Plautus, Panurge, and ‘les aventures des gens curieux’

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An enigmatic phrase

If the first encounter between Pantagruel and Panurge, in Chapter 9 of Rabelais’s *Pantagruel* (1532), has become one of the most famous episodes in French fiction, this is partly due to its haunting, enigmatic quality. At first glance, this opacity seems to be wholly on the side of Panurge and his many languages, whereas linguistic clarity seems to lie with Pantagruel, persisting as he does with French. However, as so often in Rabelais, it is the apparently familiar that turns out to be the most opaque and puzzling of all.

For example, even one of Pantagruel’s clearest-seeming phrases has provoked disagreement among scholars over its basic meaning. Pantagruel says of Panurge:

Voyez-vous cet homme, qui vient par le chemin du pont Charanton? Par ma foi, il n’est pauvre que par fortune: car je vous assure que, à sa physionomie, nature l’a produit de riche et noble lignée, mais les aventures des gens curieux le ont réduit en telle pénurie et indigence.

What does ‘curieux’ mean here? The most influential interpretation has been provided by Gérard Defaux. He argues that Pantagruel is invoking the ancient, patristic, and humanist tradition which condemns *curiositas* as an intemperate desire to know and to see, as a *discendi cupiditas* or a

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1. See Terence Cave, *Pré-Histoires II: langues étrangères et troubles économiques au XVIe siècle* (Geneva: Droz, 2001), 189. On this episode, see Cave’s Part 1. For examples of the abundant scholarship on it, see his page 27n.

does have the merit of reminding us that in 1532 curieux often did not specifically denote the desire for knowledge (the discendi cupiditas), but that it did almost always denote ‘care, anxiety’, like its etymon cura. Shortly before the publication of Pantagruel, Robert Estienne defined ‘Curieux’ as ‘Curieux, & soingneux a faire quelque chose, ou qui se soucie trop & prend trop de chagrin de ses affaires ou de celles dautrui’. I argue below that when Rabelais introduces Panurge he is imitating not only Homer, Virgil, the Bible, and so on, but also one particular passage from Plautus which propelled a semantic strand of curiosus that seems to have been overlooked in modern scholarship both on Rabelais and on early modern curiosity. It is primarily from that locus that Rabelais derives the phrase ‘gens curieux’. But that does not make the Plautus locus the source, the key that unlocks Rabelais’s phrase and episode by dispelling their opacity, for, if Pantagruel’s explanation of Panurge’s piteous state is ‘elliptical and mysterious’, this is not only because it makes the reader ask narrative questions such as ‘How does Pantagruel know about these adventures?’ and ‘What are they?’, but also because Rabelais is rewriting an inherently opaque, polysemic, and unsettling locus, of which the key term — curiosus — had always been enigmatic anyway. Viewed in this light, modern disputation (including my own) about the meaning of ‘gens curieux’ is necessarily unresolved, since it is itself snarled up in the textual play between different strands of meaning, rather than unravelling them. The Plautine locus reveals not a systematic moral message (as does the Odyssey for Defaux) but rather an unresolved generation of meaning that takes the form of an


5. Whereas considerable space was devoted to curiosus in contemporary dictionaries, curiositas was either absent altogether (Ambrosio Calepino, Dictionarium multarum linguarum (Venice: Paulo Mammio, 1542); Robert Estienne, Dictionarium, seu latinae linguæ thesaurus (Paris: R. Estienne, 1531)) or else granted only minimal space.


8. Defaux too is acutely aware of this ‘care, anxiety’ sense of curieux, but he extrapolates more readily from it to the ‘desire for knowledge’ sense.

9. Dictionarium, seu latinae linguæ thesaurus (1531).


imaginative reconfiguration of a polysemic ancient text, a reinvention of the past.

This reconfiguration may well have been of the Plautus locus both in its original context and also in one or more of the various excerpted, decontextualised forms in which it circulated, for example in dictionaries or commonplace-books. Although Rabelais’s debt to compilations such as Erasmus’s Adagia is well-known, much remains to be established about the ways in which he uses such manuals. The present investigation is inspired by the challenge laid down by Ann Moss at the end of her magisterial study of commonplace-books:

The most informative place of all to look for the influence of the commonplace-book on vernacular production would be in vernacular works themselves, a project we must leave for another time and to other enquirers. It is a project to be pursued in non-literary works as well as various forms of fiction ...

