

**MUNDANE MONSTERS: THE POLITICS OF ORDINARY LIFE FROM  
GARGANTUA TO LEVIATHAN**

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*Prepared for the Canadian Political Science Association 2018 meeting.  
This is a draft, and is not for citation or circulation.*

For now, since by many prolonged, repeated experiences, I have perceived that in all cases man must eventually lower, or at least shift, his conceit of attainable felicity; not placing it anywhere in the intellect or the fancy; but in the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country.  
—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*<sup>1</sup>

Aboard the *Pequod*, one of Ishmael's occasional duties is to sit around a large bucket of spermaceti with a few of his fellow sailors, manipulating the substance by hand so as to break up the lumps. His description of the activity is rapturous, but his explanation for his pleasure, which serves as the epigraph to this paper, ties that ecstasy back into the simplicity of the task. Being elbow-deep in organic matter, accidentally squeezing the hands of his coworkers from time to time, is the spur to transcendence. These mundane joys are available to him, he says, because he has learned that "attainable felicity" is to be found in the mundane ("the wife, the heart, the bed, the table, the saddle, the fire-side, the country").

The “lower[ing], or at least shift[ing]” described by Ishmael here captures one of the major aims of a number of early modern writers, including the subjects of this paper, François Rabelais and Thomas Hobbes. Against more traditional claims about the purpose of the good life—imitating Christ, achieving military or political glory, participating actively in republican-style political life—, such thinkers promoted a good life that had more to do with minding one’s own affairs, cultivating interpersonal relationships, and relishing the pleasures of the body and mind. Carving out a space for this more or less novel vision of the good life required critiquing the aforementioned traditional views, and both Rabelais and Hobbes were adept deployers of satire to this end. This paper explores this “elevation of the mundane” in three stages: first, it

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\* This is an expanded and adapted version of a paper delivered at the University of Toronto’s Political Theory Research Workshop in March of 2017. I am grateful to everyone who attended for their comments, and especially to my discussant, Dr. Ryan Balot. I am also grateful to colleagues who read and commented on various versions of this paper, especially Dr. Ronald Beiner, Scott Dodds, Danny Hutton Ferris, Emma Planinc, Taylor Putnam, and Dan Sherwin.

<sup>1</sup> Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or The Whale* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 393.

looks at the role of language and satire in the analysis of both thinkers, and the connection of satirical critique to the mundane; second, it attempts to reconstruct Rabelais's positive political vision and compare it to that of Hobbes; and, third, it explores the divergence between the two political theories, and proposes explanations for that divergence.

### **Preliminary Challenges**

Two immediate problems are likely to strike the reader, however, so it seems prudent to attempt to address these at the beginning. The first problem is that Rabelais is not traditionally read as a political theorist, and the second is that Hobbes famously avoided articulating a positive vision of the good human life. Addressing these objections will hopefully help set the stage for the argument that follows.

Whether Rabelais can be read as a political theorist or not will depend to some extent on one's definition of political theory. For the purposes of this paper, I take the distinctiveness of political theory to consist in the following: (a) that the author presents a somewhat novel vision of how individuals ought to live together; (b) that the author provides an explanation of the goodness of that vision; and, (c) that the explanation is logically coherent. The fact that Rabelais's major works, the four (or five) books of *Gargantua and Pantagruel*,<sup>2</sup> are somewhere between an epic and a novel, rather than being a straightforward philosophic treatise, should not be an object to reading them as works of political theory. While a philosophic treatise will likely have the advantage of clarity (though Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* springs to mind as a powerful counter-example), a literary text might be able to shed light on dimensions of political life that a treatise cannot. For instance, the author of a literary text can show us political actors caught between contradictory motivations (as in *Macbeth* or *Antigone*), the quiet horrors of being

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<sup>2</sup> The fifth book of *Gargantua and Pantagruel* has been the subject of a great deal of scholarly disagreement over its authenticity, and I do not treat it here.

subject to a bureaucracy (as in Kafka's corpus), or the subtle and terrible effects of racialization on individuals and families (as in Morrison's *Beloved* or Faulkner's *Absalom Absalom*).<sup>3</sup> The current canon of political theory features such literary oddities as a dialogue and an unorthodox mirror-for-princes, so there is already good reason to think that insights can be culled from a variety of genres.

Rabelais's literary vision is not narrowed to the conduct of the individual. His novels feature kings—above all, the titular giants—who make war, solve disputes, take counsel, and enact policy. We see two successive giant-princes, Gargantua and Pantagruel, being educated according to the plans of their fathers, the kings. The descriptions are almost always comical, but they are rarely, if ever, lacking a sincere message about the importance of education and the nature of political life. Descriptions of the education of virtuous princes have passed for political theory before, as in Xenophon's *Education of Cyrus* or Erasmus's *Education of a Christian Prince*. Furthermore, Rabelais provides us with a description of a utopia, the Abbaye de Thélème, as Thomas More and Plato had done previously, as well as multiple accounts of dystopic regimes in the voyages of the *Quart Livre*. His accounts are fictive and comedic, but to the extent that they can teach us something about governance or political education, they deserve to be considered by political theorists.<sup>4</sup>

There is also Rabelais's explicit admission that he has a political message, which comes in the prologue to *Gargantua*. There, Rabelais says that the good reader will chew his pages as a dog chews a bone, to get to the marrow, where the reader will find “a very different savour and a

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<sup>3</sup> I am not claiming that any of the books I list here should be considered works of political theory, which would require separate arguments for each of them, only that literature is better designed to show us certain things about political life than is a straightforward treatise.

<sup>4</sup> This last qualifier is important. The political theorist must not only show us political decision-making, but also show or tell us how these decisions fit within a coherent, or at least deeply probing, vision of political life.

more hidden instruction which will reveal to you the highest hidden truths and the most awesome mysteries touching upon religion as well as upon matters of state [*l'estat politicq*] and family life [*vie oeconomicque*].”<sup>5</sup> Only a full interpretation of *Gargantua et Pantagruel* could be fully persuasive, but I hope these preliminary remarks show that there are reasons to embark on such an interpretation.

The second preliminary challenge, that Hobbes does not put forward a positive vision of the good life, and that he can therefore not be said to be advocating for the ordinary life or any other, is more difficult to address. That being said, I think it makes sense to ask how subjects in the leviathan-state ought to live, given Hobbes’s extensive consideration of human psychology and its relevance for political stability. Hobbes demonstrates an awareness of how unpleasant anxiety and uncertainty are for human beings,<sup>6</sup> yet also gives us little more to aspire to than our “general inclination” towards “a perpetual and restless desire of power after power, that ceaseth only in death.”<sup>7</sup> Our anxiety about impending death is reduced in the leviathan-state by the presence of a power that keeps us all (obediently) in awe, but does the leviathan-state not create the conditions for a whole new set of anxieties around our relative status in society? Fear presents an analogous problem. Fear of punishment, and of the return of the state of nature, are necessary for stability, but fear is also distressing. How can a society founded on fear and characterized by anxiety be conducive to “commodious living”?

