

## Unit 1 – The Renaissance

Humanist Writers - Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*

*In the late 15th and the 16th centuries, the Renaissance spread north to Germany, France, England, and Spain. Illustrating the Renaissance spirit in France was François Rabelais (c.1495-1553), a Benedictine monk, a physician, and a humanist scholar. Gargantua and Pantagruel, his significant folk epic, attacked clerical education and monastic orders and expressed an appreciation for secular learning and a confidence in human nature. Like other humanists, Rabelais criticized medieval philosophy for its concern with obscure, confused, and irrelevant questions. Expressing his aversion to medieval asceticism, he attacked monasticism as life-denying and regarded worldly pleasure as a legitimate need and aim of human nature. The following selection from Gargantua and Pantagruel (written 1532-1542), contains a description of life at an imaginary monastery, the abbey of Theleme, whose rules are quite different from those of the medieval monastery.*

## The Rules According to Which the Thelemites Lived

All their life was regulated not by laws, statutes, or rules, but according to their free will and pleasure. They rose from bed when they pleased, and drank, ate, worked, and slept when the fancy seized them. Nobody woke them; nobody compelled them to either eat or to drink, or to do anything else whatsoever. So it was that Gargantua had established it. In their rules there was only one clause:

## DO WHAT YOU WILL!

because people who are free, well-born, well-bred, and easy in honest company have a natural spur and instinct which drives them to virtuous deeds and deflects them from vice; and this they called honour. When these same men are depressed and enslaved by vile constraint and subjection, they use this noble quality which once impelled them freely towards virtue, to throw off and break this yoke of slavery. For we always strive after things forbidden and covet what is denied us.

Making use of this liberty, they most laudably rivaled one another in all of them doing what they saw pleased one. If some man or woman said, "Let us drink," they all drank; if he or she said, "Let us play," they all played; if it was "Let us go and amuse ourselves in the fields," everyone went there. If it were for hawking or hunting, the ladies, mounted on fine mares, with their grand palfreys following, each carried on their daintily gloved wrists a sparrow-hawk, a lanneret, or a merlin, the men carrying the other birds.

So nobly were they instructed that there was not a man or woman among them who could not read, write, sing, play musical instruments, speak five or six languages, and compose in them both verse and prose. Never were seen such worthy knights, so valiant, so nimble both on foot and horse; knights more vigorous, more agile, handier with all weapons than they were. Never were seen ladies so good-looking, so dainty, less tiresome, more skilled with the finger and the needle, and in every free and honest womanly pursuit than they were . . .

Now every method of teaching has been restored, and the study of languages has been revived: of Greek, without which it is disgraceful for a man to call himself a scholar, and of Hebrew, and Latin. The elegant and accurate art of printing, which is now in use, was invented in my time, by divine inspiration; as, by contrast, artillery was inspired by diabolical suggestion. The whole world is full of learned men, of very erudite tutors, and of most extensive libraries, and it is my opinion that neither in the time of Plato, of Cicero, nor of Papinian were there such faculties for study as one finds today. No one, in future, will risk appearing in public or in any company, who is not well polished in Minerva's workshop. I find robbers, hangmen, freebooters, and grooms nowadays more learned than the doctors and preachers were in my time.

I beg you to devote your youth to the firm pursuit of your studies and to the attainment of virtue.

[. . .]

It is my earnest wish that you shall become a perfect master of languages. First of Greek, as Quintillian advises; secondly, of Latin; and then of Hebrew, on account of the Holy Scriptures; also of Chaldean and Arabic, for the same reasons; and I would have you model your Greek style on Plato's and your Latin on that of Cicero. Keep your memory well stocked with every tale from history, and here you will find help in the Cosmographies of the historians. Of the liberal arts, geometry, arithmetic, and music, I gave you some smattering when you were still small, at the age of five or six. Go on and learn the rest, also the rules of astronomy.

[. . .]

Of Civil Law I would have you learn the best texts by heart, and relate them to the art of philosophy. And as for the knowledge of Nature's works, I should like you to give careful attention to that too; so that there may be no sea, river, or spring of which you do not know the fish. All the birds of the air, all the trees, shrubs, and bushes of the forest, all the herbs of the field, all the metals deep in the bowels of the earth, the precious stones of the whole East and the South -- let none of them be unknown to you.

Then scrupulously peruse the books of the Greek, Arabian, and Latin doctors once more, not omitting the Talmudists and Cabalists, and by frequent dissections gain a perfect knowledge of that other world which is man. At some hours of the day also, begin to examine the Holy Scriptures. First the New Testament and the Epistles of the Apostles in Greek; and then the Old Testament in Hebrew. In short, let me find you a veritable abyss of knowledge. For, later, when you have grown into a man, you will have to leave this quiet and repose of study, to learn chivalry and warfare, to defend my house, and to help our friends in every emergency against the attacks of evildoers.

*François Rabelais, The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel, trans. J. M. Cohen (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1955)*