The circulation of a locus from Plautus

In 1531, the year before the publication of Pantagruel, Robert Estienne revolutionized the new genre of the printed dictionary with his Dictionarium, seu latinae linguae thesaurus, which included some French translations. The entry for ‘Curiosus’ is one sub-division within the ‘Cura’ entry. The meanings of ‘curiosus’ are divided into three paragraphs, each corresponding to one category: vicious (‘in malum.’), virtuous (‘in bonum.’), and lamb-related – the taxonomy would have pleased Borges. The third category reads as follows:

Curiosus agnus, Ung agneau qui est fort maigre, qui na que la peau & les os. Plaut. in Aulul. 16.26, Etiam agnum misi. E. quo quidem agno sat scio magis curiosam nusquam ullam esse bestiam. M. volo ego scribere, qui sit agnus curio. E. qui ossa atque pellis totus est, ita cura mactat: quin exta inspicere in sole etam vivo licet, ita is pellucet quasi latena punica.

13 The ‘Cura’ entry is reproduced and studied (but without reference to the Plautus locus) in Kenny, Word Histories, 53–56.

‘LES AVENTURES DES GENS CURIEUX’

The quotation consisting of Latin dialogue will be discussed below. It is from a comedy by Plautus, the Aulularia (The Pot of Gold). The skinny lamb mentioned in this play takes up an astonishing one third of the space devoted to ‘Curious’ in 1531. The lamb continues to appear under ‘Curious’ in later Estienne dictionaries, but the proportion of space that it occupies becomes progressively smaller. In the 1536 edition of the Latin dictionary it is ‘A curious lamb, skinny, as if worn out by care’ (‘Curiosus agnus, Macilentus, quasi cura confectus’). The entry in the 1546 Latin/French dictionary reads: ‘Curiosus agnus. Plaut. Maigre, comme il est ou mal aigri de souci’.

This locus from Plautus is also cited and discussed, again under ‘Curiosus’, in the Calepinus (first edition 1502) which, when Rabelais was composing Pantagruel, was the most widely used dictionary of the time. The Calepinus even extrapolates from the Plautus locus to interpret Apuleius’s phrase ‘agnum incuriosum’ (Florida, 2) as denoting a fat lamb (rather than an ‘incautious’ one, as modern scholars would have it). However, the strange status of the skinny lamb as a major semantic strand of curious eventually diminished, in both the Estienne dictionaries and the Calepinus. When in 1553–1554 Robert Estienne published a version of the Calepinus that was supplemented with additions derived from his own dictionaries, the sole major structural change that he made to the Calepinus entry for ‘Curious’ was to delete Plautus and his lamb from it altogether. Thus, it was precisely at the time when Pantagruel was written that the influence of this skinny lamb on the meaning of curious was at its peak. Not that this influence was a passing fad: it survived even into the eighteenth century.

14 For example see the 1518 (Paris: Josse Bade) and 1542 (Paulo Manzonio: Venice) editions. Defaux quotes the start of the ‘Curious’ entry in the Calepinus (using the Josse Bade edition of 1514) but not the passage on the lamb (Le Curieux, 71).
16 The influence of the lamb locus on the meaning of curious was renewed later by Denis Lambin’s famous Plautus commentary: Plautus, Opera (Paris: Jean Macé, 1576), 180a. Lambin explains that curious people (‘curiosi’) are, like this lamb, skinny and worn out with care. As late as 1714, a German university dissertation cites Lambin’s comments when defining curiositas:
Dictionaries were not the only means by which Robert Estienne promoted the circulation of this Plautus locus and numerous others as fragments of discourse, excerpted from their original contexts. Estienne's commonplace-book of sententiae and proverbs taken from Roman authors includes the three lines from the Aulularia that describe the lamb as all skin and bones, emaciated by care ('Ossa, atque pellis totus est, ita cura macet ...'). The lines excerpted gave readers no idea that in their original context they refer to a lamb: when re-using the decontextualized phrasing themselves, readers could re-apply it to anything or anyone. They were encouraged to do so even by the edition of Plautus that Estienne printed shortly before the appearance of Pantaigruel: although its readers had the original context before their eyes, a few striking turns of phrase were capitalized, in order to encourage readers to excerpt and re-use them in other contexts:

M. Volo ex te ego scire, qui sit agnus curio.
E. QUI OSSA, ATQUE PELLIS TOTUS EST, ita cura macet ...\(^{18}\)

**Panurge and the locus from Plautus**

The descriptions of Panurge in Chapters 9 and 13 of Pantaigruel contain direct echoes of this locus from Plautus. Decontextualizing the locus in the way that was encouraged by humanist culture, Rabelais displaces the lamb's characteristics onto Panurge, who is similarly 'curieux'. Both are worn down (Estienne's 'confectus') or reduced (Rabelais's 'reducti') from their natural state, the lamb by care (Estienne's 'soulev' and

