated and displaced. Worse yet for the family's cohesion and continuation, his change now threatens a proposed marriage between Mimin and a neighbour's

daughter. Maître Mimin has overstepped his role as son and in doing so has removed himself from the traditional family structure. As his father Raulet explains to Mimin's future father-in-law, Raoul Machue, the reason they sent their son to his present teacher (*Magister*) was, "Affin qu'il gardast mieulx le sien / Qu'il peust susciter de nous deux" (vv. 81–2). "Susciter" here has the sense of "succéder," drawing attention to Mimin's eventual inheritance and future role in the family hierarchy.

Whatever his parents' motivations might have been for sending Maître Mimin to school, they were clearly of a practical nature. As his father explains, "C'estoit pour le mettre en pratique / Que je l'ay tenu à l'escolle" (vv. 23–4). "Pratique" implies both the practice of a profession and the practical motivation of the parents' investment. Both parents are now outraged: What could possibly be less practical than a son with whom they cannot even communicate? Rather than seeing his ability to speak Latin as progress, they see it as a threat. Maître Mimin's mother reacts to her husband's explanation that he sent his son to school to become a lawyer with this accusation: "Mais c'estoit affin qu'il affolle!" (v. 25). While his mother accuses Mimin of being deranged, his future father-in-law warns that it may be a sign of something more nefarious: "C'est danger qu'il ne face un cherme / Pour faire venir l'ennemy" (vv. 95–6). Mimin's father later asserts that his son is in some way possessed: "Le gibet¹⁵ y ayt part au lat[i]n!" (v. 223).¹⁶ Mimin's corrupted language is viewed as an indication of a greater perversion; linguistic *dém mesure* is a symptom or manifestation of a diabolical condition.

Mimin's parents' first stratagem to return their son to his former state is to show him his fiancée, who literally embodies what is most desirable about his previous life. This proposed solution is typical of the bawdy world of farce, where all forms of motivation are of a materialistic, often sexual nature. As the father Raulet explains to his wife why they must bring Mimin's fiancée along to see their son, "Car je croy ... / Qu'il parlera françoys à elle" (vv. 47–8). The fiancée's presence does at least cause a change in the subject matter of Mimin's language, if not its register. With her arrival, he abandons his comically haughty pseudo-scholarly talk for an earthier, physical language. As he says after kissing his fiancée,

Baisas.
Couchaverunt a neuchias,
Maistre Miminus anuitus,
Sa fama tantost maritus,
Facere petit enfant[c]hon. (vv. 218–22)

As can be seen by this representative passage, the “Latin” Mimin uses is atrociously bad. Besides the Latinate manipulations, the words are all French. Verbs are either not conjugated (“Facere”) or conjugated in the third person plural (“Couchaverunt”). Mimin’s Latin is a parody; the urban theatrical troupes that produced these farces were constantly poking fun at provincial country bumpkins by creating characters such as Mimin whose education produces laughable results.

Despite Mimin’s partial awakening, the seductive ploy still falls short, and a more drastic stratagem is required. To save their son, the solution the family arrives at is a humiliating one indeed. Rather than respect the intelligence and education of their son, through the use of a domesticating analogy they equate their problem with that of training a bird to speak. In the extreme world of farce, Mimin’s learning has threatened to transcend human limits, so in his punishment he must be reduced to the state of an animal. He has essentially become *foreign*, someone who stands outside of familial norms and established social order. He has forgotten his place in that order, and must be trained like an animal in order to relearn the part he must play.

Moreover, the humiliating solution proposed by Mimin’s mother enacts another of farce’s typical tropes in which characters’ actions remain anchored in the world of what Bakhtin terms the “bodily lower stratum,”¹⁷ a debasement that functions as a constant implicit parody of the contemporary courtly literature that espoused ostensibly lofty motivations and behaviour. Maintaining her central role, the fiancée fetches a birdcage in which to place Mimin. The incorrigible Latinist literally becomes the butt of the joke when his fiancée says, concerning the cage,

... que sa teste soit dedans,
Son nez, sa bouche avec ses dens,
Laissez aller le cul arriere (vv. 288–90)

Here Mimin’s body is literally divided between the intellectual (“que sa teste soit dedans”) and the physical (“Laissez aller le cul arriere”). This division serves a double purpose: it is the intellect that must be reformed, thus the cage traps and restrains this part of Mimin, while the humiliating position of the physical helps to ensure that the victim will be receptive on a physical as well as intellectual level. In typical farcical humour, Maître Mimin’s humiliation is thoroughly debasing and vulgar. A coarse and shameful punishment counters his affectation and linguistic *démesure*. A new, more extreme form of domestication, itself equally removed from the *juste milieu* it is meant to reestablish, overcomes his previous lack of adherence to social norms. Once in the cage, Mimin quickly rediscovers his native tongue.