As has been remarked by Ioannis Evrigenis, Hobbes’s negative descriptions of the state of nature and death as the “summum malum” contain elements that point away from the vision of

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<sup>5</sup> François Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. M.A. Screech (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 207 [7]. All references to Rabelais in English are to the Screech edition. Where appropriate, I include square-bracket references to the French Pléiade edition: François Rabelais, *Oeuvres Complètes*, ed. Mireille Huchon (Paris: Gallimard, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> E.g., in the fact that, in the state of nature, “diffidence”—lack of confidence in the behaviour of others—is one of the three causes of quarrel, and that war is not only direct battle but also the mere possibility of battle. See Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Edwin Curley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 75-6.

<sup>7</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 58.

the bad human life towards a more positive vision.<sup>8</sup> In *Leviathan*'s famous description of the state of nature, we are told that it is so bad in part because it has (almost) no security, no "place for industry," no

culture of the earth, no navigation, nor use of the commodities that may be imported by sea, no commodious building, no instruments of moving and removing such things as require much force, no knowledge of the face of the earth, no account of time, no arts, no letters, no society, and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.<sup>9</sup>

Some of these absences are technological instruments or specialized arts, and it is not immediately clear how they would contribute to a positive vision of human life. But others paint a clearer picture: it seems reasonable to conclude from this passage that Hobbes thinks things like "knowledge of the face of the earth" and an "account of time" contribute to what he elsewhere calls "commodious living."

More obviously, arts, letters, and society seem like important elements of a good human life and, in the final and apparently most serious category of evils, we find fear, solitude, poverty, nastiness, brutishness, and shortness. That long lives are preferable to short ones does not tell us anything about how those long lives ought to be lived, and "nasty" and "brutish" might be unclear—though perhaps they are related to the absence of arts, letters, society, and knowledge of the face of the earth—but fear, solitude, and poverty suggest clearly that Hobbes thinks the good life requires the absence of these three things.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps most interestingly, then,

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<sup>8</sup> As Evrigenis puts it, in *Leviathan*'s description of the state of nature, "death plays but a very small part, whereas uncertainty and inconvenience reign supreme, leaving little doubt about the relative balance between felicity and misery promised by the chapter's title": Ioannis Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy: The Rhetoric and Science in Hobbes's State of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 196.

<sup>9</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 76.

<sup>10</sup> Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*, 196.

Hobbes include something like friendship, or at least other human relationships, among the goods whose loss we can lament in the state of nature. In a similar vein, earlier in the same chapter Hobbes had said that “men have no pleasure, but on the contrary a great deal of grief, in keeping company where there is no power able to over-awe them all,” suggesting that “pleasure in company” is possible in the leviathan-state.<sup>11</sup> As a final consideration, according to his biographer John Aubrey, Hobbes himself seems to have been good-humoured and relatively happy throughout his long and often difficult life.<sup>12</sup> He does not seem to have been a man who thought human happiness was utterly off-limits.

### **Hermeneutical Politics**

If an account of the good human life according to Hobbes has to be reconstructed from a clearer negative account, the elevation of mundane life with which this paper is concerned was itself largely constructed in opposition to other pursuits. It is against the “nobler” pursuits of communion with God, victory in battle, active participation in republican politics, philosophic contemplation, and so on, that Rabelais and Hobbes championed the ignoble: the pleasures of eating, drinking, comfort, and friendly and bodily companionship. In order to create a space in which such pursuits could seem like aims worthy of a good human life, Rabelais and Hobbes subjected the nobler pursuits to critiques that were often scathingly satirical. We might think of the goods of mundane life as the residuum of this satirical attack on (what comes to look like) arrogance, vainglory, and pretension: mundane life is what is left when our higher aspirations have been satirized.

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<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 75.

<sup>12</sup> Aubrey makes several references to Hobbes good-naturedness, humour, and the pleasure others had in his company. See John Aubrey, “The Brief Life,” in Thomas Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. J.C.A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2208), e.g.: 237, 238, 241.

One of the primary targets of this satire were the various Christian authorities of early modern England and France, with their visions of the good life that ranged from fanatic to disciplinarian to hypocritically self-serving. At different times, Rabelais lampoons multiple monastic sects, the authorities at the Sorbonne, the papacy, and reformers. There is a personal dimension to this hostility. During his own life, his books were censored by the Sorbonne several times,<sup>13</sup> and, shortly after his death (in 1553), he was listed on the Council of Trent's 1562 Index of Prohibited Books as a "heretic of the first class."<sup>14</sup> While he managed to keep his person safe and his books in circulation through the protection of his friend the Cardinal du Bellay and legal protections (*privileges*) from both Francois I and Henri II,<sup>15</sup> Rabelais was nevertheless walking a dangerous line by providing heterodox and often scandalous takes on Christian doctrine in a France that was becoming increasingly defensive and intolerant of anything resembling heresy.

Though he was writing approximately a century later, Thomas Hobbes was also writing in a precarious political climate. In his verse autobiography, he describes fear as his "twin": Hobbes was born just as the Spanish armada was approaching the coast of England, which seems to have imbued him with a sense of the fragility of political life.<sup>16</sup> Later, as an adult, he would leave England for 11 years (1640-1651) under self-imposed exile during the English Civil War. He claims to have departed England after seeing a bishop punished for articulating a position very close to his own. While he was permitted to come home to the new Commonwealth of England, and to remain there safely after the Restoration, he spent much of his later life defending the positions he took in the *Leviathan* against claims of heresy.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Mireille Huchon, "Introduction," in Rabelais, *Oeuvres completes*, xiv.

<sup>14</sup> M.A. Screech, "Introduction," in Rabelais *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, xxvi.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii.

<sup>16</sup> See "Hobbes' Verse Autobiography," in *Leviathan*, liv.

