A la judaïque: Traces of Jewish Absence in François Rabelais's Works

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> "Quand on demande aux massorethz et caballistes pourquoi les diables n'entrent jamais en Paradis terrestre, ilz ne donnent autre raison sinon qu'à la porte est un cherubin, tenent en main une espée flambante."[1]

Rabelais's wide-ranging erudition included knowledge of several Jewish religious texts-by no means an easy achievement in a period of turbulent religious and social changes, when unorthodox thinking and writing could easily lead to the gallows. This extensive knowledge was apparently in large part from secondary sources, since most critics seem to agree that Rabelais was not as well versed in Hebrew as in Latin or Greek. As Michael Screech puts it, the author of *Pantagruel* had "some real concern for Hebrew, some real (if partly second-hand) knowledge of the Talmud, the Kabbalah and rabbinical writings" (*Rabelais*, 37). In the case of the above quotation, Rabelais freely mixes in comic fashion two very different schools of Jewish learning, the Massoretic and the Kabbalistic, in an instance of what Screech refers to as "Hebrew laughter" (44-49) or "Kabbalistic laughter" (86-97).

The two schools differed chronologically and teleologically. The first (whose main works were written from the eighth to the tenth century) was concerned with the definitive establishment of a correct, or Massoretic, text of the Hebrew Bible, mainly through grammatical codification and through the adjunction of diacritical signs, so as to compensate for the absence of written vowels in the Hebrew alphabet, which had led to successive alterations (and thus differing interpretations) in the transmission of the Biblical text over time.

The second school, whose name derives from the verb "lekabel" (to receive), was much more than "the received [tradition]," since it was based on the quest for different layers or levels of meaning (beyond the literal) within Biblical texts. The Kabbalah started in the thirteenth century and became most influential in Jewish religious life during the sixteenth century (since the eighteenth century, it has been renewed within the Hassidic movement). Its hermeneutic approach also influenced some Christian

scholars of the Renaissance, such as Guillaume Postel and Johannes Reuchlin.[2] Whether or not Rabelais was familiar with the differences between these two schools of learning, he did not hesitate to refer to them in his works: Dixon and Dawson's Concordance lists the word "massoret(h)z" as being used six times, along with fourteen instances of the different forms of the word "Kabbalah" (although some of these mentions carry the negative connotation of the Kabbalah as associated with magic and alchemy).

A Strong Absence

There are no Jewish characters in Rabelais's works.[3] Nor does there seem to be any sort of overt thematic strain that could be construed as dealing in any positive or negative manner with the figure of the Jew in Medieval and Renaissance Europe. In all his travels, Pantagruel never encounters a Shylock or a Wandering Jew. Jerome Schwartz, while viewing Panurge's often incomprehensible polylingualism (PT, IX) as a trait that "was especially characteristic of one particular cultural group in the sixteenth century-the Jews," specifies that "Rabelais certainly does not identify [him] as a Jew" (34). It is therefore all the more striking to notice the numerous instances in which Rabelais uses such words as "Juifz," "Judaycque," "Israël" and "Hébrieu." For example, according to Dixon and Dawson's Concordance, there are more mentions of the word "Jews" (eighteen), than of the word "Christians" (twelve), once the different spellings used by Rabelais are combined (Juifs/Juifz and Chrestians/Chrestiens/Christians/Christiens).

Another textual paradox arises with the language of the Jews. In Chapter VIII of *Pantagruel*, Gargantua presents a detailed program of education for his son, in which the study of three ancient languages—Greek, Latin, and Hebrew—comes first.[4] While being elevated, or rendered present, as a means of more direct access to the wisdom of Biblical texts, the Hebrew language is thus also linked by association to vanished civilizations, to a past irretrievably lost. Other textual traces in Rabelais's works both point to and reinforce this sense of absence.