An intriguing parallelism illustrates the equity of the punishment. Mimin has extended himself too far in one direction and his punishment provides an equal extreme in the other direction in order to return him to his proper place between these two poles. All of this is underscored by the first and last words Mimin says in his kitchen Latin. When he first speaks, he tells his teacher, who has asked him to answer in French,

Ego non sire.
Franchoyson jamais parlare;
Car ego oubliaverunt. (vv. 118–20)

It is not simply that Mimin chooses not to speak in French, but rather his problem is more extreme because he has forgotten altogether how to speak in French (“ego oubliaverunt”). Before seeing his son, Raulet makes the same observation, “Qu’il [Mimin] a le françoys oublié” (v. 87). He echoes this concern again when they find their son with his teacher. He asks his son, “As-tu oublié le langage, / Que ta mere si t’a aprins?” (vv. 195–6) Such a dramatic departure from familial norms requires an equally extreme solution, and once caged, Mimin exclaims, before reverting back to French,

Cageatus emprisonnare,
Livras non estudiare
Et latinus oubliare. (vv. 297–9)

The diminished, reduced Mimin does not decide to become bilingual, but instead decides to abandon and forget the Latin he has learned. In both cases, “oubliare” defines Mimin’s status, first in that he has forgotten his proper place within familial and societal hierarchies and then in that he is restored, through a humiliating device, to his previous state. His forgetfulness is in fact his crime; his purported linguistic amnesia underscores the fact that he has forgotten where he belongs.

The farce describes Maître Mimin’s effective cure of linguistic amnesia. The humiliation has its desired effect by returning the student to his former state. While the play is clearly whimsical, its action is nevertheless undergirded by a rigid system of justice. Here as elsewhere in the world of farce, punishment is not gratuitous—it is inspired by and reflects a transgression. Each such transgression in farce is met with an equivalent counteraction that forces the transgressor back to his or her original position. All of this underscores the essentially conservative nature of farce: the reversals that take place do not disrupt societal norms but instead help restore them.

By the time Rabelais began composing his tales of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, “Mimin” had become established as a popular type and dramatic

persona. The name became synonymous with a “niais” or a “sot pédant.”¹⁸ The encounter between Pantagruel and the *écolier limousin*, Rabelais' first episode constructed like a farce,¹⁹ clearly echoes what we find in *Maître Mimin l'étudiant*. Reading the theatricality of the episode proleptically, Gérard Defaux notes that in this chapter of *Pantagruel* “Le comique est déjà ici moliéresque. Nous sommes au théâtre.”²⁰ The following comparison suggests the specific ways in which this episode in Rabelais' work places the reader in the realm of late-medieval farce. In general terms, both of these farcical episodes have as their main character an ostentatious student who speaks in a garbled form of Latin and who is subsequently “cured” of his affectation. In Mimin's case, he has learned Latin to the point that he has purportedly forgotten French, while for the Limousin student, it is obvious that he has learned very little except how to live a dissolute life and parrot the language of pretentious Parisian schoolboys. Pantagruel is certainly irritated by the Limousin's speech in a way that recalls Mimin's parents' reaction. Also, Pantagruel's solution to the problem of the student's pretension is at least as aggressive and humiliating as the one reached by Mimin's family; the giant grabs him by the throat, causing him to soil himself, an earthy punishment that echoes Mimin's humiliation, focusing as it does on his *cul*.

There are, however, important differences between each student's interlocutors. In contrast to *Maître Mimin*, the familial, domestic setting is altogether absent in *Pantagruel*. In Rabelais' episode, instead of simpleton parents concerned about the well being of their son, two educated strangers meet on the road outside the gates of Orléans. From the outset, the public arena supplants the domestic, private setting of *Mimin*. While Mimin's parents are portrayed as simple peasants who feel threatened by the news of their son's inability to speak his native tongue, the *écolier limousin*'s interlocutor, Pantagruel, demonstrates relative indifference to the student's language. It is interesting, however, that Pantagruel's comments resemble those of Mimin's parents, who think that their son is possessed by the devil. After hearing the student, Pantagruel asks one of his companions, “Qu'est ce à dire?” He is told that the language the student is using is “de Paris” and after being treated to another sampling of the student's Latinate discourse, Pantagruel again questions the nature of this corrupted language: “Que diable de langaige est cecy? Par dieu tu es quelque heretique,” a seemingly archaic suspicion that is reinforced by his next comment: “qu'est ce que veult dire ce fol? Je crois qu'il nous forge icy quelque langaige diabolique, et qu'il nous cherme comme enchan-teur” (*Pantagruel* 6:232–4). These reactions echo those of Mimin's family. As Koopmans has amply demonstrated concerning medieval theatre, “Le lien entre langues étrangères et dissidence religieuse ou folie est tenace.”²¹ While