<sup>17</sup> Perhaps most urgent among the attacks was a 1666 bill to make Christian heresy a crime, which makes specific mention of *Leviathan* as a "most poisonous piece of atheism." Quoted in Patricia Springborg, "Hobbes, Heresy, and



Rabelais and Hobbes were active during a period in which disagreement in and over words could quickly become heated or even violent. It is not surprising, then, to find that interpretation and its problems generated a major set of issues that Rabelais and Hobbes felt it necessary to confront as part of an articulation of their visions of political life. In both authors, the problems of interpretation provide a great source of satire. Interpretation is a problem inherent in language itself, and Hobbes and Rabelais are masters at revealing the strategies of power-hungry individuals and groups who will stretch plausibility to comical lengths to achieve an interpretation conducive to their own ends. In revealing these strategies, and turning them against their users, Hobbes and Rabelais both educate their readers about how to be vigilant against abuses of language, and ridicule the ambitions that motivate such abuses.

Mikhail Bakhtin refers to Rabelais's attempts, through humour, to "lead men out of the confines of the apparent (false) unity, of the indisputable and the stable,"<sup>18</sup> and this is clearly on display in his interpretations of Scripture and prophecy. He plays with Scripture in order to satirize its many abuses at the hands of the papacy and the Sorbonne. For instance, after describing the giant Gargantua's birth from his mother's ear, Rabelais cites Proverbs and I Corinthians as evidence that his readers must believe him: "The simple believeth every word," and "Charity believeth all things." The veracity of his account is further proven when he can find "nothing against it written in the Holy Bible."<sup>19</sup> The disjuncture here between what the reader is being asked to believe and what common sense will permit reveals the paucity of "proof texts" as proof of anything.<sup>20</sup>

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the *Historia Ecclesiastica*," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55/4 (October 1994), 553-71: 556. Springborg notes that the initial bill failed, but similar bills were put forward in 1674, 1675, and 1680.

<sup>18</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, tr. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 48.

<sup>19</sup> Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 226.

<sup>20</sup> In a more subtle way, this passage also recalls, mockingly, Scripture's own "unbelievable" birth story: Christ's virgin birth.

Later, Gargantua will accidentally eat six pilgrims, eject them from his mouth with a toothpick, and urinate so much that their path is flooded. The pilgrims are ultimately "comforted in their afflictions" when one of them offers a line-by-line exegesis of Psalm 124,<sup>21</sup> in mockery of Rabelais's contemporaries, who would "apply" the Psalms to contemporary events,<sup>22</sup> but also, it seems, in mockery of Church Fathers like St. Augustine, who would engage in stylistically similar line-by-line exegeses of the Psalms.<sup>23</sup>

Rabelais's mockery of the abuses of interpretation extends beyond the misinterpretation of Scripture, to such practices as prophesying—also one of Hobbes's major targets—and reading one's "lot" by randomly selecting passages in the works of Homer or Virgil.<sup>24</sup> Legal and parliamentary proceedings, especially the disputes of the Sorbonne's canon lawyers, receive similarly satirical treatment. Pantagruel's resolution of an "amazingly hard and obscure" legal case involves the two disputing lords spewing out reams of utter nonsense ("...and that is why it was a bumper-year for snail- shells throughout the whole country of Artois..."), which Pantagruel synthesizes in a similarly nonsensical decision (after pointing out that this case is much easier than many of the existing laws) that nevertheless satisfies both parties, who leave the courtroom as friends.<sup>25</sup> Language used well—which is to say in a way that tends towards harmony rather than fragmentation—is the cure for language used wickedly.

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<sup>21</sup> Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 324.

<sup>22</sup> According to M.A. Screech, this was a common practice at the French Court: *ibid.*, 322. Cf. Huchon, *OC*, 1147.

<sup>23</sup> Consider Augustine's interpretation of the same psalm, in which he claims that the "waters without substance" referred to in the Psalm are our *sins* ("For sins have not substance: they have destitution, not substance; they have want, not substance"). These are the same "waters without substance" that are interpreted by Rabelais's pilgrim as the streams of Gargantua's urine. Yet, if we confine ourselves to the psalm itself, Augustine's spiritual take is not vastly more plausible than Rabelais's deliberately crass one. See Augustine, *Expositions on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 5, tr. J. Tweed (Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1847-57), 530.

<sup>24</sup> See the interpretation of the Sybil's prophecy to Panurge: Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 471ff.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 57-74.

Through his own comedic re-enactments, Rabelais shows us what Hobbes describes so memorably when he says that "they that *insist upon single texts*, without considering the main design, can derive nothing from them clearly, but rather by casting atoms of Scripture, as dust before men's eyes, make everything more obscure than it is."<sup>26</sup> Hobbes tells us, for instance, that the torments of hellfire and purgatory are now a matter of church doctrine simply because church doctors like Augustine and Bellarmine have plucked out Scriptural passages and "haled [them] to their purposes by force of wit,"<sup>27</sup> rather than by faithful interpretation. Rabelais chooses for the most part to ridicule those who engage in hermeneutic acrobatics, or to praise those who, like Panurge and Pantagruel, can force sense out of nonsense. As is to be expected in a treatise, Hobbes approaches biblical hermeneutics more directly, and often wants to show his reader what *cannot* be found in Scripture, like the doctrine of Purgatory, or the Trinity—thereby implying that those who pretend to find such doctrines there must be acting out of self-interest.

After bringing to bear various passages from the Old Testament to show that Christ was both a *sacrificial* goat and a *scape* goat, Hobbes concludes: "Thus is the lamb of God equivalent to both these goats."<sup>28</sup> Here he parodies the difficulties of reading the Old Testament as a prefiguration of the new by drawing our attention to the mixed metaphor that results.<sup>29</sup> In another context, he refers to Luke 20:34-36 as a "fertile text," because it is ripe with a description of the resurrection to eternal life, but the adjective also puns on the fact that, according to his interpretation, the text tells us that the saved in Heaven will live eternally but will not

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<sup>26</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 410; my italics. However, as James Farr points out, Hobbes is happy to use this tack when it suits his purposes; in fact, he never considers an epistle or book from beginning to end. See Farr, "Atomes of Scripture': Hobbes and the Politics of Biblical Interpretation," in *Hobbes and Political Theory*, ed. Mary Dietz (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1990), 173.

<sup>27</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 430.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>29</sup> As Dr. Ryan Balot has point out to me, Hobbes is also equating the lamb of Christ with a well-known symbol for Satan, the goat.

reproduce—by contrast with the damned in Hell, who will continue to have children, and therefore continue to enjoy the pleasures of procreation. With this pun, he slyly derides the joys of heaven, which will not include one of the most poignant bodily pleasures, and points us back to the joys of *this* life. Hobbes prefers to use satire to highlight the *limits* of interpretation (by showing how quickly interpretations become ridiculous), whereas Rabelais shows us how endless the possibilities of interpretation are, and therefore how much nonsense can be “proven” thereby.

