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Of all great writers of world literature, Rabelais is the least popular, the least understood and appreciated.

And yet, of all the great creators of European literature Rabelais occupies one of the first places. Belinski called Rabelais a genius, the sixteenth-century Voltaire, and his novel one of the best of times past. Because of his literary power and historical importance, Western literary critics and writers place him immediately after Shakespeare or even next to him. The French Romanticists, especially Chateaubriand and Hugo, included him among the greatest "geniuses of humanity" of all times and na-

tions. He was and is still considered not only a great writer in the usual sense of the word but also a sage and prophet. Here is a typical opinion expressed by the historian Michelet:

Rabelais collected wisdom from the popular elemental forces of the ancient Provençal idioms, sayings, proverbs, school farces, from the mouth of fools and clowns. But refracted by this foolery, the genius of the age and its prophetic power are revealed in all their majesty. If he does not discover, he foresees, he promises, he directs. Under each tiny leaf of this forest of dreams, the fruit which the future will harvest lies hidden. This entire book is a golden bough.¹

All such judgments and appreciations are, of course, relative. We do not intend to answer the question whether Rabelais can be placed next to Shakespeare or whether he is superior or inferior to Cervantes. But his place in history among the creators of modern European writing, such as Dante, Boccaccio, Shakespeare, and Cervantes, is not subject to doubt. Rabelais not only determined the fate of French literature and of the French literary tongue, but influenced the fate of world literature as well (probably no less than Cervantes). There is also no doubt that he is the most democratic among these initiators of new literatures. He is more closely and essentially linked to popular sources and, moreover, to specific ones. (Michelet enumerates them with considerable accuracy.) These sources determined the entire system of his images and his artistic outlook on the world.

It is precisely this specific and radical popular character of Rabelais' images which explains their exceptional saturation with the future so correctly stressed by Michelet in the appreciation quoted. It also explains Rabelais' "nonliterary" nature, that is the nonconformity of his images to the literary norms and canons predominating in the sixteenth century and still prevailing in our times, whatever the changes undergone by their contents. Rabelais' nonconformity was carried to a much greater extent

¹ Jules Michelet. *Histoire de France*, Vol. 10, p. 355. Paris, L. Hachette, 1852-1867. The golden bough was plucked by Aeneas at the bidding of the Cumæan sibyl. It was the passkey to the underworld.

than that of Shakespeare or Cervantes, who merely disobeyed the narrow classical canons. Rabelais' images have a certain undestroyable nonofficial nature. No dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist with Rabelaisian images; these images are opposed to all that is finished and polished, to all pomposity, to every ready-made solution in the sphere of thought and world outlook. This accounts for Rabelais' peculiar isolation in the successive centuries. He cannot be approached along the wide beaten roads followed by bourgeois Europe's literary creation and ideology during the four hundred years separating him from us.

Although during these four hundred years there have been many enthusiastic admirers of Rabelais, we can find nowhere a fully expressed understanding of him. The Romantics who discovered him, as they discovered Shakespeare and Cervantes, were incapable of revealing his essence and did not go beyond enraptured surprise. Many were repulsed and still are repulsed by him. The vast majority, however, simply do not understand him. In fact, many of his images remain an enigma.

This enigma can be solved only by means of a deep study of Rabelais' popular sources. If he appears so isolated, so unlike any other representative of "great literature" of these last four centuries of history, we should reflect that this period of literary development may in turn seem unusual when viewed against the background of folk tradition. Rabelais' images are completely at home within the thousand-year-old development of popular culture.

Rabelais is the most difficult classical author of world literature. To be understood he requires an essential reconstruction of our entire artistic and ideological perception, the renunciation of many deeply rooted demands of literary taste, and the revision of many concepts. Above all, he requires an exploration in depth of a sphere as yet little and superficially studied, the tradition of folk humor.