Pantagrue's initial reaction resembles that of a character in a farce, his accusation that the *écolier* is "quelque heretique" diverges from traditional accusations of the sort in that it has a more pointed context as a not-so-subtle attack on the Sorbonne, where the student has picked up his perverted Latin. Also, at this time when evangelical humanists and Sorbonne scholastics were fighting over who held authority in matters of Biblical exegesis and theology, accusing the other side of being a heretic was common, which adds an ideological subtext to Pantagrue's insult. Thus, from the beginning, the reader finds a scene that is both humanistic and farcical, underscoring the heterogeneous nature of Rabelais' work.

Another crucial variation found in this chapter of *Pantagrue* is that both of the languages the student speaks, his Latinate French and his own native Limousin, represent linguistic registers that vary from the normative French of the text. While the goal in each case is to make the Latin-speaking student return to his native tongue, the Limousin student suffers yet another humiliation by having to return to his native Limousin dialect. When he finally speaks "naturellement," he is speaking in a language that is as foreign to the standard French of the text as his artificial Latin. Rabelais thus presents a farce-like episode that adds an element alien to traditional farce. This change anticipates the future farcical comedies of the *commedia dell'arte* and Molière, where the bumbling patois-speaking peasant becomes a stock comedic character.

As for the two students' Latinate discourse, Mimin's Latinized French is fairly easy to decipher without a knowledge of the language, and his teacher even provides a translation for the comparatively few words that Mimin speaks. As alluded to earlier, the quality of Mimin's Latin, both linguistically and rhetorically, is deficient to the point of absurdity. Given that the subject of the farce and its use of Latin point to a *Basoche* or other educated society's production, it is baffling that the Latin is as bad as it is. Even Mimin's *magister* fares no better than his student in his use of degenerate Latin. From a cultural production perspective, this leads to the conclusion that either the play's author lacked a basic knowledge of Latin, or more likely, the play represents an elite society's mockery of the lower, provincial class that, even when educated, still remains illiterate. In contrast to the case of Mimin's Latin, M. A. Screech has noted that "the quite straightforward mockery showing up the hollowness of the pretentiously Latinate French of the *Ecolier limousin* means little to the reader who has no Latin."²²

While the Limousin's provincial credentials are made explicit during his encounter with Pantagrue, there is nothing provincial or uneducated about his discourse. On the contrary, his speech is linguistically and rhetorically so-

phisticated. Along with the obvious use of periphrasis, the student uses simile, metaphor, alliteration, and anaphora. The beginning of his discourse is borrowed directly from Geofroy de Tory's eclectic and erudite work, *Champ fleury* (1529), in a passage where the author is mocking the ornate Latinate discourse used by educated Parisians.²³ Mimin's language, whether elevated or debased in the play, is consistently poor; the Limousin student demonstrates a level of erudition and sophistication entirely absent in the world of farce.

A study of farce reveals a wide range of sophistication and complexity that, along with historical documentation, points to a varied cultural milieu in which these plays were written and staged. However, even the most elaborate and intelligent farce, *Pathelin*, does not demonstrate the sort of erudition found in the Limousin's speech, a difference that highlights the fact that unlike much of traditional farce, the episode's intended audience is not wholly popular, but rather humanist as well.

Yet another significant contrast between the two episodes is that while both students finally revert to their natural tongue, in *Mimin* this is a cause for celebration, whereas the *écolier's* use of his native tongue, "*Vee dicou, gentilastre. Ho saint Marsault adiouda mi. Hau hau laissas a quau au nom de dious, et ne me touquas grou,*" is cause for further scorn, joined as it is with the student befouling himself. The student has been unmasked, and his true nature is risible. This also calls into question the positive nature of Pantagruel's comment, "A ceste heure parle tu naturellement" (*Pantagruel* 6:234); the student's native tongue is an analogous humiliation to Mimin's bird cage. It represents an extreme linguistic pole as removed from the *juste milieu* of the normative French spoken by Pantagruel as his initial Latinate discourse, making the student, much like Mimin in the cage, the butt of the joke. His natural speech is not desirable, but is instead considered barbaric to the humanist ear. As Defaux notes, quoting from Pierre Fabri's *Le grant et vray art de pleine Rhétorique*, the student "commet cet autre barbarisme qui consiste à user d'un 'languaige parcial en termes barbares, gergon et aultre parler non congneu que en lieu parcial.'" ²⁴ The text highlights the dichotomy between culture (Pantagruel to the student: "tu veulx icy contrefaire le Parisian") and nature ("Tu es Lymosin, pour tout potaige").