\(^{17}\) Georg Ernst Stahl (*prases*) and Giovanni Francesco Donzelina (*respondens*), *Disertatio inauguralis medica de medicina medicinae curiosa* (Halle: University of Halle, 1714), 9. For the notion that curious people are thin, see also Madeleine de Scudéry, *Célisse*, ed. Alain Niderst (Paris: Nizet, 1979; first edition 1661), 47 ('une Amie ... qui n'aura jamais d'embonpoint, parce qu'elle est trop curieuse'); Michael Watson (*prases*) and Andreas Rose (*respondens*), *Exercitatio academica de curiositate*, in Daniel Harnack, ed., *Curiosa theologica* (Wedel: Heinrich Werner, 1690; first edition 1652), 760 ('emaciatus vultus Curiosorum').


\(^{19}\) Plautus, *Conoeniae*, XX (Paris: R. Estienne, 1550), 36.

'Tcura'), Panurge by his adventures.\(^{19}\) In Chapter 9, this reduction is initially of Panurge's elegance ('pitoyablement navré en divers lieux, et tant mal en ordre') and opulence ('pauvre ... pénurie et indigence'), whereas in the skinny lamb's case, the reduction is of body mass ('amaigri', 'Macilentus'). But the similarity between them is soon reinforced. When, in Chapter 13, Panurge is about to recount one of the adventures that have reduced him to his present state — his escape from the hands of the 'Turks'\(^{20}\) — the physical thinness that was implicit in Chapter 9, as another dimension of his reduction, is now made explicit: 'car il était extirmé comme un hareng soret. Aussi allait-il du pied comme un chat maigre' (387; my italics). It is revealing that these first two analogies cited for Panurge's skinniness are both from the animal world. Within a few lines, his skinniness is being mentioned yet again, this time within his account of his Turkish adventure:

Les pillards Turcs m'avaient mis en broche tout tardé, comme un cormil, car j'étais tant exirné que autrement de ma chair cuit était fort mauvaise viande, et en ce point me faisaient rôter tout vif. (389)

Too thin to be eaten? This description of the curious Panurge's patry flesh all but states that he is, like Plautus's curious lamb, all skin and bones ('qui na que la peau & les os'; 'QUI OSSA, ATQUE PELLIS TOTUS EST').

At this point, with Panurge about to be eaten, with the question of skinniness raising that of edibility, let us leave him cooking for a while and return to Plautus's play.

**Rabelais and Plautus**

While there is, in my view, no doubt that Rabelais knew the Plautus locus, up till this point I have considered his rewriting of it only in so

far as he may have known it as an already decontextualized excerpt, for example in a dictionary or a commonplace-book, such as one of those produced by Robert Estienne. For Rabelais to have imitated the locus to the extent that I have sought to establish so far, he would not have needed to have first-hand knowledge of the play from which the locus was taken. This still leaves open the question: did Rabelais know the *Aulularia* directly?

Rabelais’s knowledge of Plautus, as of numerous other ancients, was based at least partly on intermediate sources. Of the chronicles’ six direct references to Plautus by name, all — with perhaps just one exception — were drawn from humanist compilations by the likes of Erasmus, Caesar Rhodiginus, and André Tiraqueau. However, that certainly does not exclude the possibility that Rabelais also knew Plautus directly: it seems highly likely that he did, though neither this question nor that of the importance of Plautus for Rabelais have received much scholarly attention, so far as I know. Although Plautus was not printed as much as Terence, he was still printed often, and it has been argued that his impact on early modern comic theatre was at least as great as that of Terence. Shortly before the publication of *Pantagruel* in 1532 Johannes Gymnicus printed an edition of Plautus with commentary by Erasmus and others in Cologne (1530), and in Paris Robert Estienne printed two editions of Plautus (1529, 1530). Plautus and Rabelais share many recurrent concerns: money, eating, drinking, hunger, the unrelentless of the body, poverty, wordplay,

neologisms, carnival (Plautus’s plays were performed in Rome on festive days). On the face of it, although it seems certain that Rabelais had direct as well as mediated knowledge of the more morally preoccupied, less earthy Terence, for whom Montaigne (in ‘Des livres’) professes the greater admiration, none the less it is with Plautus’s writing that Rabelais’s seems to have richer connections.