Rabelais is difficult. But his work, correctly understood, casts a retrospective light on this thousand-year-old development of the

folk culture of humor, which has found in his works its greatest literary expression. Rabelais' illuminative role in this respect is of the greatest importance. His novel must serve as a key to the immense treasury of folk humor which as yet has been scarcely understood or analyzed. But first of all it is necessary to take possession of this key.

The aim of the present introduction is to pose the problem presented by the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance and to offer a description of its original traits.

Laughter and its forms represent, as we have said, the least scrutinized sphere of the people's creation. The narrow concept of popular character and of folklore was born in the pre-Romantic period and was basically completed by von Herder and the Romantics. There was no room in this concept for the peculiar culture of the marketplace and of folk laughter with all its wealth of manifestations. Nor did the generations that succeeded each other in that marketplace become the object of historic, literary, or folkloristic scrutiny as the study of early cultures continued. The element of laughter was accorded the least place of all in the vast literature devoted to myth, to folk lyrics, and to epics. Even more unfortunate was the fact that the peculiar nature of the people's laughter was completely distorted; entirely alien notions and concepts of humor, formed within the framework of bourgeois modern culture and aesthetics, were applied to this interpretation. We may therefore say without exaggeration that the profound originality expressed by the culture of folk humor in the past has remained unexplored until now.

And yet, the scope and the importance of this culture were immense in the Renaissance and the Middle Ages. A boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture. In spite of their variety, folk festivities of the carnival type, the comic rites and cults, the clowns and fools, giants, dwarfs, and jugglers, the vast and manifold literature of parody—all these forms have one style in common: they belong to one culture of folk carnival humor.

The manifestations of this folk culture can be divided into three distinct forms.

1. *Ritual spectacles*: carnival pageants, comic shows of the marketplace.
2. *Comic verbal compositions*: parodies both oral and written, in Latin and in the vernacular.
3. *Various genres of billingsgate*: curses, oaths, popular blazons.

These three forms of folk humor, reflecting in spite of their variety a single humorous aspect of the world, are closely linked and interwoven in many ways.

Let us begin by describing each of these forms.

Carnival festivities and the comic spectacles and ritual connected with them had an important place in the life of medieval man. Besides carnivals proper, with their long and complex pageants and processions, there was the "feast of fools" (*festa stultorum*) and the "feast of the ass"; there was a special free "Easter laughter" (*risus paschalis*), consecrated by tradition. Moreover, nearly every Church feast had its comic folk aspect, which was also traditionally recognized. Such, for instance, were the parish feasts, usually marked by fairs and varied open-air amusements, with the participation of giants, dwarfs, monsters, and trained animals. A carnival atmosphere reigned on days when mysteries and *soties* were produced. This atmosphere also pervaded such agricultural feasts as the harvesting of grapes (*vendange*) which was celebrated also in the city. Civil and social ceremonies and rituals took on a comic aspect as clowns and fools, constant participants in these festivals, mimicked serious rituals such as the tribute rendered to the victors at tournaments, the transfer of feudal rights, or the initiation of a knight. Minor occasions were also marked by comic protocol, as for instance the election of a king and queen to preside at a banquet "for laughter's sake" (*roi pour rire*).

All these forms of protocol and ritual based on laughter and consecrated by tradition existed in all the countries of medieval Europe; they were sharply distinct from the serious official, ecclesiastical, feudal, and political cult forms and ceremonials. They

offered a completely different, nonofficial, extraecclesiastical and extrapolitical aspect of the world, of man, and of human relations; they built a second world and a second life outside officialdom, a world in which all medieval people participated more or less, in which they lived during a given time of the year. If we fail to take into consideration this two-world condition, neither medieval cultural consciousness nor the culture of the Renaissance can be understood. To ignore or to underestimate the laughing people of the Middle Ages also distorts the picture of European culture's historic development.

