The Function of Pantagruelion in Rabelais’s Quart Livre

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March 2, 2016

Abstract

The praise of the famous Pantagruelion herb that occupies the last four chapters of Rabelais’s *Tiers Livre* bears on the narrative of the *Quart Livre*. Although apparently frivolous or superfluous, the use of Pantagruelion as a blow-tube places it in the same class of beings as the other *physeter* in Rabelais’s text—the whale that later appears in chapters 33 and 34 of the *Quart Livre*. Pantagruel’s preparedness for the whale, compared with the misplaced fear of Panurge and overconfidence of the Pantagruelic artillery, rests in part on his knowledge that *physeters* are governed by necessities that make them what they are. Connecting Pantagruelion to the whale in this way reveals an order in nature, one that requires belief despite appearances. Pantagruelion supplies or inspires such belief.

Keywords: Rabelais, philosophy, belief, *Tiers* and *Quart Livres*
Like many of Rabelais’s passages, the praise of Pantagruelion that closes the Tiers Livre has a generative capacity that encourages interpretation. There Rabelais cryptically describes the plant that will be brought on board in preparation for the search for the Dive Bouteille, which supposedly holds the final answer to Panurge’s marriage question, initially raised with the end of the war against the Dipsodians and the onset of political peace in the Tiers Livre. The plant’s qualities seem to have little to do with this quest. I will suggest that, on the contrary, the Pantagruelion plant is well-suited to answering Panurge’s marriage question and to further educating Panurge by giving him the right disposition toward his future and his happiness.

The interpretive history of the Pantagruelion plant is expansive. In 1956, Verdun Saulnier identified eight scholarly theories about Pantagruelion as worthy of consideration. Donald Frame’s 1977 Study catalogued four more. Saulnier developed what has since been called the hésuchist theory, which presents Rabelais’s prudential recourse to shrouded speech and imagery (such as that of the lauded herb) as a way of communicating with fellow évangeliques in the face of religious persecution. This interpretation prevailed until the 1960s, when scholars began to examine the rhetoric of the Pantagruelion encomium, its comical, paradoxical, digressive character, and its lyrical quality. These latter studies consider the Pantagruelion chapters as one whole to be examined independently.

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3. Louis-George Tin writes, for example, that the hemp plant (which Pantagruelion is compared to) was used during the reign of Francis I to suppress Lutherans in France. Louis-Georges Tin, “Qu’est-ce que le Pantagruélien?,” in Études rabelaissienes, vol. 39 (Genève: Librairie Droz, 2000), p. 130.
of the rest of Rabelais’s writings. Louis-Georges Tin reminds us that, after all, the ending of the Tiers Livre may perhaps be “un texte sur rien, faisant surgir ex nihilo aliquid,” but Tin himself—like so many readers—cannot resist probing the rhetorical, hermeneutical, and poetical aspects of the Pantagruelian chapters.

The reading offered here connects Pantagruelian to the narrative of the Quart Livre by showing that the plant, a living thing, serves a purpose in the quest for the Dive Bouteille, during which Panurge will encounter nature. Under these circumstances Panurge cannot discount nature as mere tradition, moralizing, or bloviating as he had discounted the expert consultations of the Tiers Livre. Nature’s tutelage or correction of Panurge occurs most obviously in chapters 33–34 of the Quart Livre when the company, then at sea, spots a whale or physeter—think of the false cognate φύσις—approaching. Pantagruelian, also a physeter, provides the key to understanding the questers’ encounter with the sea creature. And Pantagruel’s thoughtful response to the monster makes use of his knowledge of physeters as a class of things.

The following argument contains three sections. The first considers a question that occurs after reading the description of Pantagruelian in chapter 49 of the Tiers Livre: Is Pantagruelian analogous to Homer’s moly plant? Homer is, after all, one of the most cited of Rabelais’s antique sources. An equivocal answer to this question leads to deeper digging. For, aside from providing a physical description of the plant, Rabelais writes that Pantagruelian has a “use” that moly lacks. The second section explains the significance of this use, which the narrator describes through a riddle. Via reflection on this riddle, two possible “uses” present themselves: 1) philosophy and 2) belief. Or is it 3) both, combined


5. Tin, “Qu’est-ce que le Pantagruelian?” p. 126.


in a kind of Platonic πίστις. Perhaps Saulnier’s hésuchist theory was right that Pantagruelion symbolizes belief, but belief in the necessity of things—belief that there is such a thing as necessity—and not religious belief despite persecution by the authorities. This conclusion rests not only on the textual evidence of the Pantagruelion chapters, but also on the function of Pantagruelion in the Quart Livre as a physeter, or blowhole, to match that greater physeter, the whale. This function, discussed in the third section of the argument, accounts for the appearance of the goddess of necessity, Atropos, in both episodes (and in only those episodes).

Understanding the function of Pantagruelion in the Quart Livre not only verifies the coherent design of Rabelais’s books, but lends credence to the view that Panurge undergoes a series of events intended to lead him to accept his circumstances rather than to try to control his future. Not least of all, the presence of the physeters in the Tiers and Quart Livres suggest a Rabelais who advocates a view of nature deserving of or commanding human deference. Rabelais’s books serve as a timely reminder in an age of heady, scientific ambitions.

**Pantagruelion as Moly: “Rough and Hard to Get at” (Tiers Livre 49 and Odyssey X)**

The praise of Pantagruelion in the Tiers Livre begins when the narrator reports that Pantagruel is preparing the number of ships that “Ajax de Salamine avoit jadis menées en convoy des Gregoys à Troie” [Ajax of Salamis long ago brought the Greeks as a convoy to Troy]. This is only the first hint that Homer’s poetry serves as a signpost for these chapters. The narrator drops more breadcrumbs when he lists the attributes of the plant.