Moreover, Rabelais mentions directly by name only three of Plautus’s many comedies, and one of these is indeed the *Aulularia*, the source of the lamb locus. In the prologue to the *Tiers livre*, the narrator, worried about his text’s likely reception, declares:

> et soit mon adventure telle que du coq de Euclion, tant celebré par Plutus en sa Marmite et par Ausone en son Gryphon et ailleurs: lequel pour en gratant avoir découvert le theasur, eut la coupee guorgé. (551)

Euclio the miser, the main protagonist of the *Aulularia*, punishes by death the hapless coqerel that scrapes the earth above his buried treasure. Rabelais’s immediate source here is probably a commonplace-book, but ‘tant celebré’ suggests how well known was not only the coqerel locus but also the play itself. Indeed, Euclio himself acquired such fame in the early modern period that his name became a generic one for misers in general (‘Eucliones’).

A closer look at the lamb locus in its home context, that of the *Aulularia*, suggests that Rabelais’s initial presentation of Panurge in Chapters 9 and 13 of *Pantagruel* probably does involve imitation not only of the locus, but also of its surrounding context in the play.

### *Panurge and the ‘Aulularia’*

How does talk of a curious, skinny lamb arise in Plautus’s play? The miser Euclio plans to marry off his daughter to an old man, Megadorus. Because Euclio is so mean, it is Megadorus who provides the supplies for the wedding feast, sending them to Euclio’s house. They include

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21 Whereas the question of Rabelais’s knowledge of Robert Estienne’s publications has not, to my knowledge, been studied, on the other hand we do know that Estienne soon knew Rabelais’s chronicles well, drawing on them lexicographically in his *Dictionnaire français-latin* of 1549, but later condemning them morally (Armstrong, *Robert Estienne*, 89, 251–52; Lazar Sanéan, ‘Un lecteur de Rabelais entre 1540 et 1549*, *Revue des études rabelaisiennes*, 8 (Paris: Champion, 1910), 188–90).


two lambs, one fat and one thin: unbeknown to Megadorus, his sly slave manages to get the fat lamb sent back to his master's own household, leaving Euclio with only the thin one. Euclio then complains to Megadorus about the quality of the provisions, including the lamb:

... *Euclio*. quo quidem agno sat seio
Magis curiosam musquam ullam esse bestiam.
*Megadorus*. Volo ex te ego scire, qui sit agnus curio.
*Euclio*. QUI OSSA, ATQUE PELLIS TOTUS EST, ita cura macet:
Quin exta inspiceret in sole etiam vivo licet:
Ita est pelliculat, quasi laterna Punica. (II. 501–66)\(^{25}\)

Euclio. Indeed I know that a more *curiosus* beast than this one doesn't exist. *Megadorus*. I'd like you to explain to me what a *curio* lamb is.

Euclio. It's all skin and bones, because it's emaciated by *cura* (care). You could put that lamb in the bright sun and inspect its intestines: it's as transparent as a Punic lantern.

It is with heavy irony on Plautus's part that he has Euclio ascribe *cura* to this lamb, since that is precisely what is repeatedly ascribed throughout the play to Euclio himself, a miser who is constantly anxious that his hoard might be discovered. Indeed, at least one early modern reader diagnosed miserly 'Eucliones' as themselves suffering from *curiositas*.\(^{26}\) *Cura* is already being displaced from lamb onto human even in the original context of this locus, before it is decontextualized, de-lammed, and re-applied to other humans by commonplace-books or by Rabelais.

Let us return now to Panurge on his Turkish spit, at the point in his narration where the question of his skinniness raises that of his edibility. Panurge and Plautus’s lamb are united not only by the cause of their skinniness — being ‘curieux’ — but also by its effect: being ‘curieux’ has left each of them barely edible. In the sentence quoted earlier, Panurge describes how the Turks could only turn him into a decent meal on the spit by attaching bacon to him, as they would to a rabbit (‘tout lardé, comme un conil’). This is thus the third animal to which he has been compared in rapid succession: a smoked herring, a thin cat, a roast rabbit . . . The first two mainly express thinness; the third expresses edibility, as also does a fourth, that is evoked a little later in the chapter. After being saved from the spit and killing his chief captor, the half-roasted Panurge (‘à demi rôti’) runs for it: ‘Et dieu sait comme je sentais mon épaule de mouton’ (393).\(^{27}\) The curious Panurge is now even closer to Plautus’s curious lamb, except that it is as mutton that he is dressed. The locus from *Aulularia*, having been humanized, is now being re-animalized.