Like Rabelais, Hobbes does not think interpretation is a problem of biblical hermeneutics alone, but a problem of human language as such. For Hobbes, language is conventional. He tells us explicitly that words do not have fixed referents, except maybe those words God taught to Adam, to help him name the creatures "he presented to his sight" (however, Hobbes does not tell us which animals have God-given names).<sup>30</sup> In general, words must have *constant* and *common* definitions in order to be useful for communication.<sup>31</sup> *Science* is the correct ordering of words into assertions and then syllogisms, "till we come to a knowledge of all the consequences of names appertaining to the subject in hand."<sup>32</sup> Achieving common definitions is no meagre task, both because contradictory definitions are always in play at any given time (except perhaps if you are the founder of a new science, like Euclid), and because words relating to our pleasure and displeasure are necessarily "inconstant," and "can never be true grounds of any ratiocination"; unless, as in the case of honour and dishonour, they are determined *a priori* by a sovereign.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 16. Whether language was conventional or not was a major debate in Rabelais's sixteenth-century France: see Mireille Huchon, "Introduction," in Rabelais, *Oeuvres complètes*, xlv. He seems to have thought etymology was important for the understanding of a word (an anti-conventionalist position), but the reams of nonsense-words he inserts throughout his books show that he knew well that not all words have referents.

<sup>31</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 19.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-22; 115.

Hobbes provides a few (far from uncontentious) definitions of biblical words. A martyr, Hobbes tells us, is literally a "witness of the resurrection of Jesus the Messiah," so that only those who "conversed with him on earth and saw him after he was risen" can be martyrs. Even then, a martyr is not required to die, but only to give testimony.<sup>34</sup> Here, too, Hobbes's treatment is sometimes mocking: "To die for every tenet that serveth the ambition or profit of the clergy is not required"; and the modern-day martyr should not complain "if he loseth the reward he expecteth from those that never set him on work."<sup>35</sup> In this discussion, Hobbes combines philology, a proof text (Acts 1:21-22), and satire to convince his readers that the Bible does not require us to die for our faith. Those who persist in the belief that this is required are not only disrupters of civil order but also fools.<sup>36</sup> They are the pawns of the Roman and presbyterian clergy, who "assure their power" and "induce simple men into an obstinacy against the laws and commands of their civil sovereigns even to death" by pretending to have the power to determine who is a saint, a martyr, or a heretic.<sup>37</sup>

Prophets, those other great disturbers of the civil order,<sup>38</sup> receive a similarly sardonic treatment. The first mention of prophets comes in the line, "The best prophet naturally is the best guesser,"<sup>39</sup> and the second comes in a discussion of what it means to believe something on the

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, the OED bears out Hobbes's etymology: the word is from the Latin *martyr*, and the Hellenic Greek *μάρτυρ*. The OED's list of definitions also suggests that Hobbes's definition of a martyr, as "A person who bears witness for a belief" (with no reference to dying or suffering for that belief), is much rarer than the definition of a martyr as "A person who chooses to suffer death rather than renounce faith in Christ or obedience to his teachings [etc.]." The OED lists Hobbes's own definition of a martyr in *Leviathan*, chapter 42. Accessed on 7 March 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 340-1.

<sup>36</sup> This theme is taken up again, with similar sarcasm, in Hobbes's discussion of the responsibilities of a Christian under an "infidel" sovereign: "And for their *faith*, it is internal and invisible... and [they] need not put themselves into danger for it. But if they do, they ought to expect their reward in heaven, and not complain of their lawful sovereign" (410).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>38</sup> "False prophecies" are brought up as early as chapter 2 of *Leviathan* (11), as one of the ways "by which crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people," in the absence of which, "men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience."

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

authority of another, in which belief in the words of the prophets is analogous to believing Livy when he tells us that the gods once made a cow speak.<sup>40</sup> In both cases, the question is the reliability of the speaker, not the reliability of God (or the gods, or even the speaking cow). The third time Hobbes mentions prophets, it is to point out that the Greeks "called madmen prophets."<sup>41</sup> When it comes to discussing prophets as they are described in the Bible, Hobbes is less hostile, but satire still plays an important role. Like Rabelais's Sybil, prophets might be those who "were for the time really mad, and spake like madmen, of whose loose words a sense might be made to fit any event, in such sort as all bodies are said to be made of *materia prima*."<sup>42</sup>

Hobbes also calls into question God's very ability to speak in anything like the human sense, in a characteristically satirical manner. Taking up the argument of "the prophet David," in Psalm 94:9 ("Shall he that made the eye, not see? or he that made the ear, not hear?"), Hobbes runs this to its comical conclusion: "But if it were to be taken in the strict and proper sense, one might argue from his making of all other parts of man's body that he had also the same use of them which we have; which would be many of them so uncomely as it would be the greatest contumely in the world to ascribe them to him."<sup>43</sup> Here, as elsewhere, we see that satire can bring lofty ruminations back down to earth. Ultimately, befuddled by the many contradictory passages he consults, Hobbes is compelled to conclude that "in what manner God spake to those sovereign prophets of the Old Testament whose office it was to enquire of him is not intelligible."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 37. This in turn relies on the claim that it is not God speaking *through* prophets, but prophets following God's commands. See 44: "Neither did the other prophets of the Old Testament pretend enthusiasm, or that God spake *in them*, but *to them* [my italics], by voice, by vision, or dream; and the *burden of the Lord* [Hobbes's italics] was not possession, but command." The issue is further complicated by Hobbes's claim that our natural reason is "the undoubted word of God" (245); if God speaks to us through natural reason, do we not all have direct access to His words?

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 43. These are the first three mentions of "prophet/s" according to Curley's index of *Leviathan* (checked against Noel Malcolm's edition online). "Prophecies" are mentioned earlier; see my footnote 11.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 288.

Hobbes's interpretations of Scripture perform a number of functions.<sup>45</sup> They shed light on the difficulty of interpreting anything, especially Scripture, which can employ irreconcilable definitions of the same word, and can generally be obscure. They also serve to show that some doctrines, like the eternal torment of the damned, have no real basis in Scripture, and are therefore better understood as a bulwark of priestly power than anything else. More interestingly, his interpretations employ humour to derogate from the seriousness of Scripture itself (or at least the act of interpreting it) and show us how Scripture can be abused (by nefarious clergymen) or manipulated to the benefit of all (by Hobbes himself, or by a sovereign suitably instructed by the *Leviathan's* example). His interpretation of Scripture therefore serves to prove that only the sovereign can interpret Scripture, but that the sovereign should find its model in Hobbes's *Leviathan*.<sup>46</sup> The prophetic word of God should be brought into line with the natural word of God (reason, from which Hobbes derives his civil science). James Farr puts it nicely while listing Hobbes principles of Biblical interpretation: "Put Scripture in its place, at the end; let it confirm that which has come before and let it have the last word."<sup>47</sup>

Hobbes is more concerned than Rabelais with the ease with which Scripture can be abused. There are always more false prophets than true,<sup>48</sup> and the importance for civil science (and therefore for peace) of achieving *common* and *constant* definitions of political words is so great that the sovereign must ultimately decide on interpretations of Scripture. The kind of hermeneutical free play that Rabelais advocates for is too much for Hobbes. Rabelais hopes that the destabilizing power of satire will diffuse tense situations and bring all parties back to laughter and good-naturedness. Hobbes uses satire to destabilize the authority of those who claim a

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<sup>45</sup> For a more exhaustive list of these functions, see Farr, "Atomes of Scripture," 175.

