

Zeitschrift: Études de Lettres : revue de la Faculté des lettres de l'Université de Lausanne
Herausgeber: Université de Lausanne, Faculté des lettres
Band: - (1984)
Heft: 2

Artikel: Printers' helps - and fruitful errors
Autor: Screech, M.A.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-870777>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 15.01.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

PRINTERS' HELPS — AND FRUITFUL ERRORS

Une nouvelle *Bibliographie rabelaisienne* — concernant les éditions antérieures à 1640 — sera terminée l'année prochaine. Un des collaborateurs montre que l'on peut mieux saisir la portée des différents ouvrages de Rabelais en examinant comment ils se présentaient aux lecteurs. En plus, on voit comment les éditeurs de Rabelais ont pu imposer de nouveaux sens à ses écrits par la suppression ou l'adjonction de certains mots. Ce que l'on a longtemps considéré comme des plaisanteries typiquement rabelaisiennes s'explique parfois par des raisons purement techniques — le fait que certains des imprimeurs de Rabelais ne disposaient pas d'une fonte grecque, par exemple, ou qu'ils aient déplacé par erreur la bouteille du *Cinquiesme Livre*.

Nearly twenty years ago it seemed to me to be a good idea to try to bring P.-P. Plan's *Bibliographie rabelaisienne* up-to-date, partly by correcting the errors which time had thrown up, partly by adding new discoveries and, above all, by listing as many copies of each known edition as could be traced. This intention to list all the known copies was, at first, little more than a wish to be complete, though I had stumbled on the truth that no two copies of a Renaissance printed book ever appear to be completely identical. This amateurish conviction was eventually given professional rigour by expert bibliographers, especially, in my case, by Philip Gaskell's handbook, *A New Introduction to Bibliography* (Oxford, At the Clarendon Press, 1972). Armed with that it seemed reasonable to hope that all the copies of at least the rarer editions of Rabelais's *Chronicles* could be traced, described and then used to establish a new critical edition. That, somewhat modified, is still the hope.

This bibliographical project made little progress until Mrs. Gwyneth Wilkie (Miss Tootill as she then was) threw herself into the task of organising, writing letters and arranging material. When, later, she felt the need to bow out at short notice, the project went on ticking over, slowly but surely, until Dr. Stephen Rawles joined the enterprise with technical bibliographical exper-

tise which far surpassed mine and with an enthusiasm which remained alive when my own tended to flag. That the end is now in sight is attributable to Dr. Rawles — the “real begetter” if not the “onlie begetter” of the finished *New Rabelais Bibliography* we hope to complete soon.

I never dreamed, at the outset, how complicated some bibliographical conundrums would prove. I never dreamed, either, how much light can be thrown on to Renaissance works — and on to later judgements of them — by bibliographical knowledge, and sometimes by bibliographical knowledge alone. Questions of the dating of an edition are cases in point. For me, however, the richest nuggets of new knowledge affected the very sense of Rabelais's works. That *Pantagruel* as first published by Claude Nourry used the same frame (*not* a similar one) for its title-page as law-books printed by other lyonese printers — for the law firm of *De Portionariis* — made the dating of Rabelais's first *Chronicle* less uncertain. Frames get damaged. One can tell which books were printed before the damage and which afterwards. But this “legal” frame eventually led to other probabilities and other certainties — not least that *Pantagruel* first presented itself to its public as a spoof, as a happy parody of a well-known series of scholarly law-books. The legal humour which dominates *Pantagruel* becomes richer as a result.

In the case of the edition of the *Pantagrueline Prognostication* prepared for the TLF (Droz, Geneva) the results were also rewarding. Bibliographical discoveries enabled me to work with a team of young scholars on the preparation of the first-ever critical edition of the original text. Tellingly, the two copies which we traced of the *editio princeps* are not identical, one being corrected in the course of printing. More vital was the realisation that the later versions of the *Pantagrueline Prognostication* — the only ones available to readers — had quietly dropped those astronomical and astrological details which firmly fixed the original edition of that little work into a definite temporal and historical context. The *editio princeps* also linked the *Pantagrueline Prognostication* much more closely than one could have expected to the expert concerns of the serious astrological *Almanachs* which Rabelais also composed at the same time. That was no little gain, both aesthetically and intellectually.