If the *Aulularia* locus is the major intertext in Rabelais’s representation of the Turkish adventure as the kind undergone by ‘gens curieux’ like Panurge, it is perhaps not the only ancient locus involved. More speculatively, one might identify two others.

One is a passage in which Varro argues that *cura* is thus called because the heart burns with it (‘quod cor urat’), and that being *curiosus* involves an excess of such heart-burning *cura.*\(^{28}\) This locus was known in Rabelais’s time: for example, Bernardus Saracenus quotes it when explaining the *Aulularia* lamb locus in his commentary on Plautus, first printed in 1499.\(^{29}\) In Chapter 13 of *Pantagruel*, Rabelais may be literalizing not only certain standard figurative topos regarding the Turks,\(^{30}\) but also this philological-medical explanation of curiosity, transforming it into an ‘aventure[] des gens curieux’ in which hero, villains, and city alike all burn. The lexis of cooking and burning, so rich and insistently repeated in Chapter 13, may echo both Varro (burning) and the *Aulularia* (in which cooking is constantly referred to). Thus, the Varro locus may be one of the intertextual elements in the curious Panurge’s thirst and ‘gorge sèche’ (359) (urere could also mean ‘to parch, dry up’), caused both by his dehydrating Turkish adventure and then also by his subsequent meeting with the thirst-inducing *Pantagruel* (Panurge explicitly connects the two in the next Rabelais quotation below).\(^{31}\)

\(^{25}\) See also 395: ‘l’odeur de sa paillarde chair demie rôtie’.

\(^{26}\) Varro, *De lingua latina*, 6.46.

\(^{27}\) See Plautus, *Comœodiae Viginti* (Venice: Melchiorre Sessa e Pietro Ravani 1518), LXXXIV. Similarly, Cicero on the ‘cura which cooks’ someone (‘curamve ... quæ nume le coquit’: Cicero, *Cat. Maior de senectute*, I.1; Cicero was in turn quoting Ennius).

\(^{28}\) See Hampton, *Literature and Nation*, 50 ff.

\(^{29}\) A parched tongue is described as one of the symptoms of *curiositas* in a 1652
The curiosity-dehydration link may be generated not only by Varro but by Plautus too: in the Aulularia, immediately after Euculio’s denigration of the skinny lamb, Megadorus tries to cheer him up with the promise of a drink:

Megadorus. Potare ego tecum hocdie Euculio volo.
Euculio. Non potem ego quidem herele. Megadorus, at ego iussero
Cudam unum vini veteris à me afferrer.
Euculio. Nolo herele: nam mihi bibere decretum aquam est.
Megadorus. Ego te hodie reddam madidum, si vivo, probe:
Tibi an decretum est bibere aquam? (II. 569–74)

Megadorus, Euculio, I’d like to have a drink with you today.
Euculio. A drink? By Hercules, I certainly won’t be having one myself.
Megadorus. And I will order a vat of vintage wine to be brought over from my house.
Euculio. But I don’t want any, by Hercules, for I’ve resolved to drink water.
Megadorus. Upon my life, I’m going to get you properly sozzled today: you’ve resolved to drink water, have you?

The theme of imbibing water rather than wine — highlighted here through heavy repetition in two lines (‘Ego ...’) that themselves became florilegium pieces in Rabelais’ time — also occurs in his Chapter 13, where it again sits immediately alongside the too-skinny-to-be-edible theme, but now following rather than preceding it. Panurge says:

Ce vin est fort bon et bien délicieux, mais plus j’en bois, tant plus j’ai soif.
Je crois que l’ombre de monseigneur Pantagruel engendre les altérés, comme la lune fuit les cataharres.
A quoi se priver à rire les assistants. Ce que voyant, Pantagruel dit: Panurge, qu’est-ce que avez a rire?
Seigneur (dit-il), je leur contais comment ces diables de Turcsq sont bien malheureux de ne boire goutte de vin. ... Les pillards Turcsq m’avaient mis

dissertation (Watson and Rose, Exercitatio, 751).

Plautus, Comicina, XX (1530), 36.

Albrecht von Eyb, Margarita poetica (Basel: Johannes Amorbusch, Johannes Petri and Johannes Froben, 1503), E[1F]. On this work, see Moss, Printed Commonplace-Books, 71.

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en broche tout tardé, comme un conill, car j’étais tant eximé que autrement de ma chair eût été fort mauvaise viande ...