At the end of this scene there is no decipherable communication, other than the acknowledgement that the student is from the Limoges region. While Mimin's original language produces confusion, at the conclusion of the play there is mutual understanding and comprehension. In the case of Pantagruel and the Limousin student, understanding is found between author and reader, not between the interlocutors. This highlights an important theme of Rabe-

lais' work, one that will become more pronounced in subsequent episodes such as Pantagruel's first encounter with Panurge, the lawsuit of Baisecul and Humevesne, and Panurge's debate with Thaumaste. Here and elsewhere modes of communication condemned by humanists are called into question by the text, as they constantly fail to provide real understanding. The Limousin's Paris-inspired esoteric discourse does not result in understanding and offers none of the enlightenment the hero Pantagruel is seeking in his whirlwind tour of French universities.

In *Maître Mimin*, the son's linguistic reversion is cause for celebration, while in *Pantagruel*, the Limousin's similar reversal is cause for further scorn and is accompanied by the student soiling himself. In true Rabelaisian form, logorrhea is replaced by diarrhea. Pantagruel and his friends mock the rustic language of the student, because it underscores the disparity between the true identity of the student and the persona he has created for himself. In this episode, the *écolier* is an actor in both senses of the word. Rather than a punishment that simply reestablishes societal norms, as with *Mimin*, here the punishment is redoubled. The initial, radical shift from standard to Latinized French is mirrored in the equally radical reversion to patois. The student's speech in his native Limousin tongue serves as an extended form of humiliation, replacing his previously haughty artificial French with a language that, while natural, is also clearly intended to be inferior to the standard French of the text. As François Rigolot explains, "La langue d'emprunt, la langue 'apprise,' pompeuse et emphatique, fait place au langage-réflexe, naïf et viscéral. Mais ces deux paroles sont également incompréhensibles, deux formes de démesure."²⁵ This new form of punishment points to another contrast between Rabelais' farce-like scene and traditional farce—in addition to a punishment focusing on the *cul*, here the punishment is also oral, situated at the level of language, a much more metaphorical, incorporeal form of retribution generally absent in the realm of traditional farce.

At the end of this chapter in *Pantagruel*, there is a notable deviation from traditional farce in the form of a philosophical, humanist justification for Pantagruel's punishment of the student. The narrator cites Aulus Gellius and Augustus, the kind of erudite references common in humanist works but absent in the realm of traditional farce. This scene presents a conflation of popular humour and humanist philosophy, rendering this farce appreciably different from its popular counterpart. Yet it is interesting that the humanist citations at the end of the chapter echo the didactic messages found in farce: "il nous convient parler selon le langage usité" and "il faut éviter les motz espaves en pareille diligence que les patrons des navires evitent les rochers de mer" (*Pantagruel* 6:235). These philosophical references are used to sup-

port what could be deemed popular wisdom, certainly providing the scene with a moral resembling the didactic messages of traditional farce. This is but one example of how Rabelais confounds any attempt to separate high and low style in his work.

The insertion of a didactic message at the end of this highly theatrical scene points to another important difference between the theatre of farce and Rabelais' farce-like scenes. There are times in farce when, at the end of the piece, an actor presents a didactic message for the audience.²⁶ Beyond this type of pronouncement, all such moralistic conclusions must be intuited by the audience through the actions of the players. The prose format of Rabelais' work allows the author to offer details to the reader that are not reproducible on the stage. For example, before the performance/debate between Panurge and Thaumaste, the reader has already been made aware of Thaumaste's motivations for insisting on such a debate:

En ces mesmes jours un sçavant homme nommé Thaumaste oyant le bruit et renommée du sçavoir incomparable de Pantagruel, vint du pays de Angleterre, *en ceste seule intention de veoir Pantagruel... et esprouver si tel estoit son sçavoir comme en estoit la renommée.* (*Pantagruel* 18: 281, italics mine)

Thus, before the two meet, the text has already informed the reader about Thaumaste's true incentive for wanting to debate Pantagruel. To accomplish this in the theatre of farce, a player must offer up an aside not heard by the other player(s). In short, it must be performed. In Rabelais' highly heterogeneous work, generic boundaries are constantly crossed, and as this highly theatrical scene is brought to a close, "Et [Pantagruel] le laissa," the text switches to a strict third-person narrative, "Mais ce luy fut un tel remord toute sa vie, et tant fut alteré, qu'il disoit souvent que Pantagruel le tenoit à la gorge" (*Pantagruel* 6: 234–5). It is within the context of this third-person narrative that Rabelais inserts his didactic pronouncements.

