Ironic Textuality in The Praise of Folly and Gargantua and Pantagruel*

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That the influence of Erasmus pervades the works of Rabelais is by now a well documented and well established fact. As Lucien Febvre has shown, moreover, the fellowship of Erasmus and Rabelais in the spirit of Christian humanism extends beyond the similarities in their intellectual outlooks to a number of remarkable parallels in their biographies. Erasmus was an Augustinian canon, Rabelais a Franciscan friar; Erasmus had a close friendship in his youth with Servatius Roger, Rabelais with Pierre Amy; both studied the classics by night; both hated superstitious ceremonies and monastic abuses; both left their respective orders quietly. Febvre summarizes their affinity as follows:

The one and the other felt, at an early date, mysterious passages opening between their Christianity and ancient wisdom. The one like the other freely founded his theology on sacred and profane texts simultaneously. The one and the other are in battle against the education that they had at first been given. . . For one as for the other, finally, Humanism is not a literary game, nor a formal perfection. It is a light that scatters the shadows.¹

In terms of the religious history of the first half of the sixteenth century, Rabelais is truly the spiritual heir of Erasmus, adhering as he did to the

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* The writing of this paper was made possible by a Newberry Library Fellowship. An earlier version was read before the Columbia University Seminar on the Renaissance. Among the many people who have assisted me, I wish particularly to thank Professor Thomas M. Greene, under whose direction this project first took shape, and Professor James V. Mirollo for repeated readings of the manuscript.

precarious middle way, sympathizing with the goals of the reformers but never breaking with the Catholic church, and rejecting the intolerant extremes of both Calvinism and the Counter Reformation.

Given the extensiveness of Rabelais’ indebtedness to Erasmus, however, it is an extremely curious point, noted by M. A. Screech, that Rabelais nowhere mentions Erasmus by name in any of his published works. The striking quality of Rabelais’ silence is heightened when it is contrasted with the effusiveness of his tribute to Erasmus in a letter of 1532—the year in which Rabelais began his literary career. In seizing the opportunity to forward by messenger a book belonging to Erasmus, Rabelais compares the latter to a mother who has nourished a child in her womb without ever having seen him:

I have said you are my father, I would also say you are my mother, if by your indulgence it were permitted to me. For by daily experience we know what ordinarily happens: they nourish those fetuses which they have never seen and guard them from the harmful surrounding air. So too you experienced this same thing, you have educated me, unknown to you by face, also undistinguished by name, you nourished me with the most chaste breasts of your divine teaching—so much so that, if I did not attribute to you alone whatever I am and whatever I am capable of, I would be the most ungrateful man of all who are or will be in other years.

Rabelais’ unwillingness to avow openly his obligation to the man whom he termed both his father and his mother except in the privacy of a

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