<sup>46</sup> Clifford Orwin, "On the Sovereign Authorization," in *Political Theory* 3 (February 1975), 36.

<sup>47</sup> Farr, "Atomes of Scripture," 184.

<sup>48</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 291.

monopoly on biblical interpretation, and use that monopoly to oppress others. But he wants to set up a new monopoly on interpretation, with the difference that this new monopoly will be informed by Hobbesian civil science. He does not want to let a thousand interpretations bloom.

### **Laughter and Equality**

It would be a mistake, however, to overlook the extent to which Hobbes is willing to use humour to unsettle the existing order. Satire is an excellent tool for cutting us down to size, recalling as it does our common bodily natures, functions, and vulnerabilities, but Hobbes thinks that we much prefer laughing at others than at ourselves, and is less sanguine about the dangers of too much laughter.<sup>49</sup> Rabelais seems more optimistic that we can laugh at ourselves. Much of his humour comes from reminding us what our pretensions have made us forget: that we are flesh and blood, who eat and drink and defecate and fall ill. Yet the point is never to humiliate. For Rabelais, as Mikhail Bakhtin writes, "to degrade an object does not imply merely hurling it into the void of nonexistence, into absolute destruction, but to hurl it down to the reproductive lower stratum, the zone in which conception and a new birth take place."<sup>50</sup>

Hobbes is interested in effecting a similar recognition of our bodily equivalence. He does so most powerfully in *Leviathan's* famous chapter on the state of nature, where he states that Nature hath made men so equal in the faculties of body and mind as that, though there be found one man sometimes manifestly stronger in body or of quicker mind than another, yet when all is reckoned together the difference between man and man is not so considerable as that one man can thereupon claim to himself any benefit to which another may not pretend as well as he

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<sup>49</sup> Consider his comically dour account of laughter as the result of "sudden glorying" on account of our own relative superiority: *ibid.*, 32.

<sup>50</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 21.



and that the weakest has "strength enough to kill the strongest, either by secret machination, or by confederacy with others."<sup>51</sup> There is something tragicomic in Hobbes's presentation of humans in the state of nature: we kill each other for the sake of our "delectation," and we will murder another for something we want, without recognizing that, if the object is desirable enough, we will quickly be murdered in kind.<sup>52</sup> Lest we think we have come a long way from these pathetically need and violent creatures, Hobbes reminds us that we lock our doors and travel armed even in a society with laws and public officers, because we so distrust each other.<sup>53</sup>

He reserves his most poignant satire for those who consider themselves wise, however. We know human beings are equal in point of intelligence because everyone thinks they are wiser than "the vulgar"—that is, "all men but themselves and a few others whom, by fame or for concurring with themselves, they approve"—, and "there is not ordinarily a greater sign of the equal distribution of anything than that every man is contented with his share."<sup>54</sup> Humans never think they have been given enough, yet everyone thinks they have more than enough intelligence. This is very clever, and it hides a profound point: we are all equally prone to overestimating our own abilities; our common desire for glory keeps us from seeing our natural equality.<sup>55</sup>

Stripped of whatever intellectual or physical superiority we thought would protect us, we are forced to confront the brittleness of our own bodies.<sup>56</sup> We are vulnerable because our passions, and the passions of others, drive us ineluctably into conflicts the results of which are rendered uncertain by our relative equality. The leviathan-state is only a partial solution to this

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<sup>51</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 74.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>55</sup> See Gabriella Slomp, *Thomas Hobbes and the Political Philosophy of Glory* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000), 30.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

problem, and it works only insofar as we remember our own fragility even in society.<sup>57</sup> Yet the fear of death that results from our sense of bodily and intellectual vulnerability is not our only motivation for entering society: Hobbes lists "desire of such things as are necessary to commodious living, and a hope by their industry to obtain them" alongside fear of death, as "the passions that incline men to peace."<sup>58</sup> Hobbes had provided a rough sketch of those "things... necessary to commodious living" earlier, right in the midst of his description of the state of nature: this state makes impossible navigation, arts and letters, society, "commodious building," and several other goods.<sup>59</sup>

This opens the door to thinking about the role of ordinary life in Hobbes's political theory. Hobbes does not expend any literary energies on describing the joys of the mundane, but he does expend great energies on descriptions of the horrors of its loss. What is terrifying in the state of nature is not just the prospect of death, but the prospect of losing things like society, knowledge, bodily comfort, and imported goods. It is important to notice in this respect that the things we lose are not *political* goods like sharing in deliberating and judging, or *martial* goods like military glory, or even *spiritual* goods like communion with God or other Christians. They are the goods of ordinary, apolitical life—dependent, of course, on the sovereign state.

In Rabelais this connection between satire and the pleasures of the body can also be found. Perhaps it is not surprising that a satirical treatment of our loftier ambitions as human beings should end by reaffirming the lower, more tangible parts of life. Rabelais's exemplary monk, Frère Jean, is a master of interpreting "any sacred text in the sense of eating, drinking, and

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<sup>57</sup> See Evrigenis, *Images of Anarchy*, 189: "there [*sc.*, in the preface to *De cive*], true to his claim to novelty, he promised no panacea for the reader's troubles, but only held up the prospect of uncertainty, misery, and a violent death as the alternative to a commodious, if imperfect, life."

<sup>58</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 78.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

eroticism, and transpos[ing] it from the Lenten to the carnival 'obscene' level": for instance, Christ's last words on the cross, *I thirst*, are interpreted as referring to Christ's bibulousness; and the beginning of Psalm 121, *I lift up unto thee*, is taken to refer to the tumescent male sex organ.<sup>60</sup>

Frère Jean is a Rabelaisian paradigm: a monk who would scandalize any true monastic community with his sacrilegious use of Scripture and his utter incontinence, but who also possesses the virtues Rabelais finds absent in most Christians: "He's no bigot; he's not tattered-and-torn; he's decent, joyful and resolute. He toils, he travails, he defends the oppressed; he comforts the afflicted; he succours the needy."<sup>61</sup> These are less a list of heroic virtues than of qualities required for everyday living. And the pleasures associated with Frère Jean are unmistakably bodily: drinking, eating, laughing, and having sex.