To return to the Limousin's discourse that brought about this condemnation, the content of his speech further distinguishes him from Mimin. Whereas Mimin babbles on to his family, crassly expressing desire for his fiancée, the Limousin student's comments are more consequential. To begin with, his speech represents a self-condemnation, as he brags about activities that are reprehensible to his humanist interlocutor. As he says, "captons la benevolence [... du] sexe féminin [...] et en ecstase Venereique inculcons nos veretres es penitissimes recesses des pudendes.. puis cauponizons es tabernes meritoires," etc. (*Pantagruel* 6:233)²⁷ In farce, the *farceur* is not usually so foolishly bold. The student details at length his debaucheries and slothful living, all in a language that connotes arrogance. It is evident from his speech

that he is not educated at all, but has merely learned a way in which to appear elite to others.

While *Maître Mimin* could be read as urban students making fun of provincial rustics such as Mimin, Rabelais is critiquing the Limousin student's *lack* of education. The Limousin's language lends him an air of superiority, but his own words belie any real education. His time in Paris has been devoted not to studies but rather to cavorting around the city in search of amusement. Additionally, he justifies his behaviour by explaining that after his debaucheries, he heads to the church to seek absolution:

[D]és ce qu'il illucesce quelque miutule lesche du jour je demigre en quelcun de ces tant bien architectez monstriers: et là me irrorant de belle eaue lustrale, grignotte d'un transom de quelque missicque precaton de nos scrificules. Et submirmillant mes precules horaires elue et absterge mon anime de ses inquinamens nocturnes. (*Pantagruel* 6:233)²⁸

This description of such blasphemous behaviour immediately follows Pantagruel's accusation that the student is a heretic. Viewed in the larger context of *Pantagruel*, the Limousin student embodies all that is wrong with traditional, medieval education. Rather than producing intelligent scholars who are eager to learn, the Sorbonne produces students such as this one, who unwittingly illustrates that the system has failed miserably. It is by no means inconsequential that, perhaps because of its notorious pedantry, the faculty of the University of Paris has inadvertently produced a student who is not even interested in education, and prefers instead to bide his time in bars and brothels and to parrot what he assumes to be the language of erudition.

While the *écolier*'s discourse is naïvely intended to confuse his interlocutors, the very words he uses ironically serve to condemn himself. In fact, while his Latinate French represents an attempt to use the farcical language of confusion (recall Pathelin's supreme example of this tactic as he employs several incomprehensible dialects to confuse the merchant), the actual result is quite the opposite. While such a linguistic strategy might have worked with the student's fellow provincials, Pantagruel sees through his pretension and soon deflates the student's ostentatious posturing. The Limousin befouling himself underscores this humiliating reversal, with his ornate discourse being literally brought down to earth.

In the end, this student initially described as "tout joliet" is thwarted and defeated in his attempt to dissimulate his humble origins by means of haughty language and physical appearance. Everything about him is unnatural and exaggerated, and his very words condemn him on two levels: first on a stylistic and rhetorical level, because his weak attempt at using esoteric language to

give a false impression of intelligence and sophistication is understood by Pantagruel, and second on the level of the meaning conveyed by his words, since he explicitly describes a lifestyle of debauchery and exaggerated appetites, not one of study and learning. Pantagruel's humiliating punishment that both empties and exposes the *écolier* underscores the student's empty character. As Edwin Duval has argued concerning this schoolboy's offense, the Limousin embodies the scriptural passage "*humilis qui se exaltat*, and it is for this [...] that Pantagruel humiliates him by forcing him to speak his own most ignoble dialect and to shit in fine Parisian pants."²⁹ Pantagruel does not act out of self-motivation as a character in a farce, but rather out of moral indignation against this offensive ostentation. Thus, in this first example of a farcical episode in Rabelais' work, Pantagruel thwarts a would-be *farceur* by forcing him to abandon his pretentious linguistic ruse.

While the episode itself represents a flawless appropriation of the structural and ethical underpinnings of popular farce recast in a novelistic format, the framing of the narrative sets it apart. The didactic statements taken from Aulus Gellius and Augustus do mirror the kinds of moral pronouncements of traditional farce, yet they reveal a form of erudition wholly foreign to their popular counterpart. More importantly, the contrast between the two adversaries, Pantagruel and the student, is more self-conscious and more ideological than between adversaries in traditional farce. The world of farce is essentially amoral where most characters are scoundrels and one player's triumph can quickly be reversed. There are no heroes to be found in farce. In contrast to the petty motivations of characters in farce, Pantagruel does not effect the humiliating reversal of the *écolier* as a means of revenge, but rather out of righteous anger. Again quoting from Duval,

