

Rabelais's Uncommon Villains: A Reinterpretation of *Quart Livre* 45-7

Vilenie: f. *Villanie*, *vilenesse*, *roquerie*, *knaverie*, *lewdnesse* [...] ¹

The word “villain”, which originally signified low social standing but came to signify low moral standing, has in fiction the more specialized meaning of a person who works against the good characters. ²

This article discusses the representation of villainy and of villain figures in Francois Rabelais's comic fictions. ³ Hitherto the subject has not received specific, sustained analysis in Rabelaisian scholarship, despite the frequent evocation of villainous deeds and persons across Rabelais's works. Indeed, to my knowledge, no serious, systematic exploration of villainy *per se* currently exists in French Renaissance studies. In recent decades scholars of the English Renaissance have begun to reflect upon the intrinsic moral qualities of villains in Elizabethan and Jacobean drama; and it is from one such study by Eugene Waith (1993) that I take my lead. As quoted above, Waith identifies a fundamental, broad divergence of meaning in the history of the English term *villain*, from the social to the moral – and accompanying this shift, a dominant tendency to conceptualize the villain asymmetrically vis-à-vis the hero: as the latter ultimately triumphs, one rejoices in the former's demise. Waith's observations form a useful point of departure for studying villainy in Rabelais's works; nevertheless, I contend, the villain in Rabelais cannot be

¹ R. Cotgrave, *Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611), n.p.

² E. Waith, ‘Concern for Villains’, *Renaissance Drama: New Series XXIV* (1993), 155-70 (155).

³ All references are to M. Huchon's edition of the *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris, 1994). Abbreviations: *P*: *Pantagruel*; *G*: *Gargantua*; *TL*: *Tiers Livre*; *QL*: *Quart Livre*.

reduced to ‘a person who works against the good characters’. The Rabelaisian villain is a complex figure – one whose social and moral standing is sometimes far from clear-cut.

To understand this complexity, we must identify and explore the French terms with which Rabelais is working: the word *villain* / *vilain* and its various cognates (*vilenie*, *vilainement*, *vil*, *vileté*, etc).⁴ The main focus will be the *Quart Livre* (1552), and specifically the episode of Papefiguière (chapters 45-7). Reading this episode for the first time through the lens of the *vilain* word group, my interpretation will vary substantially from those given by Frank-Rutger Hausmann and by Franco Giacone – the most thorough modern studies of QL 45-7.⁵ Giacone’s recent piece is a meticulous, historicizing account of these chapters, in which the Papefigues are judged to be an allegory of the Jews’ plight in the Renaissance. Hausmann’s analysis is a nuanced attempt to situate the story of the Papefigues in relation to Mediterranean folklore and to historical developments of the French Reformation. Both Hausmann and Giacone have produced valuable insights into the Papefigue narrative. Neither, however, directly comments upon the uncommon, unstable depictions of villainy which flavour Rabelais’s narrative of Papefiguière, as I shall attempt here. By studying Rabelais’s use – and intriguing non-use – of the *vilain* word-cluster, we may appreciate the wider significance of a lowly peasant couple, whose humorous encounters with a junior devil constitute the central narrative thread of the Papefiguière episode. It is in these encounters, I argue, that we discover Rabelais’s thinking of villains in its full maturation.

⁴ Standardized spellings of these terms did not exist in the sixteenth century. Hereafter I use *vilain* and *vilenie* as default orthographic forms, except when citing Rabelais, who mostly uses *villain*.

⁵ Hausmann, ‘Comment doit-on lire l’épisode de «L’Isle des Papefigues» (*Quart Livre*, 45-47)’, in *Rabelais en son demi-millénaire*, eds. J. Céard and J-C Margolin (Geneva, 1983), pp.121-9; Giacone, ‘Relecture de l’épisode de l’isle des Papefigues (*Quart Livre*, XLV-XLVII)’, in Giacone (ed.), *Langue et sens du Quart Livre* (Paris, 2012), pp.411-30.

I The Rabelaisian villain: an introduction

Rabelais's celebrated comic fictions present a bristling array of villains, in which we find some of the most disturbing depictions of villainy in the European Renaissance. A comprehensive exploration of this diversity is beyond the scope of this article. I set out here some preliminary *pistes de réflexion* on the *vilain* word group across Rabelais's works. In sixteenth-century French, the term *vilain* had strong moral connotations, signifying a range of devious behaviours which ran contrary to ideals of nobility and heroism.⁶ *Vilain*, furthermore, retained a strong social colouring, denoting a person of low birth.⁷ Crucially, in many cases, the term *vilain* and its cognates implied a fusion of social and moral categories, together with an aesthetics of ugliness: hence the villain was frequently portrayed as a lowborn whose conduct and appearance were in some sense repulsive, eliciting an aggressive response. Rabelais, we shall see, embellishes common moral, social and aesthetic aspects of villainy throughout his works, continually reflecting on their compatibility – or otherwise.

The Rabelaisian villain, firstly, is a foe to be beaten with outright violence. Rabelais's parodic epic chronicles pursue this line of commonplace thought to its bloodthirsty conclusions.

⁶ Robert Estienne's *Dictionnaire françoislatin* (1539) provides apt evidence of the basic moral connotations of the *vilain* word group in sixteenth-century French. According to Estienne, *vilain* and its cognates could signify shades of miserliness (*illiberalitas*), sordidness (*sordes, turpitude*), impurity (*impuritas*), as well as injurious words.

⁷ As a substantive, *vilain* was in the first instance a morally neutral marker of social standing. In this sense *vilain* (and its English counterparts *villain* / *villein*) derived from the medieval Latin *villanus*, signifying an inhabitant of the rural *villa*. From the eleventh century the *vilain* occupied a lowly position in the feudal system: he was a poor tenant entirely subject to a local *seigneur*, to whom he paid annual dues and services *en villenage* (i.e. in exchange for a small portion of land): see E. Huguet, *Dictionnaire de la langue française du seizième siècle*, 7 vols (1925-67), VII (Paris, 1967), p.475; E. Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 4 vols and supplement (1878-89), IV (Paris, 1889), p.2492: 'rente vilaine, terre vilaine, celle qui n'est pas tenu par un noble'. As enfranchisement from *seigneuries* advanced in the later Middle Ages, *vilain* (subst.) became synonymous to an extent with *roturier*, a social and legal term denoting a non-noble, urban or rural. Such persons had in some cases begun to acquire money. In the *Fabliaux*, the wealthy *vilain* features reasonably prominently: he is a miser ('aver et chiche') who does not put his recently acquired fortune to good use. See M-T. Lorcin, *Façons de sentir et de penser: les fabliaux français* (Paris, 1979), p.151. See also A. Greimas and T. Keane, *Dictionnaire du moyen français: la Renaissance* (Paris, 1992), p.658: 'thesorizer est faict de vilain' (a saying noted by Rabelais in *G* 33).