This double aspect of the world and of human life existed even at the earliest stages of cultural development. In the folklore of primitive peoples, coupled with the cults which were serious in tone and organization were other, comic cults which laughed and scoffed at the deity ("ritual laughter"); coupled with serious myths were comic and abusive ones; coupled with heroes were their parodies and doublets. These comic rituals and myths have attracted the attention of folklorists.²

But at the early stages of preclass and prepolitical social order it seems that the serious and the comic aspects of the world and of the deity were equally sacred, equally "official." This similarity was preserved in rituals of a later period of history. For instance, in the early period of the Roman state the ceremonial of the triumphal procession included on almost equal terms the glorifying and the deriding of the victor. The funeral ritual was also composed of lamenting (glorifying) and deriding the deceased. But in the definitely consolidated state and class structure such an equality of the two aspects became impossible. All the comic forms were transferred, some earlier and others later, to a nonofficial level. There they acquired a new meaning, were deepened and rendered more complex, until they became the expression of folk consciousness, of folk culture. Such were the carnival festivities of the ancient world, especially the Roman Saturnalias, and such were

² See an interesting analysis of comic doublets in *Proiskhozhdenie geroicheskogo epasa* "Origin of Heroic Epics" by E. M. Meletinskii, Moscow, 1963, pp. 55-58. The book also contains a bibliography.

medieval carnivals. They were, of course, far removed from the primitive community's ritual laughter.

What are the peculiar traits of the comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages? Of course, these are not religious rituals like, for instance, the Christian liturgy to which they are linked by distant genetic ties. The basis of laughter which gives form to carnival rituals frees them completely from all religious and ecclesiastical dogmatism, from all mysticism and piety. They are also completely deprived of the character of magic and prayer; they do not command nor do they ask for anything. Even more, certain carnival forms parody the Church's cult. All these forms are systematically placed outside the Church and religiosity. They belong to an entirely different sphere.

Because of their obvious sensuous character and their strong element of play, carnival images closely resemble certain artistic forms, namely the spectacle. In turn, medieval spectacles often tended toward carnival folk culture, the culture of the marketplace, and to a certain extent became one of its components. But the basic carnival nucleus of this culture is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play.

In fact, carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between actors and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival, as the absence of footlights would destroy a theatrical performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by the people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world's revival and renewal, in which all take part. Such is the essence of carnival, vividly felt by all its participants. It was most clearly expressed and experienced in the Roman Saturnalias, perceived as a true and full, though temporary, return of Saturn's

golden age upon earth. The tradition of the Saturnalias remained unbroken and alive in the medieval carnival, which expressed this universal renewal and was vividly felt as an escape from the usual official way of life.

Clowns and fools, which often figure in Rabelais' novel, are characteristic of the medieval culture of humor. They were the constant, accredited representatives of the carnival spirit in everyday life out of carnival season. Like Triboulet³ at the time of Francis I, they were not actors playing their parts on a stage, as did the comic actors of a later period, impersonating Harlequin, Hanswurst, etc., but remained fools and clowns always and wherever they made their appearance. As such they represented a certain form of life, which was real and ideal at the same time. They stood on the borderline between life and art, in a peculiar mid-zone as it were; they were neither eccentrics nor dolts, neither were they comic actors.

Thus carnival is the people's second life, organized on the basis of laughter. It is a festive life. Festivity is a peculiar quality of all comic rituals and spectacles of the Middle Ages.

All these forms of carnival were also linked externally to the feasts of the Church. (One carnival did not coincide with any commemoration of sacred history or of a saint but marked the last days before Lent, and for this reason was called *Mardi gras* or *carême-prenant* in France and *Fastnacht* in Germany.) Even more significant is the genetic link of these carnivals with ancient pagan festivities, agrarian in nature, which included the comic element in their rituals.