The Christianity of the *Pantagruel* is extreme in this regard. Being a profoundly evangelical work it is also a profoundly anti-Ciceronian work openly hostile to pure (that is, unmotivated) eloquence. Fancy talk, like fancy clothes, can too easily become a means of exalting oneself, of setting oneself apart from the vulgar crowd. It is for precisely such an abuse of eloquence that Pantagruel punishes the Limousin schoolboy. This self-aggrandizing brat affects an exalted, ornate, highly Latinate language, not to enter into a community with his interlocutors but to set himself apart from them, to exclude them, to humiliate them.³⁰

At the time of their meeting, both characters are students, yet they are diametrically opposed. The humanist giant is travelling throughout France to educate himself, while the *écolier limousin*, being interested only in appearing educated, is symbolic of the failure of scholastic pedagogy. This empty ostentation is condemnable and leads to the only instance in the Pantagrueline

books where the giant himself directly metes out the punishment in a farcical episode. (Once Panurge introduces himself in chapter 9 of *Pantagruel*, he takes over the punishing role of the *farceur*.) The student's humiliation is more far-reaching in its implications as it does not simply "settle the score" between two feuding tricksters, as one finds in traditional farce; instead, Pantagruel's thwarting of the sham scholar punishes the anti-humanist mentality the latter represents. This conflation of farce and humanist satire is central to understanding Rabelais' work.

This episode demonstrates how popular culture informs Rabelais' humanist satire, while at the same time showing the author's transformation and radicalization of this popular genre. With its frequent use of language as a weapon to confuse rather than communicate, farce becomes an apt tool for an author who constantly calls into question the provisional nature of language. As Mireille Huchon has observed, in Rabelais' work "la polysémie devient une esthétique."³¹ Rabelais' polysemous creation centres in part on the tensions between popular and learned culture as the two are simultaneously contrasted and conflated, leaving the reader often perplexed. The *écolier limousin* serves as an introduction to one of the main interests of Rabelais' books, the displacement and obstruction of meaning, and the corresponding requirement for new hermeneutic models to combat the corrupted rhetoric of the scholastics scorned by humanists.

What role, then, does farce play for the author who claimed to have been breast-fed by the "*divinae...doctrinae*"³² of Erasmus? While many of the ideas put forth in the books of *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel* draw upon Erasmian, evangelical humanist thought, Rabelais' methods are distinctly different from those of other humanists. Instead of creating a relatively homogeneous erudite work such as *In Praise of Folly*, Rabelais asserts evangelical humanist principles through popular forms such as street theatre.³³ Certainly, in an episode such as the one examined above, there is a theatrical representation or production of the scriptural passage, "Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14.11 and 18.14, Matt. 23.12). But this message is conveyed through Rabelais' intentional use of farcical means to humanist ends: the comedic reversals contained within these plays that Rabelais is appropriating into his own work, while originally used to reassert the status quo, are now deployed in an attack on societal institutions such as the Sorbonne. The episode will be followed by others such as those concerning Thaumaste and the *haute dame de Paris*, in which figures like the *écolier* and unlike the anonymous characters of farce, represent established societal attitudes and ideas. Thus a genre that typically presents a conservative didacticism and ethics within domestic,

private settings is inverted and inserted into a humanist satire in which it is made to effect humiliating reversals on characters that represent entrenched institutions and ideologies.

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Notes

1. I am grateful to the New Faculty General Research Fund at the University of Kansas for providing me with resources that enabled me to complete this article. An earlier, shorter version of my project was presented at the Sixteenth Century Studies Conference, Denver, October 28, 2001.
2. Gustave Cohen, "Rabelais et le théâtre," *Revue des Études Rabelaisiennes* 9 (1911), pp. 1–72.
3. Emmanuel Philipot, "Notes sur quelques farces de la Renaissance," *Revue des Études Rabelaisiennes* 9 (1911), pp. 365–422.
4. Jelle Koopmans, "Rabelais et l'esprit de la farce," *Les grands jours de Rabelais en Poitou : Actes du colloque international de Poitiers*. Ed. Marie-Luce Demonet, *Études rabelaisiennes* 43 (Geneva: Droz, 2006), p. 299.
5. Among the many episodes in Rabelais that resemble theatrical farce are Pantagruel's adjudication of the dispute between Baisecul and Humevesne (*Pantagruel*, ch. 10–13), the debate between Panurge and the English scholar Thaumaste (*Pantagruel*, ch. 18–20), the encounter between Panurge and the *haute dame de Paris* (*Pantagruel*, ch. 21–22), the dealings between Panurge and the merchant Dindenault (*Quart livre*, ch. 5–8), and the punishment of the *chicanous* by Lord Basché (*Quart livre*, ch. 13–15). In each of these, there are distinctive theatrical elements, such as stage directions and *mise-en-scène*, theatrical dialogue, and gesturing. In dramatic farce, all action revolves around the punishment of one character in a humiliating and coarse fashion, a punishment occasioned by the character's excessive appetites or attempts to break with social conventions. This structure is present in all of the episodes mentioned here. All references to Rabelais' work are taken from Mireille Huchon's edition (Paris: Gallimard, 1994). In each case, the individual work is given, followed by the chapter. In the case of specific quotes, the chapter number is followed by the page reference.
6. "Rabelais quotes directly or indirectly, textually and freely, hundreds of passages [of farces], sometimes directly, sometimes indirectly." All translations are mine.
7. The other self-reference is found in the *Quart livre*, chapter 27, which explains that Rabelais was one of those present at the death of his protector, Guillaume Du Bellay, who passed away January 9, 1543.
8. V. L. Saulnier, "Médecins de Montpellier," *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance* 19 (1957), pp. 425–79. Saulnier, beginning with Montpellier's medical school records, traced the future careers of the other players mentioned with Rabelais in chapter 34 of the *Tiers livre*, among them Antoine Saporta, who became a professor at the University of Montpellier, and Pierre Tolet, who practised medicine in Vienna and Lyon, as well as producing some translations and therapeutic works.
9. See note 5 for a representative list of such episodes.