In the earlier works, *villain* designates a foe who physically opposes the giant heroes Gargantua and Pantagruel, and their epic companions. Typically, these enemies are soundly quashed, with dehumanizing ferocity. Gargantua eviscerates ‘un gros et gras villain’ (G 36) before similarly detripping an enemy captain, Tripet (G 43), en route to a glorious victory in the Picrocholine War. In a later adventure, Pantagruel’s mercurial companion Panurge boasts of how he violently subdued a ‘villain Baschatz’ and ‘un villain petit Turq bossu’ during his suspenseful escape from his Turkish captors (P 14). In these examples, the villain is situated in snap-shots of hyperbolic aggression that capture the brutal side of Rabelais’s comic imagination. If there is humour to be had as the villain is pummelled, sliced and skewered, it is a grim humour associated with physical distortion, akin to that of the Renaissance war surgeon trying to cope with battlefield gore.⁸

The Rabelaisian villain, however, is not simply the punch-bag in parodic, imaginative acts of heroism. Elsewhere he represents an integral element of a cultural *unheimliche*, an uncanny realisation of the familiar in the foreign, whereby the grotesque, distorted desires and behaviours of extraordinary fictional adversaries appear to originate in the excesses of this world.⁹ On their epic travels, Pantagruel and his fellow adventurers encounter the villainous, litigious ‘Chiquanous’ (QL12-16) in the land of Procuration, an encounter which, to an extent, echoes unsettling clashes between different social tiers in mid sixteenth-century France.¹⁰ The Chiquanous, we are told, pose a two-fold threat to the nobility: firstly, armed with bags of writs, they bring summons and insults against *gentilshommes* on behalf of malicious monks, priests,

⁸ See M.A. Screech, *Rabelais* (London, 1979), pp.174-5.

⁹ The most well-known analysis of this foretaste of Freudian *unheimliche* is by J. Kristeva, *Etrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris, 1998).

¹⁰ On the Chiquanous: E. Bruce Hayes, *Rabelais’s Radical Farce: Late Medieval Comic Theater and Its Function in Rabelais* (Farnham, 2010), ch.4; J. Parkin, ‘Rough Justice in Rabelais’, in *Rabelais in Glasgow*, eds. J. Coleman and C. Scollen-Jimack (Glasgow, 1984), pp.125-143; F. Rigolot, *Les Langages de Rabelais* (Geneva, 1972), pp.127-30; R. Marichal, ‘René Du Puy et les Chicanous’, *BHR* 11 (1949), 129-66. More generally, see L. Petris, ‘L’Avarice et la justice dans la littérature française du XVI^e siècle’, *Seizième Siècle* 4 (2008), 125-47.

usurers, and lawyers (QL 12);¹¹ secondly, they are a financial menace, exacting substantial damages from the adversarial party who is goaded into beating them up ('Et mon villain debout, ayse comme un Roy ou deux', QL 16).¹² The violent Chiquanous episode is not only a continuation of Rabelais's 'comedy of cruelty' (as Screech puts it), but also accentuates the social dimension of villainy in Rabelais's writings. The *villain*, we discover here, is more than an incidental, ignoble, ugly brute, swept aside in combat; he is a cleric or *roturier* of some considerable means who unseats the financial security and prestige of the noble. He must not be allowed to topple the nobility by chicanery or trickery, but rather kept in humiliating submission.¹³ Better still is to hold all such villains at arm's length. The utopic Abbaye de Thélème is a haven for 'nobles chevaliers' and 'dames de haulte pairage', (G 52-57) who are seeking refuge from all moral 'vilité' that flourishes among their social inferiors – particularly those who operate in ecclesiastical, legal and commercial milieux. Religious 'hypocrites', litigious 'basauchiens' of the Palais de Justice,¹⁴ greedy 'officiaulx', and miserly 'usuriers' all feature prominently on the long list of undesirables banned from entering Thélème.¹⁵

Villainy in Rabelais, therefore, is much more than the opposite of heroism, as Waith put it in his initial definition. In Rabelais, villainy is tumultuous energy, capable even of vitiating persons or things normally considered 'noble' (whether in social, moral or aesthetic terms). In

¹¹ A hint at the practices of litigants hiring members of the clergy and of the Third Estate to harass their adversaries: see Rabelais, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Huchon, pp.1515-6, n.5. The Chiquanous, we learn, are in the pay of a 'gras prieur de saint Louant'. This figure is generally identified with Jacques Le Roy, prior of Saint-Louand (1515-1565) in Rabelais's home territory of Chinon. Le Roy was an enemy of Rabelais and a formidable litigant: see Screech, *Rabelais*, p.340.

¹² As the Chiquanous are supposedly official representatives of the crown, the beleaguered noble may be punished for *lèse-majesté*, 'avecques dangier de miserablement pourrir en prison' (QL 12). See also Hayes, *Rabelais's Radical Farce*, p.165.

¹³ Compare with 'oignez villain, il vous poindra. Poignez villain, il vous oindra' (G 32). This ancient proverb (circulated widely in *florilegia* such as the *Motz dorés de Cathon*) expresses typical Renaissance contempt of the lower orders. It suggests that *villains*, the lowborn dregs of society, will deliberately and spitefully harm anyone foolish enough to have mercy on them; conversely, there is much to be gained from subduing villains with violence.

¹⁴ An interpretation suggested by F. Joukovsky in her edition of *Gargantua* (Paris, 1993), p.222.