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One of the first things he notes is that Pantagruelion “a racine petite, durette . . .” [has small and tough roots . . .] 10 And later, at the beginning of chapter 52, he attests that the truth about Pantagruelion is “d’access assez scabreux et difficile” [rather rough and hard to get at]. 11 As we shall see, this is the verbiage Hermes uses to describe the nature of the moly plant to Odysseus in The Odyssey. Rabelais’s mimicry may suggest that the Pantagruelion plant functions in Rabelais’s book just as the moly plant functions in Homer’s book. The possibility would lend importance to Pantagruelion. Seth Benardete claims that the very “peak of the Odyssey” occurs when Hermes descends to Odysseus. 12 Hermes intervenes in Odysseus’s situation in The Odyssey after his group’s arrival on Aiaia, an island inhabited by the powerful goddess Circe. Odysseus had seen a fire in the distance and decided to send a team headed by Eurylochos to investigate. 13 Eurylochos alone returned and reported the fate of the others who had happened upon the household of Circe, accepted “malignant drugs” from her, and “took on the look of pigs.” The last that Eurylochos knew, his men had been driven by the dread goddess into a hog-sty. 14 Just before Hermes appeared to reveal the nature of the moly plant, Odysseus and Eurylochos had disagreed about how to proceed. Odysseus wished to retrieve the men and Eurylochos advised abandonment. But Odysseus felt a strong “compulsion” and determined to save the company. 15

Odysseus then set off to find his companions. Hermes, in the likeness of a man in the bloom of youth, appeared to Odysseus and provided him with a “good medicine” to work against the “malignant medicine” that Circe had used on the investigators. He told Odysseus to enter the house of Circe and wait for her to try to strike him with her wand. At her movement he was to draw a sword and rush at her. When she, in fear, would invite

11. TL 52, 509 / CW, 409.
Odysseus to bed, Odysseus was not to refuse but rather to obtain her oath to desist. With these instructions delivered, Hermes “administered” the medicine. Benardete points out that the medicine works not through its administration to the body, but through Hermes’ “explaining” its “nature” $[\phi\upsilon\varsigma\nu]$ to Odysseus:

So spoke Argeiphontes, and he gave me the medicine, which he picked out of the ground, and he explained the nature of it to me. It was black at the root, but with a milky flower. The gods call it moly. It is *hard for mortal men to dig up*, but with the gods all things are possible.\footnote{Odyssey, p. 160 (10.302–306). Italics mine. See also Benardete, *Bow*, p. 86. Lattimore translates θεοὶ δὲ τὰ πάντα δύνανται as “the gods have power to do all things.”}

Odysseus called Hermes by one of his many epithets, Argeiphontes, which refers to another instance where Hermes counteracted the magic of Hera, who had Zeus’s lover Io transformed into a cow. Hera afterward enlisted the giant Argos to guard the enchanted animal. Later, Hermes slew Argos, hence the name Argeiphontes [Argos-slayer]. Yet Hermes himself never uses magic. Hermes works or thinks through the way things are, their being, telling Odysseys about these things presumably at greater length than Odysseus discusses them with us. As this study of nature applies to the *moly*, it is possible that without Hermes’ help Odysseus would only have seen the plant’s white blossom. The root, “hard for mortal men to dig up,”\footnote{Cf. the description of Pantagruelion at TL 52, 509 / CW, 409.} would have remained hidden. Thus Odysseus would not have realized that the white blossom and black root belong together, just as the human body and mind, though also disparate, go together.\footnote{This is a summary of Benardete’s argument. See Benardete, *Bow*, p. 86.}

The root and the flower differ in more than color, however. The root works to keep the plant grounded in one place. The flower, on the other hand, is not only visible but effortlessly gives off pollens that travel and reproduce the plant in scores elsewhere. The reproductive capacities of the flower point to the universality of its nature; the roots, to its particularity. And whereas the flower has a soft beauty about it, the black roots look ugly.

*Moly* is “hard for mortals to dig up,” but not because digging it requires a superhuman amount of physical strength. A more plausible answer is that the beauty of the *moly*...
petals leaves onlookers content with what stands above ground, or that it compels them to snap the plant at the stem and take what they see. Either way, the root is simply not recognized or desired. The root is not considered as essential to the plant or as on the same level of importance as the flower. Knowing about this ugly thing requires considerable will to see beyond the visible. Hermes’ lesson is not only that nature combines diverse parts into wholes, but also that people keep to the surfaces of things out of an intellectual weakness or blindness, and that this blindness prevents them from seeing the whole. In this case, being blind means seeing and holding to a prettier picture of life.

If Rabelais’s Pantagruelion plant is anything like moly, then the narrator’s description should produce a view or understanding of nature like the one found in Book X of The Odyssey. For the sake of comparison, here is the narrator’s full description of the nature of Pantagruelion:

1. Pantagruelion may be “prepared” and put to use.
2. Pantagruelion has small, shallow roots (though “petite” tough and “durette”) with a blunt white point.
3. Its stem is concave, with a green outside and white inside.
4. Pantagruelion derives its worth from its fiber.
5. Its height ranges from 5’ to that of a lance (roughly 10’)
6. The Pantagruelion herb dies yearly.
7. It does, however, have evergreen leaves with spikes.
8. These leaves number 5 or 7 in each row, “tant l’a cherie nature, qu’elle l’a douée en ses feueilles de ces deux nombres impars tant divins et mysterieux” [so much has Nature cherished it that she has endowed in its leaves these two odd numbers, so divine and mysterious].
9. The odor of the plant is too strong for delicate noses.
10. But “estainct en l’home la semence generative, qui en mangeroit beaucoup et sou- vent” [it extinguishes the generative seed in anyone who should eat many of them often]. Greeks used these seeds for desserts.
11. The female has a milky flower.