The giant Gargantua eventually offers Frère Jean his own monastery, the Abbey of Thélème, which is ordered according to Rabelaisian principles: monks and nuns live together, and spend their time in drinking, playing, learning, and even courting. There is only one clause in the Abbey's rule, and it is about as far from Hobbes as you can get: "*Fay ce que voudras*" ("*Do what thou wilt*").<sup>62</sup> As I have tried to show throughout, the proximity between Hobbes and Rabelais on many issues is frequently betrayed by Rabelais's willingness to allow playfulness and tolerance a much greater scope than Hobbes can sanction, and this is perhaps nowhere more visible than in the animating principle of the Abbey of Thélème.

### **Hobbes and Rabelais on the Best Regime**

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<sup>60</sup> Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 86-7. See *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 327; 331.

<sup>61</sup> Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 330.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 373 [149].

The basics of Hobbes's positive political vision are well-known, and I will not rehash them here. Rabelais's are much less well-known, so I will sketch them here for the sake of charting the agreements and differences between the two thinkers. There is room for disagreement about where to look for Rabelais's positive political vision. A number of interpreters have looked to the Abbey of Thélème mentioned above, and concluded that, to the extent that Rabelais has any positive political vision, it is to be found in the way of life of the abbey, which is characterized by simple, mundane pleasures and a complete freedom of the wills that nevertheless results in the wills of all the members ending up in sync. It is a vision of simplicity, pleasure, and organic harmony.

I do not disagree that Rabelais holds up Thélème as a kind of utopian vision, but both because it is a religious community, and because it exists under the protective auspices of a larger kingdom, it seems more plausible to read the description of Thélème as satirically utopian, and there are other places to look for Rabelais's views on political life. The more realistic positive vision of politics comes from the giants who rule as princes and kings throughout the work. The giants after whom the works are named, Gargantua and Pantagruel, are king and prince respectively, and the father of Gargantua, a giant named Grandgousier, is the ruler at the story's beginning.

Despite being a giant, Grandgousier is shown in a more "human" light than would have been usual even for human kings at the time. In one episode, he is shown cooking and warming his privates by a nice big fire ("*un beau clair et grand feu*") and entertaining his family with stories from the past. The scene is homey, and it is jarring to find a king described in such an intimate setting (intimate both because of the private pleasure he is taking in warming his most private parts, and because he is in intimate communion with his family). The suggestion of the

passage is that the sweetest moments, even for a king, are moments of private sensual pleasure that are nevertheless social, since Grandgousier is communicating his ease and pleasure, as it were, through his entertaining stories, and thereby expanding his merely private pleasure into a social one. The sweetness of the scene is underlined by the fact that it is bookended by, on the one side, a description of the preparations a neighbouring king, Picrochole, is making for war and, on the other, Grandgousier's realization that he must leave his hearth and begin preparations for war.

The giant makes clear his reluctance to abandon peace for war. In the speech he gives upon hearing of his neighbour's preparations for war, he states emphatically that his whole life he has pursued nothing more eagerly than peace, but that he must gear up for war. Reason demands it, he continues, because he is maintained by their labour, and from their sweat he and his family are fed. He concludes by saying that he will nevertheless not undertake a war until all the "arts and means of peace" have been tried.<sup>63</sup> Finally, he brings together his counselors to debate how to proceed. Rabelais shows his reader that kings are embodied individuals with pleasures like our own, and that they will be better rulers to the extent that they share their subjects' affection for peace and its ordinary pleasures rather than the pleasures of military conquest and glory. He also shows the mutual indebtedness that constitutes the relationship of kings to subjects: kings are indebted to subjects for their sustenance and nourishment while subjects are indebted to kings for the peace that allows them to live full lives. The best kings, like Grandgousier, will be ready to acknowledge such indebtedness.

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<sup>63</sup> Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 298-9 [83].

Another scene in which Grandgousier is seen ruling as a good king should takes place at the feast at which Gargantua will be born, after his mother eats too much tripe,<sup>64</sup> and Grandgousier and the queen are depicted banqueting with their subjects. After dining, they all descend into the garden to dance together on the grass, to the music of horns and bagpipes. They are depicted as going down “*pelle melle*,” suggesting the great extent to which the queen and king are comfortable mixing and celebrating with their people, and the narrator tells us that they all danced together so joyfully that it was a “celestial pastime” (“*passetemps celeste*”) to watch them so enjoying themselves (“*les veoir ainsi soy rigouller*”).<sup>65</sup> Here, as throughout the works, Rabelais’s heroes pursue pleasure with great relish, but this pleasure is enhanced, rather than constrained, by the presence of others. In this case, the pleasure itself is political: the king and queen remind their subjects and themselves of their common humanity by dancing, eating, and generally mixing together. As Michael Randall, who draws attention to the political relevance of the passage, puts it, “This literary image can be understood as making the same political points as that made by more theoretically explicit texts. Grandgousier is described as moving amongst his people and literally being one with them.”<sup>66</sup> The crown of the event is the birth of the new prince, Gargantua, born where he belongs: down among his future subjects.

Like Hobbes, Rabelais’s political vision is monarchical, and in both cases the monarchs seem to rule absolutely—which is to say, in the absence of formal, institutional restraints. When Grandgousier decides to go to war, he does not seem to need the approval of a *parlement* or anyone else. That being said, he does immediately call together his counselors, drawing our attention to an important theme of Rabelais’s political thought, and indeed early modern

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 224-7. It is of course symbolic that Gargantua is born at a feast. Rabelais takes this symbolism a step further, and renders it more tangible, by having Gargantua be born as a *direct* result of his mother’s over-feasting.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 219 [17].