¹⁵ On the links between these characters banned from Thélème and the Chiquanous of the *Quart Livre*, see V.L. Saulnier, *Rabelais*, 2 vols (Paris, 1982), II, p.68.

the Abbaye de Thélème, debasing vitality aligns socially with various types of non-noble, who have been locked out; but elsewhere, villainy cannot be confined to particular social groups or individuals. Villainy, in other words, becomes uncontainable, degrading excess. France's leading legal experts soil their breaches 'villainement' after failing to resolve a knotty lawsuit (*P* 10). Similar defilement of clothing is found in 'la plus grande villanie du monde' (*P* 22): the much analyzed trick played by Panurge on a 'haulte dame de Paris', in which a pack of 'villains chiens compissoyent tous ses habillemens'.¹⁶ *Villanie* here comprises a bestial spectacle, transforming a beautiful noblewoman into an aesthetically repulsive object. Defiled by the dogs, who mistake her for a bitch 'en chaleur', the Parisian lady recalls the beastly, lecherous hags, 'horriblement villaines et defaictes', whom Panurge had recently married off to bribed suitors (*P* 17). Villainy of this kind, in short, is a fusion of aesthetic and moral ugliness: it erupts aggressively from the lower bodily strata, dragging the noble elements of life and society down to the level of animal effluvia and excrement.

The examples of baseness and villains hitherto discussed are by no means exhaustive. They help us begin to navigate and move beyond a heterogeneous field of behaviours in Rabelais's fictions which qualify as villainous by common Renaissance standards: such behaviours include miserliness,¹⁷ heresy,¹⁸ as well as numerous examples of sexual *vilenies* (lechery, sodomy, cuckoldry etc) and *paroles vilaines*.¹⁹ Rabelais, we have seen, intensifies ordinary Renaissance understanding of villainy. Yet arguably he goes further still, to undermine

¹⁶ Scholarship on this incident is extensive. The leading feminist contribution is C. Freccero, 'Damning Haughty Dames: Panurge and the Haulte Dame de Paris (*Pantagruel* 14)', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 15 (1985), 57-67. For a strikingly different approach, see F. Rigolot, 'Rabelais, Misogyny, and Christian Charity: Biblical Intertextuality and the Renaissance Crisis of Exemplarity', *PMLA* 109:2 (1994), 225-37.

¹⁷ Condemned by Panurge in his famous eulogy of debts: 'Qui rien ne preste, est creature laide et mauvaise: creature du grand villain diantre d'enfer' (*TL* 3).

¹⁸ See for example Panurge's scathing condemnation of the old poet Raminagrobis as a 'villain', a 'haereticque', who sins 'villainement' in blaspheming against the established Church (*TL* 22).

¹⁹ Compare with villainous words in Marguerite de Navarre, *Heptaméron*, nouvelles 20, 22, 31, 52, 61, 66.

typical social and moral categories of villain. A closer scrutiny of one particular episode – the story of Papefiguière (QL 45-7) – reveals a significant questioning of the conjoining of low morals, defilement and low social status found elsewhere in the Rabelaisian corpus and across other Renaissance French representations of *villains*. In the story of the Papefigues, villainy, aggressively debasing conduct, comically ripples through a race of servile peasants; and yet, curiously, such villainy does not evenly align with the *villain* word group as it was commonly used in Renaissance French.

II *Quart Livre* 45-6: ‘villain’ versus ‘Diable’

The story of the Papefigues is well known to scholars as the prelude and companion piece to the acerbic satirical episodes of the Papimanes (QL 48-54). Nevertheless, Rabelais’s representation of villainy in Papefiguière should not exclusively be viewed through the lens of Reformation satire. In chapters 45-6 we discover a rich microcosm of Rabelaisian villainy (QL 46). This includes a range of urban adversarial characters who use their profession to exploit and swindle, and who thus recall the Chiquanous and the undesirables of Thélème: members the legal professions (‘Chiquanous, desguyseurs de process, notaires faulsaies, advocatz prevaricateurs’), and diverse representatives of the commercial classes (‘marchans usuriers, apothecaires, faulsaies, billonneurs’), who are not explicitly dubbed *villains*, but whose characterization nonetheless clearly evokes common moral traits of villainy such as duplicity and avarice hitherto outlined. Nonetheless, these shady characters do not take centre stage. Instead, chapters 45-6 primarily focus on a particular rustic *villain* (a peasant), whose behaviour and social standing do not at all match those of the typical Rabelaisian villains we have seen thus far. The

characterization of this *villain*, and his interactions with a junior devil, merit a reappraisal.

Drawing on previous studies of the Papefiguière episode, my method is to track Rabelais's usage of the term *villain* alongside other terms (principally *laboureur*) used of the peasant as he confronts the devil; this oscillation, I argue, implies a remarkable yet hitherto unnoticed subversion of the traditional socio-economic and ideological notions surrounding the substantive *villain* in sixteenth-century French.

Rabelais's account of 'L'Isle des Papefigues' is a curious blend of fable and verisimilar detail. We are transported to a fictitious agricultural landscape that is home to a population in extreme hardship. The 'Papefigues', once a prosperous race of 'Guaillardetz', suffer 'gresle, tempeste, peste, famine, et tout malheur, comme eterne punition du peché de leurs ancestres et parens' (QL 45, p.643). The ancestral sins in question relate to the uproar caused by one of the erstwhile Guaillardetz at a religious festival on the neighbouring 'Isle des Papimanes':

L'un d'eulx voyant le protraict Papal (comme estoit louable coustume publicquement le monstrier es jours de feste à doubles bastons) luy feist la figue. Qui est en icelluy pays signe de contempnement et derision manifeste (QL 45, p.642)

In retaliation for this crude, irreverent villainy (though interestingly Rabelais uses no such term here), the Papimanes promptly invaded and massacred the Guaillardetz. As further punishment the latter were enslaved and made tributaries of their captors, and henceforth forced to bear the humiliating title of 'Papefigue' – all for daring to 'show a fig' to his Holiness,²⁰ venerated by the Papimanes.