The Other and/or the Same

It comes as no surprise that a writer steeped in the traditions of Christian Europe. living in a country from which Jews had been almost totally excluded by the beginning of the sixteenth century,[5] should view them as essentially alien. References to Jews in Rabelais's works are thus often a

study in the representation of otherness, of removal in physical or psychological time and space. They are presented as foreign by faith as well as geography, in the same way as various groups of unbelievers, such as Turks and Mamelukes:

> "Voulez-vous trouver homme qui par vie exemplaire, beau parler, sainctes admonitions, en peu de temps, sans effusion de sang humain, conqueste la Terre Sainte et à la saincte foy convertisse les mescréans Turcs, Juifz, Tartes, Moscovites, Mammeluz et Sarrabovites? Prenez-moy un Décrétaliste." (QL, LIII, 685-6)

Unlike more distant unbelievers, Jews had been present in France for centuries; and expulsions and forced conversions had not eliminated all traces of them. If some of them had become (dubiously) assimilated—as Marranos—within the confines of Christian Europe, such latent Jews were also probably diabolically inspired: "A trente diables soit le coqü, cornu, marrane, sorcier au diable, enchanteur de l'Anti-christ" (TL, XXV, 422). As personifications of an other whose absence is textually traceable, Jews could be reduced to (sub)categories of the same. Those who had recently converted to Christianity in order to avoid expulsion were thus inherently suspect as potentially backsliding apostates, all the more so because of their proximity, which threatened societal homogeneity.[6] Despite the unavoidable taint of alterity, allusions to Jewish historical and Biblical figures abound in Rabelais's works, along with non-condemnatory, even laudatory, references to various forms of Jewish learning, such as the Talmud (from the verb "lilmod"—to study) and the previously-cited Kabbalah.

Metaphorically absent in Biblical texts perceived as superseded by Christian revelation, Jews were also mostly physically absent from the French cities where Rabelais traveled and lived, but which bore traces of medieval communities destroyed or uprooted by successive waves of massacres or expulsions. Today, as in the sixteenth century, a "Rue de la Juiverie" can be found in Chinon, Rabelais's birthplace, indicating the former location of a medieval ghetto. There are of course similarly-named streets or neighborhoods in many other French towns and cities.

On August 21, 1321, the 160 Jewish inhabitants of Chinon were burnt at the stake on an island in the Vienne river, following an accusation-in a typical instance of a Medieval blood libel-that they had poisoned the wells of the city, in a conspiracy with a different category of outcasts, the lepers. By the time Rabelais was born (1494 seems to be the commonly accepted year), there were almost no Jews left in all of France. The general expulsion order signed by King Charles VI in 1394 had effectively resulted in

the elimination of any Jewish presence in northern France. The formal incorporation of Provence into the Kingdom in 1481 also eventually led to a royal expulsion order in 1498, which was completely enforced by 1501, at which time the only Jews openly living in France resided in Avignon and the Comtat Venaissin-small enclaves which remained Papal possessions until the Revolution.

Another major upheaval in Jewish life in Europe roughly coincided with the year of Rabelais' s birth. In 1492, having finally completed the *Reconquista* and expelled the Moslems from their last Spanish stronghold of Grenada, Ferdinand of Aragón and Isabella of Castile, the Catholic monarchs of newly united Spain, decided to purge their country of Jews as well, giving them the choice of exile, conversion or death. Portugal followed the Spanish example with an expulsion order of its own in 1496. The expulsion from Spain constitutes a particularly traumatic event in Jewish history, since it virtually eliminated, in a very short time span, what had once been not only the largest but also the most intellectually and artistically flourishing Jewish community of its time.

Jews who converted to Christianity in order to avoid the Inquisition and/or the expulsion were labeled "Marranos," a term of opprobrium apparently deriving from the Spanish word for "swine" (another term for them was "conversos").[7] As forced converts, Marranos and their descendants were suspected—often with good reason—of continuing to practice their religion in secret, thereby acquiring a supplementary aura of devious, esoteric customs (not unlike the Kabbalists). Some of these "New Christians," seeking to escape the continuing efforts of the Inquisition to expose them, eventually settled in cities in southern France, particularly Bordeaux and Bayonne. Their problematic, newly-acquired status as Christians is discernible in Rabelais's writings. Gargantua's father, for example, sought to ensure his son would not be tainted by contact with Marranos: "Son éspée ne feut point valentienne, ny son poignart sarragossoys, car son père hayssoit tous ces indalgos bourrachous, marraniséz comme diables" (GG, VIII, 28).

