Significant Counsel: Reading Rabelais’ Silent Sibyl

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The narrative of Rabelais’ *Tiers Livre* is driven by Panurge’s quest for an answer to his nagging question of whether or not he should marry and, if he should, would he become a cuckold. As this quest for counsel develops, it takes the form of a journey involving consultations with various authorities suggested by Pantagruel, “King of the Dipsodes, Son of the Great Giant Gargantua.” On one of the stops along the journey with Pantagruel’s tutor Épistémon, Panurge endeavors to consult the Sibyl of Panzoust (*TL* 16–8), a most unlikely and uncomely seer who marks the text with a singularity that points to more than just an answer to Panurge’s question. Here Rabelais’ text invites the reader to stop along the travels chronicled on its surface and venture beneath it to follow its tangents, interrogate its words, and decode its signs, thereby effectively obeying the injunction in his prologue to *Gargantua*: “par curieuse leçon et méditation fréquente, rompre l’os et sugcer la substantifique mouelle” (“by careful reading and frequent meditation, break the bone and suck out the substantific marrow”) (5; Frame 4).1

What beckons the reader in this episode to obey Panurge’s injunction? What distinguishes this episode from among the multiple, seemingly disconnected episodes of consultation along the journey in the *Tiers Livre* that, as critics have noted, could be increased or decreased without compromising meaning precisely because the sole answer to Panurge’s question is the same and has been predetermined by Pantagruel?2 The episode of the Sibyl of Panzoust does stand out among the others, not because it provides a different answer to Pantagruel’s dilemma, but because on the surface it presents a sibyl unlike others, one who does not conform to the prescribed decorum of a sibyl who speaks a divinely authored oracle. She is an uncomely hag who does not speak her oracle but rather composes it in writing, then immediately decomposes it and decamps with a vulgar gesture. Despite this singularity on the surface, few critics have explored any subtext in the episode itself. Floyd Gray discusses the serio-comic possibilities of the episode for use in the classroom and makes important observations on the competing discourses of Pantagruel and Panurge (“Deciphering” 228–30), while Florence Weinberg gives an astute reading of the sibyl’s gestures within the context of the classical tradition (“Written” 719–20). David LaGuardia argues that the episode shows the interplay between a “neurotic male sexuality” and the process of interpretation in Rabelais (“Masculinity” 9). Alfred Glauser focuses on the sibyl’s answer to Panurge but largely treats her cryptic gestures and the text’s lexical properties as variables of certain numbers (118–20). It remains to read this episode beyond the surface of its turning on the axis generated throughout the book by a Panurge in search of an answer to a question. To do so it is appropriate to take a cue from the astute reading of the prologue of the *Tiers Livre* provided by several critics. Glauser

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(174–5), Jeanneret (40), and Weinberg ("A Mon Tonneau" 556) have stressed that the prologue’s frenzied and unpredictable movement of Diogenes earthenware barrel prefigures and epitomizes Rabelais writing his unstable and episodic book that defies systematization. Just as in this regard Gray has called Rabelais “Diogenes with a pen” (“Structure” 61), so we can consider this strange Sibyl of Panzoust writing with her spindle pen as a cryptonym not only of Rabelais writing but of Rabelais writing about writing and about how writing has eventuated from an oral culture. With this idea in mind, I propose to read this episode as a hermeneutic of a cultural reality beyond the narrative of Panurge seeking an answer, i.e. as an expression of the bridge between the waning oral culture and the waxing written culture of the period, for this singular sibyl does not speak but rather writes. In so doing, the text’s matrix will surface as absence and loss, signed by sibyl’s absence of speech and Panurge’s loss of masculinity. Both then eventuate in the production of writing and the process of reading, respectively. This reading of the sibyl episode will imitate the narrative journey and go where it leads on the syntagmatic plane and then where it stops at various points to plumb beneath the surface of the text various paradigms of significance which will be marked in gestures, words and, paradoxically but appropriately, the lack thereof.

**Oral and Written Cultures**

Approaching a sibyl for consultation presupposes her as a mediatrix capable of transmitting knowledge from a divine source to the human world. The means by which this transmission is operative will reflect the development of learning and communication contemporary with the composition of Rabelais’ book. Panurge is seeking knowledge at a time when the communication of knowledge is based on speaking and hearing between persons, an oral culture which is shifting to a point based on observation, sight and objects (Ong, “System” 224). One key characteristic of an oral culture is its reliance on memory, mnemonic devices, and formulas to reconstitute experience, thus restricting words to sound (Ong, *Orality* 33–4). Pantagruel represents an oral culture since his thought processes rely on memory and sound. The shift from an oral culture to one based on observation and sight has not been actualized in his mind. To convince Panurge to go hear the sibyl, Pantagruel generates a vocabulary based on a rime formula: “Que nuisit sçavoir tousjours et toujours apprendre, feust-ce d’un sot, d’un pot, d’une gédoufle, d’une moutle, d’une pantoufle?” (“What harm is there in always finding out and always learning, even if it’s from a sot, a pot, a dipper, a mitten, or a slipper?”) (384; Frame 303). In addition, Pantagruel tells Panurge to go hear the sibyl, not just see her: “oyez ce que vous dira” “hear what she’ll tell you” (384; Frame 303). To continue his persuasive tactics, Pantagruel appeals to memory: “Vous soubvieigne que . . . ” “Remember that . . . ” (385; Frame 303). He proceeds to recount an anecdote about the unfortunate decision of Alexander the Great, who had refused to listen to a certain merchant known for good sense but poor and of mean