²⁰ An obscene hand gesture simulating sexual intercourse; also, the punishment imposed by Frederick Barbarosa in 1162 on those who had insulted his wife. As Rabelais explains, the condemned had to remove a fig with their teeth from a mule's 'membres honteux', and replace it, or face execution: 'Iceulx avoir à belles dens tiré la Figue, la

Scholars have long reflected on the satirical significance of this story, and of the episodes that follow, narrating the sensual, idolatrous rituals of Pope-worship on Papimanie.²¹ For some, these episodes broadly satirize fanatical violence in 1540s France surrounding what Michel Jeanneret has termed ‘la réification du spirituel’ – the smothering of spirituality in palpable religious rites and objects institutionalized within the Catholic Church.²² Other scholars offer even more precise historicizing interpretations. For Raymond Lebègue and M.A. Screech, the Papimanes’ grossly disproportionate retaliatory attack on the Papefigues points to a persecution of the antipapal Vaudois sects in the Mérindol and Cabrières districts of Provence.²³ This persecution started in 1539 and ended with a massacre in 1545 during which over 2000 died for their faith. Franco Giacone, however, refutes this connection with the Vaudois massacre, arguing that the Vaudois were neither as rich nor as free as the erstwhile ‘Guillardetz’ are said to have been in QL 45. For Giacone, the word ‘Papefigue’ points to fig imagery in the Old Testament associated with Israel; the Papefigues are thus the Jews, a people of fluctuating fortunes, who have known wealth, liberty, persecution and enslavement throughout their history.²⁴ If Giacone is right, the Jewish identity of the Papefigues nonetheless remains subtly understated in the Rabelaisian text, whereas the text insists that Papefigues faithfully observe Catholic rituals (QL 47). The once irreverent Guillardetz are not obviously blasphemous according to the stereotypical image of the premodern Jew; nor are they clearly heretical in the manner of the Vaudois. Hence, whilst it may be fruitful to detect allusions to persecuted peoples in the portrayal of the Papefigues, the latter do not represent one group to the exclusion of others.

monstroient au Boye apertement disans. *Ecco lo fico*’ (QL 45, pp.642-3). For a discussion of this fragment in relation to Jews, see Giacone, ‘Relecture de l’épisode de l’isle des Papefigues’, pp.424-8.

²¹ See for instance F. Marshall, ‘Papimania, the Blessed Isle: Rabelais’s Attitude to the Roman Church’, *Australian Journal of French Studies* 31:3 (1994), 245-58.

²² Jeanneret, *Le Défi des signes: Rabelais et la crise de l’interprétation à la Renaissance* (Orléans, 1994), p.114.

²³ Lebègue, ‘Rabelaisiana. Notes et documents’, *BHR* 10 (1948), 159-68; Screech, *Rabelais*, pp.401-4.

²⁴ See Giacone, ‘Relecture de l’épisode de l’isle des Papefigues’, pp.421-30.

The desolation of Papefigue Island is soon apparent to Pantagruel and his epic band when they stumble across a bizarre exorcism ritual being performed in a small chapel at the harbour. Here are three priests attempting to conjure away demons, whilst a peasant lies submerged in water tank. This exorcism, it transpires, is a desperate attempt to rid Papefiguière of demonic activity, which has notably invaded the life of this poor peasant. Chapter 45 introduces a particular demon whom Rabelais humorously describes as a ‘petit Diable’ who ‘ne sçavoit ne tonner ne gresler, fors seulement le Persil et les choux, encore aussi ne sçavoit ne lire n’escire’ (p.643). This junior devil hails from the comic traditions branching out of medieval mystery plays, which Marianne Closson has analyzed at length. For Closson, the *mysteres* of the Middle Ages accelerated a ‘humanisation’ of diabolical beings in literature, firstly diminishing them in stature from grotesque beasts to folkloric ‘lutins’, and eventually rendering them ‘semblable aux fous et aux enfants’; Rabelais, familiar with the genre of the *mystere*, was a key player in this literary trend, contributing to a much broader ‘désacralisation de la peur du diable’.²⁵ This analysis is broadly accurate, although it over-accentuates the harmlessness of devil figures in Rabelais. The ‘petit Diable’ of the *Quart Livre*, clearly a comic caricature of demonic activity in the natural world, is far from harmless; although not a fully-fledged demon he nonetheless poses a considerable threat to the peasant farmer, on whom he is seeking to enact revenge. One might thus consider him a malefic tool-villain of Satan, with comic potential.

The exorcism ritual introduced in QL 45 is the tail-end of an extraordinary series of events to which Pantagruel et al. are now privy. The peasant is hiding in the chapel from the devil, whom he has cheated three times: twice in a crop-growing contest and latterly in a scratching match. Chapters 45-7 present Rabelais’s subtle account of this triple duping. Versions of this story were apparently widespread throughout Renaissance Europe; they seem to have

²⁵ Closson, *L’Imaginaire démoniaque en France (1550-1650)* (Geneva, 2000), esp. pp.195-6; 199-205 on Rabelais.

survived at least as late as the Brothers Grimm.²⁶ However, as we shall see, Rabelais rehearses the tale with his idiosyncratic brand of erudite and obscene humour; and in so doing he calls into question Renaissance stereotypical categories of *vilenie* and the *vilain*, both moral and social. In Rabelais's version, the 'petit Diable' is given holiday leave by Lucifer to torment the poor Papefigues. This junior demon seizes upon a labourer sowing his field, insisting that the field belongs to the dark powers, who demand a share in its profits: 'Car depuys l'heure et le temps qu'au Pape vous feistez la figue, tout ce pays nous feut adjudgé' (QL 45, p.644). The devil forces the peasant to share his harvest with him, laying claim to all crops under the earth, and allowing the peasant to take all crops above ground. Hereupon the peasant farmer sows *touselle*, a species of wheat. The following July the devil returns triumphantly for the harvesting, thinking that his wheat stubble will sell well at the market; on the contrary it is the farmer who gets a boot full of cash for his wheat crop. The devil makes no sale but is publicly humiliated (QL 46, p.645). Realising that he has been outmanoeuvred, the devil insists on reversing the arrangement for the following harvest, staking a claim on crops *above* ground rather than below. So this time the farmer sows 'Raves', the roots of which return him a handsome profit in the market; and predictably the devil gets nothing for the beet leaves. Moreover, again, 'on se mocquoit de luy publicquement' (QL 46 p.646).