The diverse intellectual currents of the Renaissance included a general desire to return to a more direct form of access to ancient texts, in their original languages, and preferably unencumbered by the accretions of glosses and commentaries that had accumulated over the centuries. Hebrew, as Rabelais pointed out, was one of the most important of these languages, for direct access not only to the Hebrew Bible, but also to a number of other, more recent texts, especially in the medical and legal fields (Rabelais also comments on Arabic in this regard). Paradoxically, this widespread renewal of interest in manifestations of Jewish learning coincided, in several western European countries, with (generally successful)

attempts to eliminate, through forced conversions, expulsions, or massacres, any overt vestiges of the physical presence of Jews. This paradox is reflected in the strong Jewish absence in Rabelais's works, which are situated in the space between an evacuated presence and the representation of its remembrance.

Pantagruel's Solomonic Wisdom and the Name of God

Pantagruel, the learned Renaissance prince, is the most explicitly Biblical figure in Rabelais's works. When called upon to render judgment on the festering quarrel between the lords Baisecul et Humevesne (PT, XIII), Pantagruel miraculously brings order and clarity where there had been linguistic and legal confusion. As for the "conseillers et autres docteurs" who had witnessed the judgment, "ilz demeurèrent en ecstase— esvanoys bien troys heures, et tous ravys en admiration de la prudence de Pantagruel plus que humaine" (226). Due to his exceptional (and apparently divinely inspired) wisdom, Pantagruel is explicitly compared to King Solomon at the beginning of the next chapter. As Screech points out, the listeners' reactions border on a form of adoration: "The judgment of Maistre Pantagruel is so heavenly that the hearers swoon, rapt in ecstasy-specifically in that form of ecstasy caused by wonder and astonishment. For Pantagruel is a new Solomon" (*Rabelais*, 86).

Aside from the comical episodes of his childhood, (the half-devoured cow and bear, the overturned and shattered crib—PT, IV), Pantagruel is commonly described in adulatory and hyperbolic terms throughout Rabelais's books. His monstrous size is of course cause for wonderment; but it is his judgment and his erudition that inspire general admiration. Parisians marvel at the "sçavoir si merveilleux" (214) of this "grand personnage" (215) who renders justice "equitablement," "justement," and whose judgment is "fort admirable" (213).

Pantagruel also seems to bridge the gap between the Hebrew and Greek Bibles that is, between the past and the present, between absence and presence. In chapter XXIV of *Pantagruel*, an enigmatic message in Hebrew turns out to be the reproach of Pantagruel's jilted lover in Paris. It is only as he is on his way to take up the defense of his father's kingdom that the reader learns Pantagruel had been courting a Parisian lady. In his haste to go to war, Pantagruel had left the capital, "sans dire adieu a nully, car l'affaire requeroit diligence" (268).

It is clear that Pantagruel's attitude (as well as that of Panurge) is a reflection of the consistent misogyny found in Rabelais's works. Contrary to Panurge's reveling in the humiliation he inflicted on "la haulte dame de

Paris,"[8] in chapter XXII, Pantagruel does at least express regret for his behavior towards the lady: "et volontiers fust retourné à Paris pour faire sa paix avecques elle" (271). However, his companions persuade him to continue on his journey, reminding him of "le département de Eneas d'avecques Dido" (271). By comparison with Panurge's gratuitous offensiveness, Pantagruel is cast as being constrained by his princely duties to behave boorishly. This episode has the paradoxical effect of heightening his stature, since he can give the impression he is sacrificing his personal feelings of love to the noble cause of saving his country. The message from Pantagruel's abandoned lover, in the form of a riddle, tends to assimilate him to an (absent) divinity:

> "Lors, le regardant, trouvèrent escript par dedans en hébrieu:
> LAMAH HAZABTHANI
> Dont appellèrent Épistémon, luy demandant que c'estoit à dire.
> A quoy respondit que c'estoyent motz hébraïques, signifians:
> *Pourquoi me as-tu laissé?*" (PT, XXIV, 271)

In the course of deciphering the message, Pantagruel reads (as addressed to him) what seem to be the last words of Jesus on the cross: "Lamah hazabthani"-"Why have you abandoned me?" in Hebrew.[9] Furthermore, the unpronounceable version of Pantagruel's name reduced to its consonants-"P. N. T. G. R. L." (269)—recalls the Hebrew consonantal Tetragrammaton (*yod hay, vav, hay*), the unpronounceable name of God, which is the origin of the words *Yahweh* and *Jehovah*. In this short episode, Pantagruel is explicitly compared to God (albeit a God in retreat or flight), as well as to the mythical Trojan hero whose descendant founded Rome. The biggest and wisest of Rabelais's characters is thus linked to both the Jewish and Greek traditions.