And towards the end of the chapter there reappears the same nexus of motifs — burning, cooking, being hungry/thirsty, being thirsty, drinking water not wine. Kind Turks take pity on an ungrateful Panurge:

Quand je fus descendu en la rue, je trouvai tout le monde qui était accouru au feu à force d’eau pour l’étendre. Et me voyant ainsi à demi rôti, eurent pitié de moi naturellement, et me jetèrent toute leur eau sur moi, et me rafraîchirent joyeusement, ce qui me fit fort grand bien. Puis me donnèrent quelque peu à repaître; mais je ne mangeais guère, car ils ne me faisaient que de l’eau à boire, à leur mode. (393, my italics)

The misericord abstinence from wine of Euculio — whose wasting anxiety associates him with the curious skinniness of the lamb that he scorns — is rewritten both as the misericord abstemiousness of the caricatured Muslims and also as the involuntary abstemiousness of Panurge.

Connections between Panurge and Euculio may be diffused even more widely in Pantagruel. Panurge’s ‘aventures des gens curieux’ associate him primarily with expenditure, not only of energy, body fluids and body mass but also of money (Panurge’s loss of opulence being one of the symptoms which Pantagruel diagnoses as stemming from such adventures): and his constant expenditure of money is described in terms of a diarrhoea, a wasting away of the body. The narrator, studying the same ‘physiognomie’ that Pantagruel earlier diagnosed as ‘curieux’, tells Panurge: ‘vous êtes malade à ce que je vois à votre physiognomie, et j’entends le mal: vous avez un flux de bourse’ (415). By contrast, Euculio hoards money. But each is also associated with the opposite: Panurge with finding new ways of obtaining money to spend. Euculio with expending energy in worrying about money and in fear of being poor (which he also pretends to be throughout the play). In both texts, the lexis of curiosity (curial/curiosus/curieux) helps produce the disguising symbiosis between the twin motifs of lack and excess.

See also 407: ‘il était ... sujet de nature à une maladie qu’on appelait en ce temps-là, faute d’argent, c’est douter non pareille’. On this disguising symbiosis in Rabelais’s chronicles in general, see Terence Cave, The Cornucopian Text: problems of writing in the French Renaissance.
A third standard locus connected with curiosity, in addition to those derived from Plautus and (possibly) Varro, may also be imitated in Chapter 13. Panurge is now on his way out of the Turkish city that he has set on fire:

je me retourne arrière, comme la femme de Loth, et vis toute la ville brillant, comme Sodome et Gomorrhe. Dont je fus tant aise que je me cuide conchier de joie. Mais Dieu m'en punit bien. (395)

Whereas Lot’s wife is turned into a pillar of salt by God because she turns round to view the burning Sodom (Genesis 19:26), Panurge is suddenly attacked by dogs intent on eating him. In the early modern period, and probably before, it seems that this story of Lot’s wife was a standard exemplum of curiosity. Rabelais appears to be weaving one more intertextual thread into his representation of Panurge’s Turkish escapade as an ‘aventure[] des gens curieux’.

At the very least, Rabelais’s evocation, in Chapter 9, of the ‘aventures des gens curieux’ — such as Panurge’s Turkish adventure (Chapter 13) — imitates a locus from the Aulularia. I would argue further that at the very most, these two chapters partly constitute a set of imaginative variations on various ancient texts which are thrown together by a virtual, commonplace-style heading such as ‘curiosi’.

An enigmatic locus

Such source-hunting does not provide a single neat answer to the question of what Pantagruel means by ‘les aventures des gens curieux’. Rabelais’s imitation of the locus from the Aulularia opens up a rich narrative vein in which the ‘curieux’ are people (or animals) who expend energy, who are reduced from their natural state, who waste away (whether physically, through deprivation and burning, or emotionally, through anxiety, as in Euclio’s case). In Pantagruel, the ‘curieux’ are not, on the other hand, primarily presented as those who suffer from an excessive desire for knowledge. And although Pantagruel’s phrase, by linking Panurge’s actions to a catastrophic outcome, has the air of being an introduction to an exemplary, cautionary tale, as if the subsequent revelation of Panurge’s adventures will enjoin the listeners against being ‘curieux’ themselves, in fact Panurge’s claim about his extraordinary victory over the Turks, plus the fact that his adventure produces dazzling discourse, partly counters such a moralizing reading: it seems that depleted ‘gens curieux’ have the capacity to rehydrate, whether by having water thrown over them (by the friendly Turkish crowd) or else by drinking wine (provided by Pantagruel) that will not fully slake their thirst but will give them enough energy to tell their tale and perhaps undergo future adventures.