Alongside this folkloric motif of cheating the devil, some have interpreted Rabelais's crop contest story as an allegory of change in the rural economy of Renaissance France. Economically, the poor farmer fares much better than previous generations of Papefigues: he aspires to own a field and makes a personal, monetary profit from his crops. This, for Hausmann, signifies economic emancipation from the bondage and entrenched debt of medieval serfdom,

²⁶ J. Bolte and G. Polívka, *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Brüder Grimm*, 5 vols (Leipzig, 1913-32), III, pp.355-64. See also Jean de La Fontaine's versified re-telling of the Rabelaisian version in his *Nouveaux Contes* (1674), no.5: 'Le diable de Papefiguière'.

symbolised in the peasant's victory over the anthropomorphic figure of the feudal devil overlord who ultimately fails to control the field and its profits.²⁷ Hausmann's interpretation rightly reminds us that Rabelais lived in an age of transition in which serfdom was fading, at least in the Ile-de-France region.²⁸ This region saw the gradual emergence of a small group of wealthier peasants, *laboureurs*, who were able to use their substantial allotments to produce surpluses of food for sale on the expanding markets of Paris.²⁹ It is not inconceivable, therefore, that Rabelais, hailing from rural Touraine, was aware of a nascent prosperous stratum among the peasantry in Northern France and reflected something of it in his writing. Indeed, returning to the *Quart Livre*, we discover that whereas the devil of chapters 45-7 pejoratively addresses the peasant farmer as a lowly *villain*, the narrator consistently refers to him as a *laboureur* – a sign, perhaps of his rising potential for prosperity which other related terms (such as *vilain*, *manoeuvrier*,³⁰ or the more neutral *paysan*) would not adequately convey.

As suggestive as this historicizing reading of *QL* 45-7 would appear, the Papefigure episode makes an even more telling contribution to intellectual history. Rabelais obliquely evokes – and then obliterates – an elitist ideology in which *nobles* trump *vilains* in material, moral and intellectual assets. In an initial, blatant anthropomorphism, the devil boasts of his privileged status as if he belonged to the traditional feudal nobility. This, he claims, gives him the right to dictate the terms of the crop contest:

²⁷ Hausmann, *op. cit.*, pp.127-8.

²⁸ On the decline of the medieval *seigneurie* see H. Neveux, 'Déclin et reprise: la fluctuation biséculaire 1340-1560', in *Histoire rurale de la France II*, eds. G. Duby and A. Wallon, (Paris, 1975), pp.1-156 (118-122). A good critique of the notion that economic stagnation plagued early modern rural France (as claimed by E. Le Roy Ladurie and P. Goubert) is P. Hoffman, *Growth in a Traditional Society: The French Countryside, 1450-1815* (Princeton, 2000).

²⁹ See H. Heller, *Labour, Science and Technology in France, 1500-1620* (Cambridge, 2002), pp.31-2; J. Jacquart, *La Crise rurale en Ile-de-France (1550-1670)* (Paris, 1974). See also M. de Navarre, *Heptaméron* (nouvelle 29), which features a 'riche homme laboureur' in the ancient 'comté du Maine' of Northern France.

³⁰ *Manoeuvriers* were among the rural underclasses (including shepherds, *vignerons* and artisans), the majority excluded from the *laboureurs*' betterment: see Heller, *op. cit.*, pp.31-2.

— J’entens (dist le Diable) que du profict advenent nous ferons deux lotz. [...]. Le choix m’appartient, car je suys Diable extraict de noble et antique race, tu n’es qu’un villain. (QL 45, p.644)

The lowly ‘villain’ must show deference to his opponent – the latter being of noble and ancient stock.³¹ Here Rabelais facetiously establishes a parallel between human and demonic social orders, by evoking a noble-villain opposition that closely corresponds to the ancient French ideology of superior and inferior *race*. Such thinking, predicated on innate inequality between men, was perpetuated by the Renaissance nobility. As Arlette Jouanna has shown,³² sixteenth-century French nobles maintained that they, the highborn, inherited along with their titles and lands a set of superior moral and intellectual capacities from their noble ancestors, which equipped them to manage their estates, fight battles, and occupy the highest offices of state. In this view, the infeodated castes, the *menu peuple* or *vilains*, were effectively a subaltern race bound by its ‘vileté de sang’: being of inferior blood, mind and morals, *vilains* could only perform menial but nonetheless vital tasks that were beneath the dignity of the nobility. As Rabelais’s ‘noble’ devil states, ‘Bled semer toutesfoys n’est mon estat’ (QL 45, p.644): he exhorts instead the lowborn farmer to toil in the fields, with the condescending mantra, ‘Travaille villain, travaille’ (QL 45, 46).³³

In a mischievously satirical vein, Rabelais sets about dismantling this asymmetric pairing of noble and villain. The devil assumes that his noble ancestry and ‘escadron de petitz Diableteaux de coeur’ (QL 46, p.644) will enable him to win the crop contest outright – only to be beaten twice by his lowly opponent. In these telling *peripeteias*, Rabelais ensures that the devil’s vestiges of social privilege are conspicuously effaced. In addition to his double loss in the

³¹ La Fontaine foregrounds the social dimension even more overtly in his *Nouveaux Contes*, making the devil a ‘diable à titre de seigneur’, a ‘gentilhomme’ and a ‘diable de cour’.

³² Jouanna, *Ordre social: mythes et hiérarchies dans la France du XVIe siècle* (Paris, 1977), pp.10, 36.

³³ Compare La Fontaine: ‘Travailler est le fait de la canaille’.

market, the devil suffers the ignominy at being outwitted in what he supposedly does best: deceiving others. Once the crop contest begins, the devil resembles not so much a feudal *seigneur* as a bumbling novice tradesman – ‘bien jeune au mestier’ – as the jubilant farmer puts it (QL 46, p.645). The peasant farmer, moreover, is no ordinary, base *villain*. It is no coincidence that Rabelais’s narrator and devil use distinctly different nomenclature when referring to him. Even the devil finds himself modifying his initial, sneering jibes. After being outwitted at the first harvest, he admits that the latter is not simply a common, coarse ‘villain’, but a ‘villain de bien’ (QL 46, p.645) whose honest victory stems from his canny knowledge of agriculture. Henceforth in Rabelais’s Papefigue narrative, we infer, the unqualified epithet *villain* – and all the feudal prejudice it entails – is an ironically inexact marker of the peasant’s character and station.