<sup>66</sup> Michael Randall, *The Gargantuan Polity*, 172.

monarchical thought more generally: the importance of counsel as an informal check on sovereignty. (It is worth noting that the enemy in this war, Picrochole, is brought to ruin in part by bad counsel given by his greedy governors, who want to benefit from their king's conquest of far too much territory.)<sup>67</sup> The prince Pantagruel also surrounds himself with a band of counsellors. He seeks their advice frequently but always makes final decisions himself, as a good sovereign ought to. Rabelais also offers his readers a negative image of a king who does not take counsel or listen to his people, in the figure of Messer Gaster, who has no ears, as a symbol of his inability or unwillingness to listen. Gaster, the king who refuses to hear anyone else, is depicted as the worst tyrant.<sup>68</sup>

Another concern that Rabelais shares with other early modern proponents of absolute monarchy is a concern for the proper education of the prince, again as an informal check on the monarch.<sup>69</sup> The importance of education is emphasized by a letter that Gargantua writes for his son, Pantagruel, when the latter is being educated in Paris. (Gargantua himself had been given a very thorough and careful education by his own father, which Rabelais describes for the reader.)<sup>70</sup> The education Gargantua proposes to his son is of giant proportions: he is to learn Greek (in the style of Plato), Latin (in the style of Cicero), Hebrew, Chaldaic, and Arabic; all the sciences, including history, medicine, and civil law; and the names of all the natural phenomena, so that there is not a feature of the natural world with which Pantagruel is not familiar.<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 307-13.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 830ff. Gaster clearly represents the belly, which rules the body as a tyrant, but I follow Michael Randall in reading Gaster as a symbol for tyranny, as well. See Randall, *The Gargantuan Polity*, 189-91.

<sup>69</sup> See Randall, *The Gargantuan Polity*, 178-80. Randall notes that the emphasis on the role of the educator and counsellor as check on absolute monarchy places new importance on the writer, a responsibility that Rabelais and Hobbes seem happy to accept. (Cf. Hobbes's self-referential description of the ideal counsellor at *Leviathan*, 170; and, Erasmus's claim that "A country owes everything to a good prince; but it owes the prince himself to the one whose right counsel has made him what he is": Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, trans. Lisa Jardine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 6.

<sup>70</sup> Rabelais, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, 278-87.

<sup>71</sup> For Gargantua's letter to his son, see *ibid.*, 44-50 [241-5, esp. 244-5].

very list of subjects to be mastered evinces a kind of wonder at the enormous body of human knowledge which remains, despite its size, minute compared to the world as object of study.

While the extent of the education might be satirical, the importance of education is treated with a profound gravity that is all the more striking for being rare. Gargantua begins the letter by saying that, of all the goods that God has granted to human beings, the most excellent seems to be the kind of immortality (“*espece de immortalité*”) bestowed on us by our ability to perpetuate ourselves through our children. Late in life, Gargantua has had the pleasure of seeing his own “hoary old age” (“*mon antiquité chanue*”) flowering again in Pantagruel’s youth, and when his soul departs, he will not consider himself entirely dead, because in his son and by his son (“*en toy et par toy*”) he will stay in this world, “living, seeing, and frequenting honourable persons and [his] friends” as he always has.<sup>72</sup> To this end, Gargantua has spared nothing in his attempt to educate Pantagruel into the image of his father, and has guarded him “as though I had no other treasure in the world.”<sup>73</sup> Coming as it does so early in Rabelais’s first book—*Pantagruel* being the second book dramatically speaking, but the first to have been published—, this letter leaves no doubt as to the importance of learning for the author.

While I hope to have shown Rabelais’s concern for education and counsel as informal checks on absolute monarchy,<sup>74</sup> many questions remain on the table regarding his positive political vision. This is largely because there is not space here to provide more than a taste of his political theory, but it is also because of the nature of fiction, as opposed to the treatise form.

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 46 [242].

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. [243]. Cf. Erasmus, *The Education of a Christian Prince*, 7: “the prince can leave no finer monument to his good qualities than a son who is in every way of the same stock and who recreates his father’s excellence in his own excellent actions. He does not die who leaves a living likeness of himself.”

<sup>74</sup> Erasmus makes the connection explicit: “when a prince is born to office, not elected... then the main hope of getting a good prince hangs on his education, which should be managed all the more attentively, so that what has been lost with the right to vote is made up for by the care given to his upbringing”: quoted in Randall, *The Gargantuan Polity*, 178-9; Erasmus, *Education of a Christian Prince*, 5.



Fiction can be very effective at *showing* us certain aspects of political life. In Rabelais's case, he shows us how kingly judgement ought to be exercised, how kings ought to remind themselves and their people of the rough equality that pertains between them, and how much care they ought to put into educating their children. He also shows how ridiculous so many of the wars of words are, how laughable so many of our pretensions to superiority are, and how truly good the pleasures of mundane life can be.

Yet fiction either cannot or can only rarely *tell* us about political life the way a treatise does. Consider the case of Hobbes here. On my account, Rabelais and Hobbes share a preference for monarchical rule; a deep concern with education, both of citizens and sovereigns;<sup>75</sup> an emphasis on the role of counsel;<sup>76</sup> grave apprehension about abuses of language; and a concern to promote the lower but truer goods of mundane life over the higher but illusory goods of ambitious striving. Hobbes is explicit about why he thinks monarchical rule is best, who should counsel the sovereign and how, and, to a lesser extent, what should be taught.<sup>77</sup> (This should nevertheless not be overstated: Hobbes's endorsement of monarchy is qualified by his admission that it is the only thing he has not "demonstrated,"<sup>78</sup> and his frequent recourse to irony suggests that we must read even his explicit admissions sensitively.) On the other hand, Rabelais does not tell us exactly why he prefers monarchy, or exactly how counsel should be conducted, and his educational plan, which I take to be sincere in its emphasis on the importance of education, is

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<sup>75</sup> For an excellent treatment of the role of education in Hobbesian political thought, see Teresa Bejan, "Teaching the *Leviathan*: Thomas Hobbes on Education," in *The Oxford Review of Education* 36 (2010/5): 607-626.

<sup>76</sup> For one of the few treatments of the role of counsel in Hobbes's political thought, see Gabriella Slomp, "The Inconvenience of the Legislator's Two Persons and the Role of Good Counsellors," in the *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 19 (2016/1): 68-85. For the importance of counsel in early modern absolutist thought, see Nannerl Keohane, *Philosophy and the State in France: The Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017).

<sup>77</sup> Hobbes all but says that *Leviathan* should be taught in the universities: *Leviathan*, 226.

<sup>78</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 14

nevertheless of too gigantic proportions to be a serious template for actual kings. (Though the very size might be educational: kings should be keenly aware of how much they do not know.)

The reader is left to infer lessons from what Rabelais has shown.