10. Terms such as dramatic or theatrical farce refer to those farces that were being performed in France during this watershed era of what is referred to as “le théâtre profane et comique.” It was most often students and low-level lawyers who belonged to groups such as the *Basoche* or the *Enfants sans souci* that produced much of this period’s comic theatre. For an analysis of this theatrical culture, see Howard Graham Harvey’s *The Theatre of the Basoche* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1941). As for farce, as opposed to other related genres such as *sottie*, *sermon joyeux*, etc., it is important to note that contemporaries made little distinction and mixed terminology in a loose manner. Modern scholars have done an impressive job of producing various definitions that establish farce as a distinct genre (see, for example, works such as Barbara Bowen’s *Les caractéristiques essentielles de la farce française et leurs survivances dans les années 1550–1620* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1964); Halina Lewicka’s *Etudes sur l’ancienne farce française* (Paris: Editions Klincksieck, 1974); Jean-Claude Aubailly’s two works, *Le Théâtre médiéval profane et comique* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1975) and *Le Monologue, le dialogue et la sottie* (Paris: Champion, 1976); Alan E. Knight’s *Aspects of Genre in Late Medieval French Drama* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983); Bernadette Rey-Flaud’s *La Farce ou la machine à rire* (Geneva: Droz, 1984); and Konrad Schoell’s *La Farce du quinzième siècle* (Tübingen: G. Narr, 1992). In dramatic farce, all action revolves around the punishment of one character in a humiliating and coarse fashion, a punishment occasioned by the character’s excessive appetites or attempts to break with social conventions. For a brief discussion of possible sources Rabelais may have drawn upon for this episode, see Mireille Huchon’s edition of his complete works, *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 1258, n. 8. The most direct reference to the world of farce in this episode comes from the “Sottie des coppieurs et lardeurs,” a play that has a character named the “Escumeur du latin,” undoubtedly the inspiration for Pantagruel’s accusation to the Limousin student: “Tu escorche le latin” (*Pantagruel* 6:234).
11. Emmanuel Philipot was the first to make the comparison between this episode and the *Farce de Maître Mimin étudiant* in the volume of *RER* previously referred to. Philipot touches on the debate as to what is Rabelaisian about *Maître Mimin*, correcting a previous misconception that *Mimin* came after *Pantagruel*.
12. André Tissier, “La Farce de Maître Mimin,” *Recueil de farces (1450–1550)* (Geneva: Droz, 1988), vol. 3, pp. 229–72.
13. Tissier, p. 218.
14. Tissier, p. 217. “The farce of Maître Mimin is not a farce written by teachers or students to be performed in a college: the Latin here is only jargon. The audience does not need to understand this Latin; the Master takes care to announce what Mimin is going to say or to explain what he says. This farce could be performed before any audience.”
15. “gibet” (in English, “gibbet” or “gallows”) is a euphemistic term for the devil. See Tissier, p. 255.
16. Equating insanity with being possessed is a prominent idea found throughout medieval theatre and literature. Despite the more ambivalent nature of folly found elsewhere in Rabelais’ work, inspired by Erasmus’ notion of divine folly, the *écolier limousin* episode repeats the same assertions found in *Mimin*: namely that folly is caused by diabolic possession.

17. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 20.
18. Tissier, p. 220.
19. As Gérard Defaux notes in *Pantagruel et les sophistes* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973), ch. 2, Gargantua's lament after the death of Badebec (*Pantagruel*, ch. 3) is highly theatrical, as is the Prologue for that matter. However, chapter 6 in *Pantagruel* is the first episode in which one finds the *trompeur trompé* formula that defines farce.
20. *Pantagruel*, p. 134 n. 1. In *Pantagruel et les sophistes*, Defaux explains what is Molière-like about this chapter: "Le verbiage de l'écolier n'est pas seulement 'une machine éternelle de rire.' Il est certes cela, à un premier niveau. Mais, par ailleurs, en précurseur de Molière, Rabelais dénonce dans cet épisode un vice—et un ridicule [...] : l'affectation, le pédantisme, la fausse science" (p. 86). Within the same chapter Defaux notes the lack of attention paid to the transformative process that takes place in this episode, as popular theatre is recast in a new humanist context: "On n'a peut-être pas assez remarqué les transformations que Rabelais a fait subir, en l'accueillant [l'épisode] à ce type comique traditionnel." (p. 83)
21. Jelle Koopmans, *Le Théâtre des exclus au Moyen Age* (Paris: Imago, 1997), p. 140. As is the case in this episode, Koopmans is not referring to other normative languages, such as German or Spanish, but rather to one form or another of nonsensical language sometimes found in plays to establish a character's heretical or insane nature. This is precisely why the merchant accepts that Pathelin is insane or possessed after listening to Pathelin's litany of dialects. The act of speaking such incomprehensible language is proof enough to convince the merchant that his delinquent client is under some sort of diabolical influence.
22. M. A. Screech, *Rabelais* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), p. 35.
23. Geoffroy Tory, "Aux lecteurs de ce présent Livre," in *Champ fleury*, ed. J. W. Jolliffe (Yorkshire: S. R. Publishers, 1970). Tory identifies what he considers to be three types of people who attempt to disfigure and corrupt French: the "Escumeurs de Latin, Plaisanteurs, & Jargonneurs." Of the first group, the "Escumeurs de Latin disent, 'Despumon la verbocination latiale, & transfretion la Sequane au dilucule & crepescule, puis deambulon par les Quadrivies & Platees de Lutece, & comme verisimiles amorabundes captivon la benevolence de lomnigene & omniforme sexe féminin.'" Compare this with the Limousin student's first words: "Nous transfretions la Sequane au dilucule, et crepuscule, nous deambulons par compites et quadriviers de l'urbe, nous despumons la verbocination Latiale et comme verisimiles amorabonds captions la benevolence de l'omnijuge omniforme et omnigene sexe féminin" (*Pantagruel*, 6: 232–33). There are some minor but interesting alterations in Rabelais' version. With the author's mania for lists, it is no surprise that "lomnigene & omniforme sexe féminin" is expanded to "l'omnijuge omniforme et omnigene sexe féminin" in Rabelais' version. Also, "Despumon la verbocination latiale," essentially "Nous écumons le langage latin" is removed from the beginning of Tory's composition and placed directly before the explanation of what the student uses his fancy language for, namely to pursue women, highlighting the debased usage to which the student has applied his acquired knowledge.
24. Defaux, p. 86. "...commits this other barbarism which consists in using a 'partial language in barbaric terms, jargon and other language only partially understood.'" For a

more thorough examination of the ways in which this scene highlights the dichotomy between nature and culture, see pp. 81–90.

25. François Rigolot, *Les Langages de Rabelais* (Geneva: Droz, 1996), p. 35. “Borrowed language, ‘learned’ language, pompous and emphatic, makes way for reflexive, naïve, and visceral language. But these two forms of expression are equally incomprehensible, two forms of excessiveness.”
26. Examples of this phenomenon include *Le Gentilhomme et Naudet* (Tissier, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, 1986, pp. 243–303) and *Le Savetier, le moine et la femme* (Tissier, *op. cit.*, vol. 9, 1995, pp. 127–94).
27. Donald Frame offers a delightful translation of this Latinate discourse: “we captate the benevolence of the [...] feminine sex [...] and in venerean ecstasy, inculcate our veretors into the most recondite recesses of the pudenda [...] then we cauponize [eat] in the meritorious tabernae....” In *Complete Works of François Rabelais* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) p. 150.
28. “...as soon as there illucesces some minutule sliver of daylight, I denigrate into one of these so well architectated minsters [churches], and there, irrorating myself with fair lustral water, I mumble a snatch of some missic precation of our sacrificules. And, submirmillating my horary precules [prayers], I elave and absterge my anima of its nocturnal inquisitions.” Frame, p. 150.
29. Edwin M. Duval, *The Design of Rabelais’ Pantagruel* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), p. 119.
30. Duval, p. 142.
31. Huchon, p. 1056.
32. Huchon, p. 998 (“Lettre à Érasme”).
33. The term “homogeneous” is not meant to imply that Erasmus’s writings are narrow or monolithic. But while the sources Erasmus draws upon are principally humanist, scriptural, and classic texts, popular forms such as farce that play such a prevalent role in Rabelais’ work are notably absent.