In the *Quart Livre*, Rabelais moves beyond the satire of one-dimensional French peasant figures in his previous works.³⁴ Rabelais uses the Papefigue crop contest story to reflect on how peasants might exploit opportunities for enrichment in an upright manner. The Papefigue *laboureur*, a ‘bon mesnaiger’ who quietly gets a good cash ‘proffit’ on his produce, complements the woodcutter Couillatris of the 1552 prologue to the *Quart Livre*, who wisely invests his unexpected pecuniary fortune in lands, livestock and viticulture. In contrast to previous scholarship,³⁵ one ought not to miss the wider intellectual significance of these virtuous peasants in and beyond the fictive Rabelaisian universe. We should appreciate how their laconic characterization suggests a new way of reflecting on the moral and economic status of the lower agrarian orders in sixteenth-century French thought.

³⁴ See notably the ‘bergiers’ and ‘fouaciers’ episode (G 25), which highlights the stereotypical excesses of rustic feasting, swearing, rivalry and brawling.

³⁵ Notably G. Lote, who dismisses Rabelais’s representation of peasants: ‘Bien que ces types soient intéressants et rendus avec une vérité flagrante, l’étude reste maigre et se borne à quelques traits assez menus’. *La Vie et l’œuvre de François Rabelais* (Paris, 1938), p.327.

III Beyond villainy: ‘La vieille de Papefiguière’ (*Quart Livre* 47)

The final section of this article will focus on the most intriguing and enigmatic figure of Papefiguière: the elderly wife of the peasant farmer, who takes centre stage in *QL* 47. This woman plays a pivotal role in the defeat of the ‘petit Diable’, and, moreover, in Rabelais’s undermining of moral notions of villainy throughout the Papefigues episode. Like her husband, the ‘vieille de Papefiguière’ ultimately surpasses common Renaissance representation of villain figures – although unlike her spouse she is never directly described in terms from the *vilain* word group. By analyzing her confrontation with the devil I shall venture an explanation for the somewhat unexpected absence of such terms.

Chapter 47 recounts the debacle of the junior tempter. Twice outwitted in the field by a humble peasant farmer, the young devil now forces his opponent into a final, ‘winner-takes-all’ contest eight days later: a scratching match. The peasant trudges off home, dismally contemplating how to minimize the lacerations soon to be inflicted upon him. And that is how the story would have ended, were it not for the salutary ruse of his wife. Eight days later, on the morning of the contest, the peasant makes his way to the chapel for confession and exorcism, ‘comme bon catholique’ (*QL* 47, p.647). Meanwhile, the devil menacingly arrives at the peasant’s abode, expecting an undemanding victory in the scratching match: “‘O villain, villain. Czà, ça, à belles gryphes.’” (*QL* 47, p.648). Forthwith, the peasant’s wife puts her plan into action. She tells the devil that her husband is at the blacksmith’s, sharpening his nails for the contest. Moreover, she pretends to be in great agony, claiming that her husband had been practising his clawing on her genitals: “‘Il m’a seulement gratté du petit doigt icy entre les

jambes, et m'a du tout affollée''' (p.648). At the sight of this supposedly horrific, expansive gash between her legs, the young devil flees in horror and abject defeat. The farmer, his wife and his property are henceforth free of meddling demons.

What are we to make of this unexpected ending, which does not commonly feature in the myriad variations of the crop contest narrative circulating in early modern Europe?³⁶ Is the wife's obscene self-exposure tantamount to uncomplicated *vilenie* – and is it the defining aspect of her moral character? In light of recent critical interest in Renaissance obscenity,³⁷ and following an important nuancing of Rabelais's antifeminism in recent scholarship, 'la vieille de Papefiguière' merits a careful study. Superficially, this figure might appear little more than a footnote in an extensive, misogynistic degrading of the female body across Rabelais's works. Yet on closer inspection, such an interpretation becomes inadequate. In *QL* 47, the peasant wife's apparent *vilenie* is the culmination of a morally ambivalent ploy to deceive the devil.

The wife's comportment undeniably overlaps with behaviour that qualifies elsewhere as vile. By exposing her horrific nether parts, she readily brings to mind other grotesque *vieilles* previously encountered in the Rabelaisian corpus: the decrepit 'Sibylle de Panzoust' who unceremoniously 'monstrois son cul' after consultation (*TL* 17), and, in particular, the 'vieille sempiternelle' featured in Panurge's scabrous fable of a lion and a fox (*P* 15).³⁸ This unfortunate 'vieille', we are told, glimpses the lion and inadvertently exposes her vulva as she falls over in

³⁶ Closson (*op. cit.*, p.202 n.146) thinks that Rabelais did not invent this narrative, but unusually inserted it as an epilogue to the crop contest story.

³⁷ Recent research has shed light on the synonymy of *vilain* and *vilenie* with the Latin *obscoenus* and *obscoenitas* respectively in R. Estienne's earlier work, the *Dictionarium, seu Latinae linguae thesaurus* (1531). From the 1530s, *vilain* was thus firmly anchored in the nascent semantic spectrum of the obscene: a word group connoting that which is lewd and indecent, servile and base, prior to it being used to designate a secular legal category of sexually explicit representations. See E. Butterworth, 'Defining Obscenity', in *Obscénités renaissantes*, eds. H. Roberts, G. Peureux, and L. Wajeman (Geneva, 2011), pp.31-8.

³⁸ The best analyses of these *vieilles* are: F. Weinberg, 'Written on the Leaves: Rabelais and the Sibylline Tradition', *Renaissance Quarterly* 43 (1990), 709-30; R. La Charité, 'Interpenetration in Rabelais's *Pantagruel*: A Study of the Lion-Fox Episode', in *French Renaissance Studies in Honor of Isidore Silver*, ed. F. Brown (Lexington, 1974), pp.239-64.

fright: the naïve lion mistakes her ‘comment a nom’ for a hideous wound inflicted ‘bien villainement’, a ‘solution de continuité manifeste’ (*P* 15, p.270).³⁹ This motif is reworked in *QL* 47, except that the ‘wound’ is now even greater: the ‘vieille de Papefiguière’ reveals an ‘enorme solution de continuité en toutes dimensions’ (*QL* 47, p.648). By Renaissance standards, these exposures, and that of the Sibylle could qualify as *vilenie* (in the sense of obscene) insofar as they exhibit that which should have remained hidden.⁴⁰ In both cases, moreover, Rabelais produces derogatory snapshots of grotesque, unlimited female orifices to elicit a kind of humour that, from the position of women, is alienating if not repulsive; not to acknowledge this is, as feminist scholars have repeatedly insisted, to risk excusing antifeminism of the worst kind as if it were a purely rhetorical mode without historical consequence.⁴¹ Whatever else Rabelais conveys through the gestures of these three *vieilles*, there remains an irreducible element of *vilenie*.⁴²