The feast (every feast) is an important primary form of human culture. It cannot be explained merely by the practical conditions of the community's work, and it would be even more superficial to attribute it to the physiological demand for periodic rest. The feast had always an essential, meaningful philosophical content. No rest period or breathing spell can be rendered festive per se;

³ Fevrial, or Le Feurial, was the court fool of Francis I and of Louis XII. He appears repeatedly in Rabelais under the name of Triboulet. (Translator's note.)

something must be added from the spiritual and ideological dimension. They must be sanctioned not by the world of practical conditions but by the highest aims of human existence, that is, by the world of ideals. Without this sanction there can be no festivity.

The feast is always essentially related to time, either to the recurrence of an event in the natural (cosmic) cycle, or to biological or historic timeliness. Moreover, through all the stages of historic development feasts were linked to moments of crisis, of breaking points in the cycle of nature or in the life of society and man. Moments of death and revival, of change and renewal always led to a festive perception of the world. These moments, expressed in concrete form, created the peculiar character of the feasts.

In the framework of class and feudal political structure this specific character could be realized without distortion only in the carnival and in similar marketplace festivals. They were the second life of the people, who for a time entered the utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.

On the other hand, the official feasts of the Middle Ages, whether ecclesiastic, feudal, or sponsored by the state, did not lead the people out of the existing world order and created no second life. On the contrary, they sanctioned the existing pattern of things and reinforced it. The link with time became formal; changes and moments of crisis were relegated to the past. Actually, the official feast looked back at the past and used the past to consecrate the present. Unlike the earlier and purer feast, the official feast asserted all that was stable, unchanging, perennial: the existing hierarchy, the existing religious, political, and moral values, norms, and prohibitions. It was the triumph of a truth already established, the predominant truth that was put forward as eternal and indisputable. This is why the tone of the official feast was monolithically serious and why the element of laughter was alien to it. The true nature of human festivity was betrayed and distorted. But this true festive character was indestructible; it had to be tolerated and even legalized outside the official sphere and had to be turned over to the popular sphere of the marketplace.

As opposed to the official feast, one might say that carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions. Carnival was the true feast of time, the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed.

The suspension of all hierarchical precedence during carnival time was of particular significance. Rank was especially evident during official feasts; everyone was expected to appear in the full regalia of his calling, rank, and merits and to take the place corresponding to his position. It was a consecration of inequality. On the contrary, all were considered equal during carnival. Here, in the town square, a special form of free and familiar contact reigned among people who were usually divided by the barriers of caste, property, profession, and age. The hierarchical background and the extreme corporative and caste divisions of the medieval social order were exceptionally strong. Therefore such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind.

This temporary suspension, both ideal and real, of hierarchical rank created during carnival time a special type of communication impossible in everyday life. This led to the creation of special forms of marketplace speech and gesture, frank and free, permitting no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times. A special carnivalesque, marketplace style of expression was formed which we find abundantly represented in Rabelais' novel.

During the century-long development of the medieval carnival, prepared by thousands of years of ancient comic ritual, including the primitive Saturnalias, a special idiom of forms and symbols was evolved—an extremely rich idiom that expressed the unique yet complex carnival experience of the people. This experience,

opposed to all that was ready-made and completed, to all pretense at immutability, sought a dynamic expression; it demanded ever changing, playful, undefined forms. All the symbols of the carnival idiom are filled with this pathos of change and renewal, with the sense of the gay relativity of prevailing truths and authorities. We find here a characteristic logic, the peculiar logic of the "inside out" (*à l'envers*), of the "turnabout," of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrownings. A second life, a second world of folk culture is thus constructed; it is to a certain extent a parody of the extracarnival life, a "world inside out." We must stress, however, that the carnival is far distant from the negative and formal parody of modern times. Folk humor denies, but it revives and renews at the same time. Bare negation is completely alien to folk culture.