Although this list shares a few things with Odysseus’s description of moly, there are also significant differences. (The third item will gain importance during the questers’ encounter with the physeter in the Quart Livre.) Odysseus’s details were scant. He mentioned only moly’s colors, its two parts, and the roughness or softness of those parts. Here readers

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get many details to sift through and organize. First, the Pantagruelion’s roots are white, shallow, and small—not black (though still “petite” and “durette”). Pantagruelion’s roots are similar to those of *moly* in that their shortness suggests that harvesting Pantagruelion does not require great physical strength but strength of another kind—strength of intellect or of constitution. Point 9 reinforces Pantagruelion’s *moly*-like difficulty of access. The strong odor of the plant keeps weak people away. Only those able to ignore its stench can handle the plant. In addition, spikey leaves [point 7] suggest a need for thick skin. This plant too is hard for mortals to dig up.

Even if *moly* serves as a kind of literary model for Pantagruelion, the meaning of Rabelais’s plant exceeds that of *moly*. Consider point 1. Odysseus did not “use” moly when he entered Circe’s household except in the sense that it gave him a knowledge of his nature that enabled him to remain firm against Circe’s seductions. Simply by being what it was, *moly* helped Odysseus to realize who he was—a human and not a pig. But chapter 51 of the *Tiers Livre* will suggest that humans use Pantagruelion in ways that improve and change conditions for themselves. This point will be revisited and examined more closely below.

Points 6 and 8 deal most directly with nature. The yearly death [point 6] of Pantagruelion speaks not only to its mortality but also to its continual recurrence, or to the fact that a blueprint for this plant exists somewhere. Its individual specimens inhabit a realm of becoming and perishing, but Pantagruelion keeps becoming and perishing because of its residence in the realm of being. The numbers of its leaves [point 8], five and seven, mean different things in the biblical and classical-philosophical traditions, and here Rabelais mixes the two. “Nature” endows the leaves with the numbers, but the numbers are also “divins et mysterieux.” The regularity with which these numbers appears points to a cause, but knowledge about this cause remains sparse.

The final point [point 10] is, however, the most enigmatic. The seed of Pantagruelion “extinguishes the generative seed in man.” (This extinguishing is what Panurge most needs in the *Tiers Livre*, and various attempts to extinguish that generative seed are made through the consultations, formal and informal.) On a literal reading one might compare Pantagruelion with those plants and drugs responsible for cases of sexual impotence, erec-
tile dysfunction, and the like. Medical researchers know that certain forms of plant life are capable of these effects. The early interpreters of Rabelais accordingly emphasized the sterilizing effects of the hemp seed in their readings of the Pantagruelion chapters.20 Yet this literal reading does not explain why Rabelais pairs this effect with the apparently unnecessary detail that the Greeks, of all peoples, ate this anti-aphrodisiac for dessert. Keeping this odd pairing in mind, a few interpretive options arise. Such a dessert may represent philosophy, for which the Greeks were so well-known. Philosophy represents the culmination of learning. It is, so to speak, the last course of one’s intellectual development. In its deepest manifestation, philosophy’s intense focus on discovering the truth about the cosmos decreases other non-philosophic loves. Philosophy “‘estainct en l’home la semence generative” by taking erotic focus away from immediate, particular things and connecting the lover of truth to eternity.

This dessert might also be belief.21 For belief reached the Greeks after philosophy did, and so may be the true final course. Christianity opened up God’s covenant with the Jews to the Gentiles in Athens, Corinth, Thessaly, and elsewhere in the Hellenic world. And just as philosophy makes the lover of wisdom un-erotic with regard to this world by turning attention to the eternal world of intellect, belief makes the faithful un-erotic by turning their attention from this world—often an autonomous and proud attention aimed at figuring out the physics of this world, or an infatuation with its material pleasures—to the next world or afterlife as presented in the written revelations. An indication of just this “extinguishing of the generative seed in man” can be found in Genesis 1:28 (ESV): “And God blessed them. And God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply. . . . ’” It is indeed an otherworldly kind of human community that needs to be commanded to this sort of activity.

As the narrator discloses more about Pantagruelion, these competing interpretations, philosophy and belief, must be weighed against each other or reconciled. A sound interpre-

20. Saulnier, “L’Énigme,” p. 51; see also Tin, “Qu’est-ce que le Pantagruelion?” p. 129.

21. Surprisingly, the use of dessert as an emblem of philosophy or belief was not typical during the Renaissance. It cannot be found in the writings of Erasmus, for instance. As far as I can tell, this emblem may be a unique contribution of Rabelais’s.
tation will not only fit the description given of the plant in the final chapters of the *Tiers Livre*, but will also explain how Pantagruelion helps the company during their journey in the *Quart Livre*.

**The Name and Use of Pantagruelion (Tiers Livre 51)**

Pantagruelion resembles *moly* in several respects (most of all in the hard work of harvesting it), but the other things disclosed about Pantagruelion suggest that its significance extends beyond that of *moly*. Chapter 51, which purports to explain the reason for the plant’s name (but which deviates to explain a use of the plant), speaks at length about this issue.\(^2\)

The chapter begins with a moral observation, which presents the reader with the first of a series of riddles to come: Thieves hate the plant because it can “oppiloit les conduitz, par les quelz sortent les bons motz, et entrent les bons morsaulx, plus villainement que ne feroit la male Angine et mortelle Squinanche” [stop up the passages by which good remarks come out and good morsels come in, more banefully than would a bad choking spell or mortal quinsy]. In short, Pantagruelion acts as a “hart” [halter] and “cornette” [cravat].\(^3\) It delivers death, especially to those who deserve it. The narrator equates this aspect of Pantagruelion with the work of the Greek goddess Atropos.\(^4\) Traditionally, Atropos was the oldest of the three Fates and had the job of ending life and ensuring cosmic justice.\(^5\)

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22. Tin observes that a literal understanding of the plant does not account for its being named after Pantagruel. I do not agree with him on all points about Pantagruelion, but this is an important insight. See Tin, “Qu’est-ce que le Pantagruelion?” p. 130.