Moreover, if the intertextual relation with the Aulularia locus does not reveal that the phrase ‘gens curieux’ has a single meaning or moral, this is not only because of the richness of Rabelais’s imaginative recasting of it, but also because the locus was already opaque anyway. In my English translation (in the previous section), I retained the key Latin terms curiosus, curio, and cura, because the characteristically exuberant Plautine wordplay between them is not only untranslatable but also unclear. Euclio’s comment that this is the most curiosus lamb in existence is initially baffling, like a riddle. Megadorus’s answer, far from being a straightforward request for clarification, actually confuses matters more, for he asks Euclio what he means not by a lamb that is curiosus but by one that is curio – although that is not what Euclio actually called it. Euclio then ignores this discrepancy when explaining the wordplay: a curiosus (or perhaps curio) lamb is one emaciated by cura.

The opacity of Euclio’s initial comment becomes even more evident when we realize that this is probably the third oldest attestation of curiosus on record, and that Plautus himself seems to have coined the term. Unlike as it may seem, the whole subsequent Western history

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40 See also La Curiosité Fracuse (Paris: Bauche Père and Christophe David, 1739), 8: ‘En effet si l’on consulte les Histoires tant Saines que Profanes, on y voit en cent endroits que cette passion [la curiosité] a presque toujours été fatale à ceux qu’elle a séduits. Le châtiment de la femme de Loth, changée en statue de Sel, en est un exemple redoutable’. Although this is a much later work, its exempla of curiosité are highly conventional (Eve, Pandora, and various males) and the inclusion of Lot’s wife is most probably commonplace, derived from an earlier (for example, patristic) source, that I have not yet been able to identify.

41 André Labharit (‘Curiositas: notes sur l’histoire d’un mot et d’une notion’,
of curiosity (curiositas, curiosité, and so on) can be traced back to Euclio’s cortorted wordplay and to a couple of earlier occurrences in Plautus. Whether or not Rabelais realized this, he is likely to have been aware that the Aulularia locus was notoriously opaque: in 1576, Euclio’s phrase ‘magis curiosam’ was called ‘ambigûe dictum, & obscure dictum’ by Lambin, echoing the way in which Rabelais’s own ‘gens curieux’ phrase strikes a modern critic (Schwartz) as ‘elliptical and mysterious’. From antiquity onwards, the strangeness of this wordplay by Plautus stimulated imitation and philological comment, some of which is reported in the sixteenth century in dictionaries and Plautus commentaries. Euclio’s gloss on how he gets from cura to

Museum Helveticum (1960), 206–24 (206–207)) points out that the two earliest attestations of curious are those found in a speech by Gelainamus in Plautus’ Stichus (III. 198–208). Stichus (200 BC) was probably written a little earlier than the Aulularia, as also probably was Plautus’ Amphitrion, which contains one occurrence of curiosas (as Estienne points out: Dictionarium (1531)). The ecologic unfamiliarity of curious in the Stichus is shown by the fact that, like Euclio, Gelainamus explains its meaning for the benefit of the audience. The two occurrences in the Stichus, like the one in the Aulularia, were decontextualized as excerpts by humanists: for example, both are included in Estienne’s Sententiae & proverbii (41): ‘Sed curiosi sunt hic quampules muli / Aliens res qui curant studio maximi / Quibus ipsis mulia est res, quam procurant, sus / Curiosus nemo est, quin sit malevolus’; moreover, both loci from the Stichus are included in the florilegium by Octavianus Mirandula, Viridarium illustrum poëtarum (Paris: Denys Rosse, 1513), CXXXIX, on which see Moos, Printed Commonplace-Books, 95; moreover, the second locus (‘Curiosus nemo est. . .’) is included in Fosio’s Monimenta poetica (E2) and is partly capitalised in Estienne’s 1530 edition of Plautus (Comœodiae XX. 226–227).

Plautus, Opera, 180n.