Perhaps the most lasting interest did not lie with the editions published in Rabelais's lifetime. One expected them to be exciting and so the excitement aroused by even important discoveries was

partly taken for granted. But readers at the end of the sixteenth century and in the first half of the seventeenth read their Rabelais in quite different editions from those which Rabelais saw through the press — mainly either in tight little duodecimos often bearing the names of “Jean Martin”, “François Nierg” or “Pierre Estiard”, or else in rather more spacious octavos which may also bear the name of “Jean Martin”. The bibliographical problems posed by these editions are often complex. Late editions are, of course, of no value for the establishing of Rabelais’s authentic text, but they tell us a great deal about the way legends grew up about both works and author. These late editions helped to turn Rabelais into a skittish writer who played with his reader — rather like Diderot and Laurence Sterne were to do, partly under their influence. They also remind us how difficult it was for late sixteenth and seventeenth century readers not to be taken in by the *Fifth Book* and by the job-lot of opuscles which regularly accompanied it. The typological setting encouraged readers to believe that the opuscles form an integral part of the *Fifth Book*. These later editions of the *Œuvres de M. François Rabelais, docteur en medecine* do not normally have *faux-titres* for the four authentic books, yet do have one for the *Cinquiesme Livre*. Only after listing opuscles such as *La Cresme Philosophale* and *Le Blazon de la Vieille* as being “contained” in the *Cinquiesme Livre*, do they add the promise on their *faux-titre*:

Avec la visitation de l’Oracle de la Dive Bacbuc, le mot de la Bouteille: pour lequel a esté entrepris tout ce long voyage: le tout composé par M. François Rabelais Docteur en Medecine.

These unassuming little books copy each other carelessly but slavishly, often page by page, and line by line, from edition to edition. These printers had no Greek type, so the first thing to be perverted was Rabelais’s Greek quotations. The result was normally a garbled jumble of nonsense-words, doubtless taken to be a learned kind of verbal jesting somewhat like that of an obscure Edward Lear. A case in point is the quotation from St. Paul surrounding the *ymage* on the young giant’s hat-badge in *Gargantua* VII (or VIII). Rabelais originally brought out the mystical sense of the androgynous emblem with St. Paul’s eulogy of love, who “seeketh not her own”:

Η ΑΓΑΠΗ ΟΥ ΖΗΤΕΙ ΤΑ ΕΑΥΤΗΣ

Whilst that remained in Greek capitals, Roman letters could be ingeniously used to render the missing Greek ones — an M printed sideways, for example, to represent the capital sigma. But even then the Greek became partly nonsensical or whimsical. Then, when the capitals were replaced by lower-case (often italic), we have nonsense-words, pure and simple:

& autour estoit escrit en lettres Ionïques, *Agpy Zythita autys*

is one common version!

The effects of such confusions can be far-reaching. This particular one eliminates any possibility of identifying the quotation from St. Paul and so leaves the reader with no Evangelical savour whatsoever, merely with a comic, two-arsed androgyne.

In the Prologue to the *Quart Livre* Rabelais attributed to “Ariphron Sicyonien” the judgement that a life without health is no life at all: ἄβιος βίος, βίος ἀβίωτος. This soon gets corrupted to *a vios vios, vios a viothos*. This time, the alleged meaning of this nonsense is given in French — as such it forms part of the authentic text — “Sans santé n’est la vie vie, n’est la vie vivable”. The reader who knew Greek might perhaps have found in the corrupted text a comic Greek dialect; others doubtless saw a kind of Joycean international pun, with βίος thrice deformed into *vios* under the influence of the French word *vie*.

What readers made of the deformation of the Euripidean fragment which Rabelais cited a few lines earlier, from Erasmus’s *Adagia*, is harder to guess. The original reads:

Ἰητροὺς ἄλλων, αὐτὸς ἔλκεσι βρούων.

Two common deformations of this, both in upper-case letters, read:

IITROS ALLON AVTHOS ELESİ VOVON.

and

IATROS ALLOM AVTOS ELKISIBRVON.

The cumulative effect, in any event, of all this to eliminate Greek Erudition entirely (and with it much Humanism and Evangelism) and to turn Greek into a funny language which we expect to laugh at. This has the result of making Greek erudition comic — something it never is in Rabelais. Comic erudition can then be

read into further misprints or confusions. A good example may be found in Dr. Ozell's fine *Works of Francis Rabelais M. D.* (my own edition was printed in Dublin in 1735). In this translation the quotation from St. Paul surrounding Gargantua's emblem is simply omitted — in error, it seems:

... a fair Piece of enamell'd Work, wherein were portrayed a Man's Body with two Heads, looking towards one another, four Arms, four Feet, two Arses, such, as *Plato in Symposio* says, was the mystical Beginning of Man's Nature: and about it was written in *Ionick* letter, (8).

The (8) refers to a puzzling footnote which inexplicably reads:

Ἀγάπη. *Charity seeketh not her own. I think ἀγάπη looks bald without the praepositive article ἡ.*

That perspicacious comment appears simply a spoof in the text as printed, since nothing whatsoever seems to justify its existence. I suspect that the odd comic footnote in *Tristram Shandy* owes much to such typographical errors, since Laurence Sterne dearly loved his Rabelais.