23. TL 51, 506 / CW, 406.

24. TL 51, 506 / CW, 406. See the Online LSJ definition of ἀτρόπος: “not to be turned, unchangeable, eternal” (p. 273).

25. See Hesiod, “Theogony,” in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, With an English Translation*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1914), lines 218–223: “Also Night bore the Destinies and ruthless avenging Fates, Clotho and Lachesis and Atropos, who give men at their birth both evil and good to have, and they pursue the transgressions of men and of gods: and these goddesses never cease from their dread anger until they punish the sinner with a sore penalty.” That Atropos and her sisters punish the gods suggests necessity or nature limits or stands above the gods.
myth of Er as the governess of “what is going to be.”

Thus Pantagruelion, like Atropos, signifies death, inevitability, and necessity, but also the future and eternity—something that, as La Rochefoucauld later wrote, “ne se peuvent regarder fixement” [cannot be looked on fixedly]. Some can, however, look at death more fixedly than others. Pantagruelion disturbs mainly the unjust. And on the other hand, Pantagruelism promises to cultivate callousness toward one’s future—callousness towards Atropos, or an ability to disregard one’s fate.

Because of the narrator’s focus on thieves as the most fearful of Pantagruelion, one might conclude that the moral, or the law-abiding, can look on death more fixedly. But if the bad fear punishment then the good anticipate rewards. The predispositions of the unjust and the just, combined with the definition of Pantagruelism as contempt for fortuitous things, leads to the conclusion that beholding death fixedly requires transcending morality altogether, or looking on death philosophically (from outside of convention). At this juncture one cannot ignore something that Rondibilis first brought up in his consultation with Panurge: Socrates’ famous formulation of philosophy as “meditation de mort” [meditation on death].

More evidence of Pantagruelion as philosophy accrues throughout the chapter. Here is the most prominent piece: The narrator observes that planters harvest Pantagruelion during the draught season, when the Sun “rend tout le monde Troglodyte, et constraine habiter es eaux et lieux subterrains” [forces everyone to live in caves or cellars or other underground places]. These draught conditions cause thirst, Rabelais’ symbol for the


30. TL 51, 506 / CW, 407.
The underground dwellings that Rabelais’s narrator describes may remind readers of the cave or shadow world described in Book 7 of Plato’s *Republic*. But in the Pantagruelian chapters, the people are not born and reared in the cave with its questionable customs, as in the account of Plato’s Socrates, but head down into them because of the harsh conditions above ground. In a literal sense, the sun’s heat might push people to live underground. In another, figurative sense, the “heat” of the governing authorities’ rule can push freethinking underground. Although advocates of liberalism and individual rights may blame this kind of “heat” for causing science to wither on the vine, Pantagruelian flourishes in draught conditions. Perhaps philosophy withers when generously watered. Great philosophers have sprouted, after all, in persecutory ages.

Pantagruelian as *belief* may be read as a competing alternative to Pantagruelian as *philosophy*, or the harsh conditions that surround Pantagruelian as *philosophy* may affirm the need for *belief* as a supplement. These possibilities need to be considered, and can be, by thinking about a list of disparate uses of Pantagruelian that Rabelais provides. The uses on this list support a second-order interpretation of Pantagruelian as *belief*. Although not literal, this interpretation is still warranted by the textual evidence. Rabelais describes the uses for the plant by painting a dreary picture of human life without it. Without Pantagruelian,

1. “. . . kitchens would be a disgrace, tables loathsome.”
2. Beds would be “without delight.”
3. Millers could not carry wheat to the mill.
4. Plaster could not be carried to the workshop
5. Water could not be drawn from the well.
6. The art of printing would perish.
7. Human beings would not be clothed.

Additionally,

8. It protects armies against cold and rain.

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9. It provides netting for fishermen.
10. It shapes shoes, strings bows, bends crossbows, and makes slingshots.\footnote{This use of Pantagruelion is addressed in my discussion of the \textit{physeter}.}
11. Dead bodies are always buried with it.
12. It arrests invisible substances\footnote{TL 51, 507–508 / CW, 407–408.}

Plant materials can explain each of these riddles well enough. Linens adorn and give charm to kitchens and tables; blankets give beds delight; bags contain wheat and plaster; rope pulls up water; printing requires paper. And of course plant materials of various kinds are used to produce clothing, weaponry, death shrouds, and sails. But the quality or virtue of belief explains the genesis or origin of each use, and it is the genesis that seems to be at stake.

The superiority of this second-order interpretation is clear from point 1 through point 12. Kitchens [point 1], to begin with, do not need decoration. From a strictly utilitarian view, the act of eating requires nothing more than transporting food from the hand to the mouth. Yet this utilitarian view cannot account for why someone would cover a dinner table with ornate doilies. The embellishments of Pantagruelion-based artifacts signal belief or trust that there will be a future catch or harvest—joyful meals, or even feasting. In short, Pantagruelion symbolizes belief in life above necessity. Likewise, a bare floor suffices for sleep, but the delight of the bed [point 2] shows that human beings are amorous and romantic creatures who not only want to be together but to dwell in each other’s beauty and togetherness.