This should not, however, be the final word. The ‘vieille de Papefiguière’ is not merely a carbon copy of earlier Rabelaisian hags. In *QL* 47 the *vilain* word-cluster is by-passed – a conspicuous permutation vis-à-vis the tale of the ‘vieille sempiternelle’. In the Papefigues episode there is no recurrence of the shocking imagery that dominates *Pantagruel* 15, where antifeminist motifs are intensified with the visceral forces of language, where the ‘vieille’ is subjected to a hideous wiping and responds with vile odours. By contrast, in *QL* 47, the old woman’s revelation of her ‘comment a nom?’ qualifies as a much more carefully veiled villainy. Grotesque physiological and scatological details are replaced by an elliptical, euphemistic suggestion of uncontainable, unnameable expanse. This corroborates the notion put forward by

³⁹ This last term is probably medical jargon: see T. Hampton, “‘Comment a nom’: Humanism and Literary Knowledge in Auerbach and Rabelais”, *Representations* 119 (2012), 37-59 (47).

⁴⁰ Here I follow M. Clément’s subtle analysis of obscenity, ‘Construction de l’obscénité dans les narrations facétieuses: d’une scène à l’autre’, in *Obscénités renaissantes*, pp.335-48.

⁴¹ See E. Burns, *Bodytalk: When Women Speak in Old French Literature* (Philadelphia, 1993), pp.13-14.

⁴² I am indebted to A. Bayle’s theorizing (via Rigolot, Bataille and Jeanneret) of ‘une «obscénité résiduelle» qui résisterait à l’interprétation symbolique’, ‘Six questions sur la notion d’obscénité dans la critique Rabelaisienne’, in *Obscénités renaissantes*, pp.379-92 (90-92).

Pollie Bromilow that female bodies – unpredictable, ungraspable entities – are privileged sites revisited fleetingly yet persistently during the course of the Rabelaisian work.⁴³ Apparently laid bare, yet in fact shrouded in mysterious word play and imagery, the female genitalia are crucial to the narrative progression in *QL* 47 in ways unseen in *P* 15. Metaphorically euphemized, the old woman's self-exposure constitutes an apotropaic gesture⁴⁴ which not only repels the diabolical foe but also causes a frisson of horror in the narratorial voice: recognition, perhaps, of an unquantifiable debt owed by the male narrator and protagonists to the unstable female body they ridicule elsewhere.

It is insufficient, thus, to conceive of the peasant wife's actions as a *vilenie* on a par with that obsessively described in *P* 15. In *QL* 47, the woman's genitals are not exposed again in an aesthetically aberrant fetishism. Instead, the narrative is constructed such that the wife's self-exposure forms the *terminus ad quem* of a morally ambivalent sequence of behaviours which includes compassion, an urge to conserve wealth, prevarication and resourceful play-acting. The 'vieille' becomes the sole actor in a self-conscious farce aimed at securing a greater good. She is stirred to action both by her husband's 'melancholie' and by glimpsing his 'bourse pleine d'argent' (*QL* 47, p.647). As she consoles her spouse 'doulcement', her motivation is not so much greed as an instinct to protect the domestic sphere, combined with an indomitable craftiness ('Elle avoit jà pourpensé bonne yssue'). Her strategy for overcoming the devil comprises a climactic series of proofs that her husband is in fact a villain – in the moral sense of an evildoer. The first move is feigned physical agony, 'en terre pleurante et lamentante', the reason for which is progressively given through calculated wordplay. The wife subtly hints at

⁴³ See Bromilow's important contribution, which nuances Rabelais's antifeminism vis-à-vis the female body in the light of T. Laqueur's notion of the 'one-sex body' and Kristeva's psychoanalytic theory of the abject. 'Inside Out: Female Bodies in Rabelais', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 44 (2008), 27-39.

⁴⁴ A notion most famously adumbrated by Freud in his 1922 paper, 'Medusa's Head'.

both her apparent ‘mal’ and its alleged cause by designating her husband with the humorous, proleptic epithet, ‘esgrateneur des Diables’ (p.648). This suggests the excruciating fate awaiting the devil should he linger, a prospect substantiated by an invitation to inspect her injury ‘entre les jambes’, casually inflicted by her husband’s ‘gryphes’. The anticipated gory sight is comically delayed further by an impassionate exhortation: ‘Saulvez vous, il n’arrestera point. Retirez vous, je vous en prie’ (p.648). Only after this careful rhetorical build-up does the wife expose herself. Her nudity is the *pièce de résistance* which lends supposedly irrefutable credence to the farcical fiction she has adumbrated, and which, in the tradition of farce, is described to us in metaphorical language.⁴⁵

At the apex of this quasi-theatrical performance, the moral focus on the peasant wife’s behaviour unexpectedly begins to shift. Rabelais provides a curious supplementary intertext which fundamentally modifies the narratorial perspective on the woman’s behaviour:

Lors se descouvrit jusques au menton en la forme que jadis les femmes Persides se praesenterent à leurs enfans fuyans de la bataille (QL 47, p.648)

This comparison enjoins the reader to see the Papefigue peasant as an exemplar of courage akin to the virtuous Persian women once hailed by Plutarch, who, by an act of self-exposure, prevented a military catastrophe in the Median-Persian War (553-550 BC). The intertext in question here derives from Plutarch’s *Moralia*, via Erasmus.⁴⁶ In his catalogue of virtuous women, Plutarch praises the mothers of the routed Persian soldiers for their scandalous bravery:

⁴⁵ On the uses of metaphor in referring to the female genitalia, see B. Bowen, ‘Metaphorical Obscenity in French Farce, 1460-1560’, *Comparative Drama* 11:4 (1977-8), 331-44.