Another contribution which "Rabelais" probably made to Sterne arose out of sheer good luck. The printers of Rabelais's *Œuvres* had difficulty with the poem in the "Bottle" which ought to find its place after the first paragraph of Chapter XLIV of the so-called *Cinquiesme Livre*. The Bottle itself posed no problem: the printers copied each others' woodcuts so well that you often have to look closely to tell them apart. But the Bottle occupies the best part of the page. With a complete lack of imagination the earliest printers of the duodecimo *Œuvres* merely went straight on, ignoring the sense and context, merely putting the Bottle and its poem later on in the book, wherever it suited their convenience. So the text therefore read comically:

Puis desploye son liure ritual, & luy soufflant en l'oreille gauche, le fit chanter vne Epilemie comme s'ensuyt:

Cette chanson paracheuée, Bacbuc iette ie ne sçay quoy dedans la fontaine.

Subsequently printers changed *comme s'ensuyt* into *que verrez cy apres*. But by then the joke was launched and was strong enough, I think, to help give rise to the blacked-out leaf in Chapter XII of

the first volume of the *Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy* and the marbled-out leaf between Chapters XXXVI and XXXVII of Book Three.

Such an interpretation of this apparent joke was further encouraged by the total omission of a few words of Greek in the *Tiers Livre* (which has some other 'delightful' deformations of Greek in Chapter X). In Chapter XIV Rabelais gave his views on the relative rôles of God and the Devil in the gift of sleep "iouxte le mot vulgaire, ἐχφρῶν ἄδωρα δῶρα." One printer omitted the Greek but left a gap for it, which remained unfilled. Subsequent ones closed the gap but failed to put in a full-stop. The result is, at very least, a comic tension for we seem required to make all the erudition which follows the words *mot vulgaire* into a common proverb — which it cannot be.

Rabelais's books, once out of his hands, generated their own jests — jests quite foreign to anything that Rabelais wrote or did. They became almost ineradicably attached to his name. In the public mind Rabelais was now merely a jester. He could be up to anything. How persistent legendary jests about Rabelais may become can be seen from compilations such as the *Oxford Book of Quotations* or, indeed, from the recent *Oxford Book of Death*. You are lucky to find even one authentic quotation from any of Rabelais's works in any of them. What you *will* find is *Tirer le rideau, la farce est jouée* and *Je m'en vais chercher un grand Peut-être!* And while this remains the case, the many who rely on these compilations since they are sponsored by a learned press will be led by the nose into total anachronism.

Quite minor misprints mount up, too. So do the self-censorship of printers. The combined effect of them all was to make Rabelais more roguish, less learned, more anti-Papist. Rabelais increased in popularity in schismatic England, especially after the Council of Trent placed him among the very bad boys, among, that is, the *Auctores Primae Classis!* This was made easier for the English by the French printers. It was almost providential for Rabelais's reputation in England that the "Jean Martins" had already eliminated the mockery of Calvin from the *Quart Livre*, where *Demoniacles Calvins* are placed among the unlovely brood of Antiphysie:

Matagotz, Cagotz et Papelars; les Maniacles Pistoletz, les Demoniacles Calvins, imposteurs de Geneve...

(QL, TLF, XXXII, p. 152).

Printers of an author condemned by Trent, and so only erratically to be sold in Roman Catholic lands, were not going to fall foul of the *Eglise Reformée* as well! They omitted this clear abuse of Calvin. In doing so they recommended Rabelais — perhaps without realising it — to an England then Calvinistically inclined. Some of the printers simply leave out the words *Calvins, imposteurs de Geneve*; others replace them by “*moynes*” — “*Demoniacles moynes*” went down as well in London as in Geneva; some prefer to replace *Calvins etc.*, by *racleurs de benefices*. That, of course, went down less well in Church circles across the Channel, where benefices remain as desirable after the Anglican schism as before. But the omission of the name *Calvin* did its trick. The English have long loved Rabelais. In less oecumenical centuries his Gallican and Evangelical mockery of popes and of *papimanes* sounded nothing but good in Anglican ears. It could be equated with good old English straight “No Popery”. The omission of but four words, *Calvins imposteurs de Geneve*, changed the status of the entire volume of *Œuvres*, not simply of the *Quart Livre* and not only of the page on which they appear. Without them no casual reader of these *Œuvres de Rabelais* in England or Switzerland was bound to know that Rabelais’s criticism of the Roman Pontifs was balanced by this scathing allusion to the “Genevan Pope” who was not only an “imposter,” but an “unnatural” and a “diabolical” one.

Habent sua fata libelli.

M. A. SCREECH.