Much the same follows for the subsequent points. Those humans who discovered wheat invested great energy and belief in their efforts to produce bread. It was not simply intuitive to the humans who discovered wheat that this crude plant could make a processed, labor-intensive food. A bag made of hemp or some such material could carry wheat to the mill well enough, but the belief that great toil will eventually pay off more truly carries the wheat to the mill [point 3]. The same goes for taking plaster to the workshop [point 4]. And it is the belief that it takes to dig for potable water that pulls up that
water from the bottom of the well [point 5]. Likewise, the art of printing is preserved by paper, but it is better preserved by a belief that others now or in the future will read one’s writing [point 6]. Clothing suggests belief in the regularity of the seasons [points 7 and 8]. The fisherman drops nets made of hemp—out of belief in a big catch [point 9]. Artisans craft weapons using plant materials, but belief in the victory over the enemy compels them to produce arms in the first place [point 10].

Points 11 and 12 suggest that this list of acts of belief constitutes an ascension. They also support the second-order interpretation of Pantagruelion. For if human clothing represents a certain kind of belief, then bringing fabrics and clothing with oneself to the grave [point 11] implies belief of the highest order—belief in the afterworld. The final point, moreover, turns from the realm of the grave and back to another, equally deep sort of belief. Although one might literally interpret the arrest of invisible substances as the arrest of winds by sails [point 12], this usage demonstrates belief in the regularity and beneficence of nature. Such belief takes explorers to new worlds far more than do the sails themselves.

A sound interpretation of Pantagruelion should maintain consistency with the end of chapter 51, but the mundane (literal) interpretation fails to do so. This section reports that the Olympian gods feared Pantagruel’s children would invent or discover an “herbe de semblable energie” [an herb of similar energy] and invade the heavens after seeing humans putting Pantagruelion to its various uses. It ends by stating that the gods convened a meeting about how to respond to the human threat.

Rabelais’s story may be derived from those warnings against collective human efforts


36. Even the use of Pantagruelion to capture wind echoes *The Odyssey*. Odysseus receives the gift of bagged winds from Aiolos just before arriving at Aiaia and meeting Circe. If the events there are any indication, humanity’s ability to use Pantagruelion to capture wind is not simply good. The bag of winds episode emphasizes the human misuse of wind-power. See *Odyssey* pp. 152–153 (10.19–27).

found in Aristophanes’ speech in Plato’s *Symposium* or in the Babel story of the book of Genesis. Regardless of Rabelais’s source, it is likely that the worry among the divinities that he writes about originates in something stronger than plant material. Still, what makes Pantagruelion so strong and threatening to the gods is not yet clear. To see how Pantagruelion supplies such belief, readers must examine its function in the quest of the *Quart Livre*.

**The Questers’ Uses of Pantagruelion in the *Quart Livre***

Thinking about the function of Pantagruelion in Rabelais’s narrative means returning to basic questions. The turn from established authorities in the *Tiers Livre* to an independent quest in the *Quart Livre* does not of itself explain the pertinence of the Pantagruelion chapters. The additional fact that Pantagruelion is mentioned only twice in the *Quart Livre*—once in a restatement of the ending of the *Tiers Livre*, and once in a droll way—seems to further diminish the plant’s purpose. Here is what the narrator describes Panurge doing with the Pantagruelion plant in chapter 63: “Panurge avecques la langue parmy un tuyau de Pantagruelion faisoit des bulles et guargoulles” [Panurge, through a tube of Pantagruelion, was blowing bubbles with his tongue]. Nothing more is written about Pantagruelion.

There may be no need for more. As Edwin Duval has written, the design of the *Quart Livre* gives weight to the appearance of another bubble-blower: the whale or *physeter* who appears to the questers in the middle of the book. The Greek term *φυσητήρ* means a few things. It may refer to 1) an instrument for blowing, a blowpipe, or tube, 2) the blowhole or spiracle of a whale, or 3) to a kind of whale. But of course, as we have just seen, Panurge later (in *QL* 63) uses the Pantagruelion plant as a *physeter*—a blowhole. Rabelais plants this apparently frivolous use of Pantagruelion as early as chapter 49 of the *Tiers Livre*, where


the narrator discloses that the stem of the plant is concave. Rabelais’s plan stews for some time, and for such an odd reason. The difficult question is what all of this means.

Pantagruelion’s use as a bubble-blowing device is best understood against the backdrop of the other ways of understanding the other bubble-blower—the whale—that are on offer. Pantagruelion and the whale both stand for natural things, or for living beings that grow. These physeters are specimens of physis or nature. Yet the very blower of the blowhole, Panurge, seems not to understand this. When the whale approaches the boat, Panurge, shouts out in fear and bemoans the coming of the “Leviathan descript par le noble prophete Moses en la vie du sainct home Job” [the Leviathan as described by the noble prophet Moses in the life of that holy man Job]. In other words, Panurge understands the physeter not according to its nature, but as presented through the holy revelations.