⁴⁶ *Moralia* (‘De virtutibus mulierum’), via Erasmus, *Apophthegmata* (Lyon, 1558), VI (‘Varie mixta’), pp.536-7: ‘Quum Cyperii adversus Astyagem Medorum regem infeliciter pugnassent, mulieres in urbem fugientibus obviam ierunt, ac nudatis ventribus, Quo, inquit, ignavissimi ruitis? An nescitis vos huc iterum intrare non posse, unde semel naturae lege egressi fuistis? Inverso ordine matres animant mares, quae solent a periculis avocare.’

the women exposed their private parts to their sons, refusing to let them cower behind the city walls whilst the enemy advanced. Embarrassed by this brazen act of exposure, the Persian soldiers unexpectedly rallied. Against the natural order ('*inverso ordine*'), they regained their courage and went on to defeat the Medes. By assimilating the '*vieille de Papefiguière*' with '*les femmes Persides*', Rabelais, one could argue, self-consciously makes an overstretched and therefore humorous parallel. Yet Rabelais does not necessarily extend an invitation to laugh. By invoking a *locus* of serious, historical exemplarity, he employs a technique analogous to anamorphosis:⁴⁷ the intertext of the brave '*femmes Persides*' acts as a lens which sharply focuses our perspective on a *vieille* whose character seemed hitherto equivocal. Suddenly, aspects of *vilenie* vanish; bravery becomes her salient character trait.

The Plutarchan intertext, concealed within a hasty simile, is part of a steganographic procedure by which a narrative of patent vileness purports to disclose morally 'higher' meanings.⁴⁸ Emphasizing precocious courage rather than villainy, it functions to make the old woman's indecency more palatable to the humanist community to which Rabelais belonged.⁴⁹ As elsewhere, Rabelais appears to be goading his readers to assume a good intention where there is moral ambiguity: we are reminded of his early plea, '*interprétez tous mes faictz et mes dictz en la perfectissime partie*' (*G*, prologue). Interpreting the wife's deeds in the best spirit, we see that, as the Persian mothers had done, she subordinates her modesty to the desperate instinct of survival: she goes to any length to ward off an ominous foe when her spouse (like the Persian soldiers) could see no other way out. Yet this does not efface the unseemliness of female nudity

⁴⁷ On anamorphosis and obscenity, see Clément, *op. cit.*, p.348.

⁴⁸ This definition of steganography derives from Béroalde de Verville: for sophisticated applications of Verville's concept to Rabelais's fictions, see F. Cornilliat, 'Interpretation in Rabelais, Interpretation of Rabelais', in *The Cambridge Companion to Rabelais*, ed. J. O'Brien (Cambridge, 2011), pp.43-56; M. Huchon, 'Thélème et l'art stéganographique', in *Rabelais pour le XXI^e siècle*, ed. M. Simonin (Geneva, 1998), pp.149-60.

⁴⁹ As Rigolot remarks, 'L'obscène ne comporte en soi de principe d'ascension; il ne peut s'élever tout seul. Il doit être tiré vers le haut par quelque forme expressive qui lui soit extérieure et pourtant l'embrasse tout entier'. *Les Langages de Rabelais*, p.119.

in either Rabelais or Plutarch; the shock of self-exposure remains an ambivalent constant.

Rabelais's steganographic art requires that we only arrive at a 'higher' interpretation of Rabelais's 'vieille' *through* a lower reading which would emphasize the old woman's calculated lewdness and duplicity in bringing a decisive, albeit comic victory over evil.

One should not therefore, over-spiritualize the denouement of the scratching match in *QL* 47, which ends with the devil's terrified and definitive departure from Papefiguière. Hausmann suggests that the peasant wife's triumph over the devil represents a reversal of elements of the Fall: nudity becomes beneficial rather than shameful; the role of women vis-à-vis men is fundamentally re-valorized.⁵⁰ This parallel, implying that Rabelais uses his peasant to reinterpret Genesis 3, is to my mind implausible, since there are no obvious Biblical *repères* in *QL* 47 to support it. Similarly, Fred Marshall's claim that the wife's display of nudity symbolises 'the naked power of doctrine' finds little direct justification in Rabelais's text.⁵¹ Depicting the actions of the Papefigue peasant wife, Rabelais opens up a subtle range of perspectives on the ethics of obscenity, and on female potentiality in the lower social orders. Here he opts not for the ordinary sixteenth-century language of *vilenie*, since it arguably could not sustain such subtleties. The Papefigue peasant wife is, morally speaking, more than *vilaine* – but much less than saintly. We must not lose sight of the comic staging of the scratching match. The wife's victory is amply bathetic: as she herself admits, “‘Si c’eust esté un grand Diable, il y auroit à penser’” (*QL* 47, p.647).

⁵⁰ Hausmann, *op. cit.*, p.127.

⁵¹ Marshall, 'The Great Allegory', *Australian Journal of French Studies* 26.1 (1989), 12-51.

Conclusions

For Rabelais, the *vilain* is not necessarily the nemesis of the hero; nor is he invariably the embodiment of baseness. In *QL* 45-7, Rabelais uses an embryonic folktale about peasants and devils to subvert a widespread, negative ideology of villainy whereby *vilains* are the social, moral and intellectual inferiors of nobles. In particular, *QL* 45-7 manifests a profound hesitancy over the substantive *vilain* as a suitable epithet with which to designate the lower agrarian orders. Such hesitancy indicates that by the 1550s, the moral, social and economic connotations of *vilain* were drifting away from concepts of feudal peasantry – a prospect openly countenanced a century later in the first dictionary of the *Académie Française* (1694), where *vilain* ‘signifioit autrefois Paysan, roturier’.⁵² Rabelais’s Papefigue peasant couple exhibit an ambivalent morality that, by sixteenth-century standards, overlaps with but exceeds the ordinary semantic capacity of the *vilain* word group. The peasant and his wife are much subtler characters than many of the villains (enemy soldiers, Turks, Chiquanous, ecclesiastics, usurers) who oppose nobles and heroes earlier in the Rabelaisian corpus. These two peasants are anti-heroes, whose behaviour is a moral notch above ‘vilain’ but falls short of impeccable virtue. The cunning ‘vieille’ bares her genitals in a manner difficult not to equate with offensive *vilenie*. Yet this is precisely the challenge Rabelais puts before his readers, as he teases out through euphemism and exemplarity the ethical implications of what looks like *vilenie* practised on the female genitalia.

⁵² *Dictionnaire de l’Académie Française* (Paris, 1694), tome II, p.644.