The Spirit vs. the Letter of the Law

When he does contrast the Hebrew and Greek Bibles, Rabelais draws heavily on the traditional spirit/letter dichotomy often used in the Greek Bible to point out the superiority of the spiritual New Alliance over the literal or "Pharisaic" Old Alliance, which is described as remaining hopelessly tied to the material, the corporeal, the flesh. In the "Messere Gaster" episode (QL, LVII-LXII), Rabelais quotes Paul's Epistle to the Philippians (3:18-19), in order to denounce the Gastrôlatres as the "ennemis de la croix du Christ, desquels Mort sera la consommation, desquels Ventre est le dieu" (699). As Jeanneret describes this passage:

> "[Rabelais] renvoie implicitement au principe de la typologie chretiénne: l'apôtre, après le Christ, condamne les Juifs attachés au respect littéral des prescriptions alimentaires de l'Ancienne Loi et prêche, à la place, un culte en esprit, libéré des observances matérielles. D'un côté, la lecture restrictive et figée des scribes et pharisiens, de l'autre, la religion du cœur" (166

The same chapter of Paul's Epistle to the Philippians also condemns the practice of circumcision as a sign of God's (defunct) Alliance with the Jews, since it has been superseded by the New Alliance through Christ: "For we are the circumcision, which worship God in the spirit, and rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh" (King James Version, 3:3). When the Hebrew Bible does reflect in Rabelais's works the pre-spiritual law of the flesh, of the stomach—"le ventre"—it is not Pantagruel (despite his enormous size and appetite), but Panurge, the more earth-bound of the two main characters, who seeks to comically emulate Jewish law as he understands it:

> "Mais (demanda Panurge) en quelle loi estoit-ce constitué et estably, que ceulx qui vigne nouvelle planteroient, ceulx qui logis neuf bastiroient et les nouveaulx mariéz seroient exemptz d'aller en guerre pour la première année?
> En la loy (respondit Pantagruel) de Moses." (TL, VI, 349)

The reference here is to Deuteronomy (20:5-7). With some exceptions, the bulk of Rabelais's references to Jewish books or characters are in this vein: humorous, sometimes condescending, but not scornful. As Screech observes in *The Rabelaisian Marriage*: "the Old Testament is to be seen behind some of the most striking aspects of Pantagruel's thought" (39). In the next chapter, when Panurge wants to signal his intention to get married, he does so through a (presumably) Jewish custom:

> "Au lendemain Panurge se fit perser l'aureille dextre à la judaïque et y attacha un petit anneau d'or à ouvrage de tauchie, on caston duquel estoit une pusse enchâssée." (TL, VII, 351)[10]

It comes as no great shock that a learned man of the Renaissance such as Rabelais should make frequent references and allusions to the Hebrew Bible. However, it is surprising to find, in books shaped by a long comic

tradition and by the relatively short-lived Evangelical movement, such a wealth of references to Jewish historical figures and texts that are not necessarily integrated within the bounds of Christian Revelation (as interpreted by traditional Catholic doctrine).

Regrettably, little is known about François Rabelais's life. In his study, Donald Frame finds only enough biographical material to fill twelve pages. As he understatedly points out: "The gaps in our knowledge of Rabelais's life are enormous" (8). This paucity of information remains a vexing limitation on attempts to interpret secondary themes in Rabelais's writings, such as the presence/absence of Jews. It would have been interesting to know if Rabelais had been influenced, in the course of his Talmudic and Kabbalistic readings, by Jewish scholars he might have met, perhaps during his travels to Italy, where the lack of political unity allowed for a more visible Jewish presence in some cities. Even if such an influence were suddenly discovered, however, it would probably still not account for the vast erudition displayed by Rabelais in his works. In a period when mere access to certain books was still limited by the threat of being burnt at the stake, he was among a small group of scholars who read and commented on Jewish texts without the sort of automatic condemnatory reflex they could have inherited from the Middle Ages. Instead of, for example, directing traditional imprecations against "le peuple déicide," Rabelais generally approaches Jewish texts much as he does all others-with his own comic form of intellectual curiosity and respect. As Screech describes Rabelais's main character:

> "The grotesque giant's full and rounded force lies partly in his being able to break unexpectedly into a world where the Queen of Sheba and Jesus of Nazareth were at home and where, thanks to Rabelais's genius, his interloping creates laughter, not hatred, indignation, scorn or shocked piety." (*Rabelais*, 96)

• NOTES

I would like to thank Robert Cottrell for his advice and suggestions.