The rest of the chapter consists of Pantagruel’s explanation to Panurge of what the physeter is and the narrator’s description of how Pantagruel confronted and defeated the creature. In other words, Pantagruel appears to Panurge as a kind of Homeric Hermes, who arrives to instruct his Odysseus, Panurge—who had described himself as such during his first appearance in Rabelais’s books. Duval demonstrates beyond doubt that Rabelais uses Job 41 as his source text for the questers’ encounter with the beast. He points out that each of Pantagruel’s actions in his battle against the Leviathan correspond to the rhetorical questions that God poses to Job. God asks, for example, whether anyone can put a cord through the animal’s nose or pierce its jaw with a hook; Pantagruel does just these things. But Pantagruel’s behavior has heretical ramifications. For according to the Church tradition, each of God’s questions were to be answered firmly in the negative. Here is what Thomas says about the matter in his Expositio super Iob ad litteram (Literal Exposition on Job):

…lest it be believed that man can overcome the devil by his own power he

41. See point 3 on the above list of Pantagruelion’s nature.
42. QL 33, 616 / CW, 508.
43. P 9, ?? / CW, ??.
44. Duval, Design of the Quart Livre, pp. 130–131.
45. QL 34, 619 / CW, 511.
begins to exclude this belief under the figure of Leviathan, concerning whom He shows first that he cannot be overcome through the method by which fish are caught. Hence, He says Or will you be able to draw out, namely, from the waters, Leviathan with a hook? ... And by this verse is signified that no man can either draw the devil away from his malice or even tie him so that he may not proceed in his malice.\[46\\]

To save Rabelais from heresy, Duval reads Pantagruel as a Christ-like “fishhook” who may legitimately bind the Leviathan.\[47\\] Although the Savior could rightfully take that kind of action, Pantagruel does not act as the Savior would. Rather than claim that he alone possesses divine power to overcome Satan, Pantagruel reinterprets the Leviathan as an exclusively physical creature and denies one of its main attributes as a devilish Leviathan. Compare Job 41:19–21 with what Pantagruel says about the whale. Here is the relevant portion of the account in Job:

Out of [the Leviathan’s] mouth go flaming torches; sparks of fire leap forth. Out of his nostrils comes forth smoke, as from a boiling pot and burning rushes. His breath kindles coals, and a flame comes forth from his mouth.

And here is how Pantagruel assuages Panurge’s fear of the “Leviathan”:

“Si telle est (dist Pantagruel) vostre destinée fatale, comme naguieres exposoit frere Jan, vous doibvez paour avoir de Pyroeis, Heoüs, Æthon, Phlegon celebres chevaux du Soleil Flammivomes, qui rendent few par les narines : des Physeteres, qui ne jetent qu’eau par les ouyes et par la gueule, ne doibvez paour aulcune avoir. Jà par leur eau ne serez en dangier de mort. Par cestuy element plus toust serez guaranty et conservé que fasché ne offene.\[48\\]

Several parts of this speech strike the eye. First, Pantagruel refuses to join Panurge in calling the animal a Leviathan, the designation given it by the biblical tradition. He in

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47. Duval, *Design of the Quart Livre*, p. 133.

48. *QL* 33, 617 / *CW*, 508–509: “If such,” said Pantagruel, “is your ill-fated destiny [that is, being destroyed by the Leviathan’s fire], as Frère Jean was stating a while ago, you should be afraid of Pyroeis, Eous, Æthon, and Phlegon, the famous flammivomous horses of the Sun, who breathe out fire through their nostrils; but of physeters, which spout nothing but water from their blowholes and from their throats, you should have no fear at all. Never from their water will you be in danger of death. By that element you will rather be made safe and preserved than troubled and harmed.” Italics mine.
fact introduces the taxonomic term *physeter*. Second, he goes out of his way to deny that this whale shoots flames as both the biblical Leviathan and the mythical horses of the Sun do. Pantagruel appears not as a soteriological hero, but as a student of nature whose knowledge of nature gives him a proper measure of confidence or belief—belief that this *physeter*, a natural thing, is no Leviathan. He does not extinguish this Leviathan’s fire (on Thomas’s view, symbolic of the Devil’s capacity to stir passions) but instead demystifies the Leviathan and denies that it has fire at all.

Guy Demerson writes, in his article on the nature of water in Rabelais, that the element is

“au moins aussi pernicieux que l’autre élément dit ‘agressif,’ le feu. … Pantagruel rappelle les deux malheurs subis par Enée : l’incendie de Troie et une ‘horrible tourmente sus mer’ (T 14, 608) et, déjà au début de *Tiers Livre*, lorsque Panurge évoquait les pires dangers qui peuvent assaillir quelqu’un, il désignait l’inondation avec l’incendie et l’assassinat : ‘au feu, à l’eau ! au meurtre ?’

Demerson’s observations are important because, at least at this point in Rabelais’s writing, Pantagruel’s and Panurge’s reactions to or understandings of water seem to be similar. Pantagruel’s understanding of Pantagruelion may then account for his new and different attitude in the *Quart Livre*.[51]

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51. Pantagruel’s transformation reflects, in an inverse way, an adage of Erasmus (quoted by Demerson in this connection) that begins with the declaration that the fire, the sea, and woman to be three evils. But as Erasmus’s adage proceeds, water is said to be more fearful than fire, and woman more fearful than water. Pantagruel, by contrast, views water as a thing to be feared less than fire, and has been in the process, of course, of purging Panurge’s fear of women. See Desiderius Erasmus, *Les Adages D’Érasme*, ed. La société d’édition des Belles Lettres et le Groupe Renaissance Âge
Now, anybody familiar with whales knows all these things that Pantagruel points out. But judging by the reactions of Panurge and the others, those in the company do not seem as though they had this same familiarity. Readers cannot, therefore, assume Pantagruel’s possession of this knowledge. Pantagruel instead seems to know about the properties of the whale by thinking about that other physeter, Pantagruelion.