Our introduction has merely touched upon the exceptionally rich and original idiom of carnival forms and symbols. The principal aim of the present work is to understand this half-forgotten idiom, in so many ways obscure to us. For it is precisely this idiom which was used by Rabelais, and without it we would fail to understand Rabelais' system of images. This carnival imagery was also used, although differently and to a different degree, by Erasmus, Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Guevara, and Quevedo, by the German "literature of fools" (*Narren-literatur*), and by Hans Sachs, Fischart, Grimmelshausen, and others. Without an understanding of it, therefore, a full appreciation of Renaissance and grotesque literature is impossible. Not only belles lettres but the utopias of the Renaissance and its conception of the universe itself were deeply penetrated by the carnival spirit and often adopted its forms and symbols.

Let us say a few initial words about the complex nature of carnival laughter. It is, first of all, a festive laughter. Therefore it is not an individual reaction to some isolated "comic" event. Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people. Second, it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone, including the carnival's participants. The entire world is seen in its droll aspect, in its gay relativity. Third, this laughter is ambivalent: it is gay, triumphant,

and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives. Such is the laughter of carnival.

Let us enlarge upon the second important trait of the people's festive laughter: that it is also directed at those who laugh. The people do not exclude themselves from the wholeness of the world. They, too, are incomplete, they also die and are revived and renewed. This is one of the essential differences of the people's festive laughter from the pure satire of modern times. The satirist whose laughter is negative places himself above the object of his mockery, he is opposed to it. The wholeness of the world's comic aspect is destroyed, and that which appears comic becomes a private reaction. The people's ambivalent laughter, on the other hand, expresses the point of view of the whole world; he who is laughing also belongs to it.

Let us here stress the special philosophical and utopian character of festive laughter and its orientation toward the highest spheres. The most ancient rituals of mocking at the deity have here survived, acquiring a new essential meaning. All that was purely cultic and limited has faded away, but the all-human, universal, and utopian element has been retained.

The greatest writer to complete the cycle of the people's carnival laughter and bring it into world literature was Rabelais. His work will permit us to enter into the complex and deep nature of this phenomenon.

The problem of folk humor must be correctly posed. Current literature concerning this subject presents merely gross modernizations. The present-day analysis of laughter explains it either as purely negative satire (and Rabelais is described as a pure satirist), or else as gay, fanciful, recreational drollery deprived of philosophic content. The important point made previously, that folk humor is ambivalent, is usually ignored.

We shall now turn to the second form of the culture of folk humor in the Middle Ages: the comic verbal compositions, in Latin or in the vernacular.

This, of course, is not folklore proper although some of these compositions in the vernacular could be placed in that category.

But comic literature was infused with the carnival spirit and made wide use of carnival forms and images. It developed in the disguise of legalized carnival licentiousness and in most cases was systematically linked with such celebrations.⁴ Its laughter was both ambivalent and festive. It was the entire recreational literature of the Middle Ages.

Celebrations of a carnival type represented a considerable part of the life of medieval men, even in the time given over to them. Large medieval cities devoted an average of three months a year to these festivities. The influence of the carnival spirit was irresistible: it made a man renounce his official state as monk, cleric, scholar, and perceive the world in its laughing aspect. Not only schoolmen and minor clerics but hierarchs and learned theologians indulged in gay recreation as relaxation from pious seriousness. "Monkish pranks" (*Joca monacorum*) was the title of one of the most popular medieval comic pieces. Confined to their cells, monks produced parodies or semiparodies of learned treatises and other droll Latin compositions.

The comic literature of the Middle Ages developed throughout a thousand years or even more, since its origin goes back to Christian antiquity. During this long life it underwent, of course, considerable transformation, the Latin compositions being altered least. A variety of genres and styles were elaborated. But in spite of all these variations this literature remained more or less the expression of the popular carnival spirit, using the latter's forms and symbols.

The Latin parody or semiparody was widespread. The number of manuscripts belonging to this category is immense. The entire official ideology and ritual are here shown in their comic aspect. Laughter penetrates the highest forms of religious cult and thought.