With this caveat in mind, I will try to summarize what I take to be the basics of Rabelais's political thought. Monarchy is the best regime when monarchs are either visibly superior or made to seem superior to their subjects<sup>79</sup> while nevertheless recognizing their indebtedness to their people and their need to keep those people living together peacefully and harmoniously (as Grandgousier is seen doing). Monarchy permits subjects to be free from the political decision-making process<sup>80</sup> and thereby to contribute to political life in a greater variety of ways—commerce, farming, fighting, and learning, as one might expect, but equally importantly, through contributions to the social sphere (cooking, jokes, rearing of children, participation in social events like feasts or the peaceful resolution of disputes, and so on),<sup>81</sup> the happy harmoniousness of which justifies monarchical rule. The best restraints on monarchy are not *parlements*, the courts, the church, or aristocratic factionalism, but the best possible counsel and education. Subjects should not be interested in dominating each other or attempting to influence political decision-making but should focus instead on “minding their own business”: contributing in their own way to the good of the community and enjoying as much as possible the pleasures of mundane life. As with Hobbes, Rabelais seems to think that those most in need

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<sup>79</sup> The giant size of Rabelais's monarchs might be meant to symbolize their superiority to their subjects, or it might be meant, like the footpan of Amasis referred to by Aristotle and Herodotus, to symbolize the importance for political stability of having a single, undisputed decision-making power. See Aristotle, *Politics*, 1259b9-10.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, 120-1. For Hobbes, the shift from democracy to aristocracy occurs when democrats grow “weary of attendance at public courts, as dwelling far off, or being attentive to their private business, and withal displeased with the government of the people.”

<sup>81</sup> Panurge's encomium/eulogy to debt (*Tiers Livre*, chs. 3-4) suggests the way human beings and the universe as a whole are already tied together through myriad bonds of credit and debt, which are not imagined in merely financial terms. I read this as opening up the possibility that the individual's contribution to political life might be imagined in much more capacious terms than either a capitalist (job- and wealth-production) or republican (direct political participation) model.

of education are the arrogant few, who want to dominate, whereas the poor want primarily to be left alone.

Hobbes, however, portrays humans as more conflict-prone than does Rabelais,<sup>82</sup> and therefore wants his educational programme to extend to everyone, not just to aristocratic troublemakers.<sup>83</sup> In so doing, Hobbes teaches both that our innate ambition often leads us into error and foolishness and that such ambition is innate and inescapable, suggesting that society might be intractably competitive and anxious. Perhaps his intention is to reduce human anxiety around competition by bringing it out into the open, and by satirizing it, so that it becomes less poignant (even if it can never be removed entirely),<sup>84</sup> but his reluctance to further a vision of the life of the ordinary subject of the leviathan-state leaves it unclear whether “commodious living” is ever actually achievable (and what it would look like) or whether comfort is only ever a brief rest-stop on the endless highway of interpersonal competition. In this light, Rabelais’s much more vivid vision of the joys of mundane life, and his depiction of political life as the harmonious but varied contributions of all its members, seems like a more attractive way of wedding personal pleasure with the common good.

Hobbes’s solution to the abuse of language, as we have already seen, is also more universalistic and disciplinarian: a sovereign with the right of interpretation and as much agreement as possible on the definitions of words, especially potentially inflammatory ones. Again, Rabelais’s solution, which employs well-meaning linguistic play to undermine the

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<sup>82</sup> On our natural “prickliness,” see Arash Abizadeh, “Hobbes on the Causes of War: A Disagreement Theory,” in *APSR* 105 (2011/2): 298-315.

<sup>83</sup> This is because he thinks the power of the trouble-makers is based upon the ignorance of the people: Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Some kind of concern with status also seems necessary for the leviathan-state to function. Consider Hobbes’s cheeky response in the preface to *De Cive* that “few except those who love praise do anything to deserve it”; or, his claim that only in monarchy is the private interest of the ruler the same as the public interest, because there “the riches, power, and *honour* [my italics] of a monarch arise only from the riches, strength, and reputation of his subjects”: Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, 13; *Leviathan*, 120.

importance of disputes, seems more promising. We can accept the seriousness of the war on words while nevertheless thinking that well-meaning and well-directed satire is a better solution than a state-imposed silence.<sup>85</sup> At minimum, such a communally-minded satire would ridicule the foundations of the debate rather than joining one side in order to pillory the other.

### **Epilogue**

I hope to have shown that there are many similarities between the political visions of Rabelais and Hobbes, but that the seeming distance between the two is also real: the genre and tone of each author is in keeping with the divergence in their solutions. As Bakhtin describes Rabelais's political vision, "here fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety."<sup>86</sup> Rabelais's laughter "overcomes fear, for it knows no inhibitions, no limitations."<sup>87</sup> Hobbes, by contrast, taught his readers that "the passion to be reckoned upon is fear" (88). His vision of a world without inhibitions or limitations is the hellish state of nature, where the pursuit of the pleasures of the body reach such a pitch that individuals will kill or use each other for their own pleasure. Hobbes stressed both the fragility of political life, and the horrors of its absence, much more than did Rabelais, and his desire to be as meticulous as possible in its preservation explains many of the differences between the two.

In a fascinating article exploring the possibility that authors like Rabelais contain the seeds of "another modernity" than our own, Raymond Geuss describes the shift from thinkers like Rabelais to thinkers like Hobbes in dramatic terms:

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<sup>85</sup> For a fuller discussion of Hobbes's solution ("civil silence") and of the early modern "war of words" more generally, see Teresa Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017).

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-9.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

For one moment there was a prospect of a "modern world" in which there might be sceptical tolerance, the affirmation of life and a conception of liberty not limited to disciplined self-regulation, the internalised policeman. A politics that arose from a realistic estimation of the possibilities of peaceful human co-existence also seemed possible. Certainly we did not have to wait long for the reaction: in the form of the modern state (Hobbes); Descartes' epistemology; and Kant's restoration of a vulgar Christian ethic based upon fideism. To recognise this as a reverse, to see it for what it was and is, is one of the most important tasks for political philosophy at the beginning of the twenty-first century.<sup>88</sup>

I sympathize with Geuss's lament for this alternative modernity, even if Hobbes was not as humourless and pessimistic as Geuss's grouping of him suggests. Like Rabelais, Hobbes also affirms the pleasures of mundane life, even if his strategy for doing so is primarily negative. Where he breaks from Rabelais, and promotes discipline through fear, it is precisely for the sake of peace and its attendant goods. Fear can and should be alleviated in the leviathan-state, but Hobbes recognizes that hope can be even more dangerous than fear, when it is hope to rule over others, or to enjoy their possessions or bodies without consent. Fear must therefore remain part of our psychological economy, according to Hobbes, but whether we can keep fear and anxiety so close at hand while also enjoying full human lives is a difficulty with which we continue to live. Perhaps it is time to give Rabelaisian modernity a try.

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<sup>88</sup> Raymond Geuss, "The Actual and Another Modernity: Order and Imagination in *Don Quixote*," in *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008), 14-25: 23.