In many ways the whale and Pantagruelion are nothing alike. One is a plant and the other an animal. One lives on land and the other in the sea. One stands as tall as a human and the other stretches “the size of four acres.” But Pantagruel’s teaching seems to be that these differences must not deceive. To the unschooled it seems the height of folly to approach the “Leviathan” with any less fear than Panurge and the others approach it with, but Pantagruel knows the nature of physeters, and so he knows their natural limits. Although Rabelais’s description of Panurge’s bubble-blowing occurs twenty-nine chapters after the physeter encounter, presumably Pantagruel has seen Panurge idling away time by blowing bubbles with a tube of Pantagruelion before. If it would have been silly to fear Panurge’s bubbles, then it is silly to fear the whale’s bubbles. The differences run surface deep. In fact, the whale spiracle and Pantagruelion tube operate according to the same principles. Pantagruel is right. As the physeter nears the ships, it begins “jectoit eau sus les premieres à pleins tonneaux, comme si feussent des Catadupes du Nil en Æthiopie” [spouting water on them by the barrelfuls, as if it were the cataracts of the Nile in Ethiopia]. There is no fire, hence no Leviathan. The whale blows bubbles with its spiracle just as Panurge blows bubbles with the Pantagruelion stem.

Pantagruel’s demystification of the Leviathan suggests his scientific view of the world, one that rejects the help of revelation. This view has a few important implications. The demystification process—the rejection or removal of the world of spirits—makes the physical world appear as the merely physical world, something within human understanding.

52. The size that Thomas attributes to the whale on Pliny’s authority. See Aquinas, job, p. 454.
53. QL 34, 618 / CW, 509.
and so not as grand and mysterious as the magical world that preceded it. Lest humans take newfound confidence in their relatively elevated place in this world too far, Rabelais compares two possible ways of mastering the physeter, one failure and one success. First the failure:

L’artillerie tonnoit et fouldroyoit en Diable, et faisoit son debvoir de le pinser sans rire. Mais peu profitoit : car les gros bouletz de fer et de bronze entrans en sa peau sembloient fondre, à les veoir de loing, comme font les tuilles au Soleil.\(^{54}\)

Whereas the biblical view (which Thomas expounded above) asserts that humans cannot master themselves or the external world unless God grants them power to do so, the artillery embodies the human conceit of thinking that the world can be overpowered or mastered. This attempt at mastery is the likely alternative to leaning on divine help, especially if the world is hostile to human life. Clearly, though, Rabelais does not support this solution. As Duval writes, “Even the most advanced modern weaponry is powerless to frighten off the beast or to penetrate its skin.”\(^{55}\) Human contrivance cannot best the power of the physeter. Readers have to look to Pantagruel for another way forward.

Were it not for Pantagruel’s intervention in the physeter encounter, the failure of the modern artillery might speak to the superiority of Thomas’s religious view over that of the modern view which, like Pantagruel’s, is also demystified. The Pantagruelic solution is one of these three possible alternatives. Rabelais’s description of Pantagruel begins with the prince Diogenically watching the artillery unload for some time. As he looks on he considers “l’occasion et nécessité” [the occasion and necessity] of the situation. Then he steps forward with his bow and arrow and pierces the physeter through the forehead to close its blowhole.\(^{56}\) He continues to shoot arrows through each of the whale’s eyes, its tail, as well as three through its spine. Pantagruel finishes the job by putting fifty arrows in each flank. “Adoncques mourant le Physetere se renversa ventre sus dours, comme font

54. QL 34, 618 / CW, 509: “The artillery hurled thunder and lightning like the Devil, and tried its best to prick it and not in jest. But this was doing little good; for the iron and bronze cannonballs, as they sank into its skin, seemed to melt, to see them from a distance, as tiles do into the sun.”

55. Duval, *Design of the Quart Livre*, p. 130.

56. QL 34, 618–619 / CW, 509–511.
tous poissons mors. . . .” [Thereupon the physeter, dying, rolled over its back, belly up, as do all dead fish]. . . . The physeter remains subject to the same necessities as all specimens of its kind.

Given Pantagruel’s consideration of the occasion and necessity of the whale confrontation, it is fitting that the reappearance of Atropos also links the Pantagruelion and physeter episodes. Back in chapter 51 of the Tiers Livre, Rabelais’s narrator equated Pantagruelion with this goddess of death and necessity. Atropos is not mentioned again until the physeter episode, when Panurge notes that he sees the death-sister appear “sus la hune” [above the topmast], “avecques ses cizeaulx de frays esmouluz preste à nous tous coupper le filet de vie” [with her scissors newly ground, ready to cut the thread of our lives]. Fittingly, the goddess of death looks on as Pantagruel brings the physeter belly up in the manner of all dead fish. Whereas Panurge responds fearfully to Atropos, according to his thievish disposition, Pantagruel responds philosophically to Atropos, or rather to necessity, knowing that the physeter also is limited. If Pantagruel earlier acted as a Hermes figure in explaining the nature of the physeter to Panurge, here he acts as Odysseus himself, firm (as Odysseus was when faced with Circe) because he is sure of what he is dealing with.

The method of archery combined with the presence of Atropos proves that power has little to do with Pantagruel’s defeat of the physeter. This combination instead suggests that knowledge of the physeter and above all of its limitations is the decisive factor. Lacking this knowledge, the artillery utterly misplaced and wasted its power. Among the most important things that Pantagruel does is consider the “necessité” of the situation. It seems to be no mistake that the first move he makes is to shut the whale’s spiracle. This was a thoughtful action, one based on the nature of the specific animal he faced. Yet one might still object that Pantagruel’s archery differs from artillery only in its comparative simplic-