1. *Le Tiers Livre*, chapter XXIII, page 412. Quotations from Rabelais 's works will henceforth be identified within the text by page number alone—or, when necessary, by book and chapter as well (all quotes are from the 1955 La Pléiade edition of Rabelais's complete works). The books will be abbreviated as follows: *Pantagruel*: PT; *Gargantua*: GG; *Le Tiers Livre*: TL; *Le Quart Livre*: QL.

2. Screech (*Rabelais*, 44) points out that Rabelais supported Reuchlin's studies of Hebrew texts, which had been attacked by several theologians.

3. Davis (17-8) suggests that Bacbuc, the oracle of "la dive bouteille" in the *Quart Livre*, constitutes a covert referent for a character in the Jewish festival of Purim.

4. Rabelais was not alone in stressing the importance of all three languages, as is evidenced by the creation of the *Collège des trois langues* in 1534, which later became the *Collège de France*.

5. The process of exclusion directed against the new unbelievers, Protestants, started soon afterwards.

6. Kriegel (227-8) sees in the larger number of recently converted Jews in France and Spain one of the causes of the wave of expulsions at the end of the Middle Ages.

7. Marks (127-42) applies the term "Marranos"—or "crypto-Jews" in a positive way (as the mark of a rich, multifaceted cultural tradition) to secular Jews living in Western countries during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

8. Duval (74-5), seeking to integrate Panurge within the "redemptive design" of a Christian Epic, interprets his behavior towards the "haulte dame de Paris" (PT, XII) as an instrument of just retribution-the bringing down of a rich, haughty and pharisaic lady who had sinned through excessive pride against Christian *Caritas*. Freccero (57-67), in a far different reading, depicts Panurge as impotent—he is unable to "venir au dessus" the lady-and, by extension, effeminate. In this analysis, the character of Panurge thus constitutes the artifact of the feminine presence that he paradoxically helps to eliminate from the text.

9. Although Rigolot (233) and Duval (13) have both convincingly argued that "Lamah hazabthani" comes from the first line of Psalm 22, while Jesus, according to Matthew (27:46) and Mark (15:34) in the King James Version, uttered these words in Aramaic ("Lama sabachtani?").

10. Russell (83-7) discusses the different possible readings of this quote according to whether it contains a reference to Deuteronomy (25:15-17), Exodus (21:2-6), or the Renaissance interpretation of Psalms (39:7).

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Aysel Özakin: Female Turkish Identity between Orientalism and Eurocentrism

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Turkish and German nationality and culture are commonly viewed as opposed, as paradigmatic for the cultures of the Orient and the Occident, divided by hard-to-bridge cultural gaps. Turkish migrant writers in Germany, however, assert multi-layered identities that reflect their daily existence with all of its possibilities and contingencies, embracing both cultures, incorporating them both in the construction of their personal identities.

Questions regarding nationality, ethnicity and cultural differences are—either overtly or covertly—a prevalent theme in the textual production by all ethnic minorities in Germany and are constantly revisited in the works of migrant authors. Thus, migrant authors are reinventing the space of the individual and reallocating the power of defining and representing with the voice of the author/Other. They are exploring as well as exploding the limitations and possibilities of living at the edges of cultures rubbing against each other. By the same token, this means redefining the artist's position in relation to German[1] as well as Turkish literature, culture and politics, and in relation to Germans as well as Turks. In her article "Opposing Oppositions," Leslie Adelson contends that—despite poststructuralist insights into the unstable nature of binary oppositions—the split between *Deutschsprachige Literatur and Migrantenliteratur* continues to abide in the arena of contemporary German Studies (305). Adelson challenges Turkish-German oppositions and demonstrates that in thier fiction "migrant authors" question the national and cultural bipolarity between German and Turkish culture. She further argues that "migrant" authors employ different strategies which confirm the production of these texts as cultural artifacts that exhibit the essentially "hybrid, liminal, and performative" nature of culture (306).

The author Aysel Özakin is a case in point. My paper addresses the ways in which issues of identity and politics and considerations of artistic and personal freedom are reflected in the writing of a Turkish woman writer in Germany. I will show that Özakin distances herself from national, cultural—and any other—categorizations, and rejects being entirely part of