

Mireille M. Huchon. *Rabelais*.

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It would be difficult to find a scholar better positioned than Mireille Huchon to produce a monumental biography of François Rabelais. From her ground-breaking work, *Rabelais grammairien* (1981) to her definitive edition of the author's *Œuvres complètes* (1994), Huchon's literary detective work is unsurpassed. Her penchant for speculations based on textual and historical clues generated great controversy when she posited that Louise Labé's poems were the creation of a group of male poets from Lyon (*Louise Labé: Une Créature de papier*, 2006), and she includes an amusingly oblique reference to that controversy in this biography, referring to another work of poetry assembled by male poets and given female attribution, explaining that this was a common practice in sixteenth-century Lyon, fabrications she refers to as "créatures de papier" (284).

While Huchon's biography is not likely to generate the same level of controversy, it is certainly filled with well-grounded speculation and provocative questions, an unavoidable necessity as facts and details about Rabelais's life, starting with his date of birth, are elusive and inadequate. Huchon brings to bear her tremendous erudition, ranging from her extensive knowledge of printers and printing practices in Paris and Lyon to the geopolitical situation in sixteenth-century Europe. One has the sense in reading this biography that no stone remains unturned and every possible connection to the subject of this biography has been teased out of texts and events.

Huchon begins at the end, offering an overview of posthumous reactions to the author to give us a sense of the ways in which he was viewed a generation after his death. Misunderstandings about the author become a common theme in the biography. She provides a corrective to Céline's famous observation that Rabelais "a raté son coup" ("missed his chance"). Céline's point was that Rabelais's language — loquacious, earthy, vulgar, and streetwise — was not the direction French literature would take. Huchon both agrees and disagrees with Céline. While French letters did not follow the path set by Rabelais, this is not because Rabelais's expression was too folksy or lacked refinement. Instead, it is the highly artificial nature of Rabelais's writings that has made the author so inaccessible. The tales of Gargantua and Pantagruel contain language that is truly encyclopedic in scope, drawing upon a host of languages, dialects, and literary traditions in a polyglot performance without precedent. There is much in Rabelais's books which has always been too arcane for readers. Rabelais's linguistic ambitions knew no bounds and could not be

contained. Modern-day readers owe Huchon a great debt for her efforts to untangle many of these morphological mysteries.

There are two particular points Huchon focuses on extensively in her biography. One is how strongly contemporary events informed Rabelais's writings; the other is Rabelais's possible involvement with the occult. In terms of current events, the presence of the Du Bellay brothers (Jean and Guillaume) cannot be overstated. Huchon makes the point, for example, that when the *Chroniques gargantuines* and *Pantagruel* appeared in 1532, both contained multiple references to England at a time when the Du Bellay brothers were deeply involved with English affairs. By the time *Gargantua* appeared, the author's protectors had turned their attention to Continental Europe, a change mirrored in *Gargantua*, which emphasizes continental politics with the figure of Picrochole—Charles V. Huchon shows time and again how crucial the support of Cardinal Du Bellay and his brother was for Rabelais, a reality that manifests itself in a variety of ways in the author's writings.

How much place does Rabelais give to the occult in his writing? This is a question Huchon asks and she spends many pages suggesting several possibilities. There is no question that Rabelais was familiar with a variety of occult practices, but whether he took them seriously is an entirely different matter. From alchemy to astrology to Kabbalistic practices, Huchon makes several intriguing suggestions that the author was deeply interested in the occult and that it strongly informed his work. As she does throughout the biography, she makes suggestions but does not jump to any definitive conclusions.

I have chosen to highlight only a few areas of interest in this dense and erudite biography, which echoes the extensive erudition of its subject. This is probably not a biography for the general reader, but specialists of sixteenth-century French culture and literature will not be disappointed. In her latest offering, Huchon displays her strong talent for literary sleuthing, showing us the richness of this endlessly fascinating, enigmatic author.

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