Plautus’s ‘emaciated with care’ sense was imitated in c. 110 BC in a comedy by Lucius Afranius, and both were cited by the grammarian Nonius Marcellus in the early fourth century AD (De coupennsissa doctrina, ed. Wallace M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1903), 32, 121). The phrase ‘Curionem agnum’ was also attributed to Plautus and explained in the second century AD by Sexus Pompeius Festus (De verborum significatu quae supersunt, ed. Wallace M. Lindsay (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1913), 52) in a lexicon that is an abridgement of the lost De significatu verborum by Verrius Flaccus (d. 14 AD) and was itself later summarised in an epitome by Paulus Diaconus (eighth century AD). For later references back to this tradition, see Calpino, Dictionarium (1542), ‘Curiosus’ (Festus); Plautus, Comœodiae

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curious clarifies one sense of curiousus (‘emaciated by care’), but Megadorus’s mention of curio adds a further denotation — ‘a leader or official of a political, military, or religious assembly (curia)’. This is so disconcerting that ‘magis curiosam’ has even sometimes been interpreted as a scriber’s error for ‘magis curionem’, or else as a phrase that is then comically misheard by Megadorus. Some sixteenth-century comment on the passage explained the jump from curiousus to curio/curia by making both derive from cura, with curiousus meaning ‘emaciated by care’ and curio/curia referring to the care that officials take of the populace. While Foulet and Downes are probably wrong to emend ‘gens curieux’ to ‘gens curiaux’, Rabelais’s phrase may indeed evoke courtiers after all, but distantly, as a supplementary connotation rather than by an alternative denotation. Although Plautus’s lamb may thus have been polysemic, in about 1532 the main denotation that it contributed to the term curiosus was ‘emaciated with care’, while on the basis of other ancient texts, including the Stichus by Plautus himself, curiousus also meant ‘having too much care [cura] for multiple, unnecessary, or inappropriate things’, or even, in certain contexts, ‘having too much desire for knowledge’. It was only from the 1550s onwards that some humanists made concerted efforts to take the lambish lameness out of curious, or at least to disentangle it from these other senses of the adjective.

viginti (1518), LXXXIIIv (‘No[nius’]).

44 For a survey of Plautus scholarship on this passage, see Aulularia, ed. W. Stockert, 2 vols (Stuttgart: B. G. Teubner, 1983), ii, 155–56.

45 See Calepino, Dictionarium (1542), ‘Curiones’, ‘Curiosus’. The Calepino argument that curiousus and curia both derive directly from cura is an explicit attack on Lorenzo Valla, who connects curiousus even more closely to curia by arguing that curiousus derives directly from curia which in turn derives from cura (Elegantia de lingua latina (Venice, 1505), IX). Varro too links curia to curiousus (De lingua latina, 6.46).

46 In his 1576 commentary on Euclio’s words, Lambin distinguishes between lamb- and non-lamb-related meanings of curiousus: ‘Nam curiousa bellus accipi potest, vel maculenta, & quasi curia confecta, ut sunt curiousi: quo modo vult accipi Euclio: vel propriè nimis multa, & alia, & non necessaria curias’ (Plautus, Opera, 180a). Although Robert Estienne excises the Aulularia locus from the ‘Curiousus’ entry in the 1553–1554 Calepino (see above), the locus still figures elsewhere in this edition, quoted in the neighbouring entry for ‘Curiones’, as it was in earlier editions.
Rabelais’ narrative amplification of the phrase ‘les aventures des gens curieux’ reveals the distinctive way in which humanist culture shaped so-called ‘concepts’. As used by Pantagruel, the term ‘curieux’ carries not a single meaning but a limited nexus of meanings that are linked less by semantic logic than by the cluster of loci classicorum that were habitually associated with one another under commonplace-style headings such as ‘curiosity’, whether in printed or private commonplace-books, in other compilations, or else in the memories of sixteenth-century writers. Humanist culture shaped hundreds of ‘concepts’ in this way, as mobile, open clusters of loci. And those loci that happened to be prominent under any given commonplace-style heading played a large role in humanist understandings of the corresponding ‘concept’. If being ‘curieux’ in Pantagruel involves what may seem to be a random combination of qualities — being emaciated by care, dejected, dehydrated, lamb-like, edible or inedible — this is because one opaque, contorted, and contested locus from Plautus loomed large in contemporary understandings of ‘curieux’. And just as the locus itself is grounded, in this case, in humour, phonic similarity, and wordplay rather than in logic, so the reasons for this kind of decisive prominence enjoyed by a locus may also have been textual, material, pragmatic, and contingent, rather than logical. For instance, at least part of the reason why lamb-related meanings take up one third of the space devoted to curiosus in Robert Estienne’s Latin dictionary is simply that his initial skeleton draft of this monumental work drew on two authors only — Plautus and Terence. It is arguable that in all periods ‘concepts’, if they exist at all, are open-ended amalgams, anthologies, clusters of meaning: the resonance of Rabelais’s reference to ‘gens curieux’ reminds us that this was especially true within humanist culture.

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