One of the oldest and most popular examples of this literature, "Cyprian's supper" (*coena Cypriani*) offers a peculiar festive and carnivalesque travesty of the entire Scriptures. This work was con-

⁴ A similar situation existed in ancient Rome where comic literature reflected the licentiousness of the Saturnalias, to which it was closely linked.

secrated by the tradition of "Paschal laughter" (*risus paschalis*); the faraway echoes of the Roman Saturnalia can be heard in it. Another ancient parody is the "Grammatical Virgil Maro" (*Vergilius Maro Grammaticus*), a semiparodical learned treatise on Latin grammar which is at the same time a parody of the scholarly wisdom and of the scientific methods of the early Middle Ages. Both works, composed at the very borderline between the antique world and the Middle Ages, inaugurated this humorous genre and had a decisive influence on its later forms. Their vogue lasted almost up to the Renaissance.

In the further development of humorous Latin literature, parodical doublets of every ecclesiastical cult and teaching were created—the so-called *parodia sacra*, "sacred parody," one of the most peculiar and least understood manifestations of medieval literature. There is a considerable number of parodical liturgies ("The Liturgy of the Drunkards," "The Liturgy of the Gamblers"), parodies of Gospel readings, of the most sacred prayers (the Lord's Prayer, the Ave Maria), of litanies, hymns, psalms, and even Gospel sayings. There were parodies of wills ("The Pig's Will," "The Will of the Ass"), parodies of epitaphs, council decrees, etc. The scope of this literature is almost limitless. All of it was consecrated by tradition and, to a certain extent, tolerated by the Church. It was created and preserved under the auspices of the "Paschal laughter," or of the "Christmas laughter"; it was in part directly linked, as in the parodies of liturgies and prayers, with the "feast of fools" and may have been performed during this celebration.

There were other parodies in Latin: parodies of debates, dialogues, chronicles, and so forth. All these forms demanded from their authors a certain degree of learning, sometimes at a high level. All of them brought the echoes of carnival laughter within the walls of monasteries, universities, and schools.

Medieval Latin humor found its final and complete expression at the highest level of the Renaissance in Erasmus' "In Praise of Folly," one of the greatest creations of carnival laughter in world literature, and in von Hutten's "Letters of Obscure People."

No less rich and even more varied is medieval humorous litera-

ture composed in the vernacular. Here, too, we find forms similar to the *parodia sacra*: parodies of prayers, of sermons (the *sermons joyeux* in France), of Christmas carols, and legends of the saints. But the prevailing forms are the secular parody and travesty, which present the droll aspect of the feudal system and of feudal heroics. The medieval epic parodies are animal, jesting, roguish, foolish; they deal with heroic deeds, epic heroes (the comic Roland), and knightly tales ("The Mule without a Bridle," "Aucassin and Nicolette"). There are various genres of mock rhetoric: carnivalesque debates, comic dialogues, and *euloges*. Carnivalesque humor is also reflected in the *fabliaux* and in the peculiar comic lyrics of vagrant scholars.

All these genres are linked to carnivalesque forms and symbols more closely than the Latin parodies. But it is the medieval comic theater which is most intimately related to carnival. The first medieval comic play that has been preserved, *The Play in the Bower* by Adam de la Halle, is a remarkable example of a purely carnivalesque vision and conception of the world. De la Halle's play contains in embryonic form many aspects of Rabelais' own world. The miracle and morality plays acquired to a certain extent a carnivalesque nature. Laughter penetrated the mystery plays; the dableries which are part of these performances have an obvious carnivalesque character, as do also the *soties* produced during the late Middle Ages.

We have here described only a few better known manifestations of humorous literature, which will suffice for the posing of our problem. As we advance in our analysis of Rabelais' work we shall examine in detail these genres, as well as many less known examples of medieval humorous writings.

Let us now look at the third form of the culture of folk humor: certain specific manifestations and genres of medieval and Renaissance familiar speech in the marketplace.

We have already said that during carnival there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life. We added that