57. QL 34, 620 / CW, 511. Italics mine.
58. TL 51, 506 / CW, 406.
59. QL, 33, 617 / CW, 509.
60. This is all the more fitting in light of Panurge’s need to be educated, given that, as noted earlier, Panurge foolishly likened himself to Odysseus in his debut in Rabelais’s work. See P 9, 249 / CW, 166.
ity. Both are forms of technology. This objection may be correct. What, then, is the virtue of simplicity? Rabelais dwells on the point. He attributes adroitness, expertise, deftness, cleverness, and dexterity to various individuals and groups (respectively: Commodus, an Indian archer, the Franks, the Parthians, and the Scythians) known for their abilities with the bow and arrow. Archery depends on certain virtues including tranquility and harmony, but the artillery does not. The bow and arrow require a steady hand. All of the archers mentioned are noted for their incredible accuracy and intense focus. Moreover, archers do not shoot arrows haphazardly but aim specifically for the most vulnerable part of the enemy. Knowing to aim for the vulnerable part (and what that vulnerable part is) is related to the presence of Atropos that Panurge detects above the topmast. Whereas Atropos strikes fear in the Panurge’s heart and reminds him of his contingency, the goddess prompts Pantagruel to remember that everything has a nature and is governed by necessities. This nature cannot be changed or overcome, but it can be realized and used. This usage works through mind, not power, a dichotomy that reminds readers that Rabelais’s description of Pantagruel’s defeat of the physeter excludes the most reputed of the archers: the thoughtful Odysseus, who shot an arrow through twelve axe heads in a contest against the other suitors for his wife. Thus in Pantagruel’s thoughtful employment of his bow against the physeter, he also shadows Odysseus as he employs Pantagruelion in this use of the plant: “Par elle sont les arcs tendus les arbelestes bandées, les fondes faictes” [By it are bows strung, crossbows bent, and slingshots made]. This too connects Pantagruelion with moly.

Fastilent and the children of Physis and Antiphysie (Quart Livre 29–32)

The story of the physeter is not the only important text about nature in the Quart Livre. In fact, Rabelais introduces the theme of nature in the episode that immediately precedes

61. QL 34, 618–619 / CW, 510.
63. TL 51, 507–508 / CW, 407–408. See point 10 on the list describing Pantagruelion’s “uses” in the discussion of Pantagruelion as belief.
the encounter with the whale. This episode does not contain any allusions or references to Pantagruelion, but it nevertheless concerns plants and maintains the same basic teaching suggested by the study of Pantagruel’s famous herb.

Nearing the middle of the Quart Livre, Pantagruel and his friends pass by the island of Coverup (Tapinois), ruled by Fastilent (Quaresmeprenant). Their guide, Xenomanes, is familiar with this strange king. Upon hearing Xenomanes’ low opinion of Fastilent, Pantagruel says he would like to know more: “You’ll give me pleasure if even as you have described to me his vestments, his clothes, his way of acting, and his pastimes, you would also explain to me his form [sa forme] and body in all its parts.” In other words, Pantagruel wants to think about Fastilent’s nature. Subsequently, Xenomanes details the king’s outer and inner parts at great length, and with great wit and humor. The list of parts described has a certain movement, and ends with an account of the various aspects of Fastilent’s intellect:

La memoire avoit, comme une escharpe. Le sens commun, comme un bourdon. L’imagination, comme un quarillonnement de cloches. Les pensées, comme un vol d’estourneaulx. La conscience, comme un denigement de Heronneaulx. Les deliberations, comme une pochée d’orgues. La repentence, comme l’équipage d’un double canon. Les entreprises, comme la sabourre d’un guallion. L’entendement, comme un breviaire dessiré. Les intelligences, comme limaz sortans des fraires. La volonté, comme troys noix en une escuelle. Le desir, comme six boteaux de saint foin. Le jugement, comme un chaussepied. La discretion, comme une mouffle. La raison, comme un tabouret.

Each of these similes ridicules Fastilent’s mind in some way, mostly by speaking to its frailty or subservience. The last image of reason as a footstool is especially noteworthy. Fastilent is the anti-philosopher. His reason is instrumental. Its very location is inverted. It is not located inside the head, but sits under the feet. Given that much of the episode reads

64. Frame translates sa forme as “his physique.”

65. He [Fastilent] had a memory like a scarf. Common sense, like a drone. His imagination, like a carillon of bells. His thoughts, like a flight of starlings. His conscience, like an unnesting of young herons. His deliberations, like a pouchful of barley. His repentance, like the carriage of a double cannon. His enterprises, like the ballast of a galleon. His understanding, like a torn breviary. His notions, like snails crawling out of strawberries. His will, like three walnuts in a dish. His desire, like six trusses of sainfoin. His judgment, like a shoehorn. His discretion, like a mitten. His reason, like a footstool. QL 30, 610 / CW, 502. Italics mine.
as a satire of Catholic practices, this description of reason as a footstool may be derived from Thomas’s well-known formulation of reason as the “handmaiden” of theology. Two chapters later, Xenomanes concludes his description of Fastilent through a series of similar inversions:


Fastilent inhabits a world without nature. His life consists of contradictions and impossibilities—or at least that is what most people would call his activities.

Xenomanes’ description of Fastilent brings to Pantagruel’s mind “old stories” featuring the children of two characters he refers to as Physis and Antiphysie. These stories have been long forgotten. Frère Jean says he knows nothing of them. They consist of an ancient wisdom that has been covered up. In the tales, the children of Antiphysie have perfectly round skulls, with distorted ears, eyes, and appendages. They do cartwheels and always go around with their legs above their heads. Antiphysie praises these children of hers and succeeds in convincing “les folz et insensez en sa sentence” [the fools and madmen] (perhaps a large group) that her offspring imitate the “createur de l’Univers” [Creator of the Universe], given that their hair is like the roots of a tree, their legs like its branches, and so on. The story is clearly framed as a critique of religion. Among those persuaded by Antiphysie are the Papelars and “les Demoniacles Calvins, imposteurs de Geneve” [the demoniacal Calvins, impostors of Geneva]. True to his form, Rabelais does not discrimi-
nate here. He attacks both Catholics and Reformers. But aside from these satirical punches pulled, the story also condemns any effort, religiously motivated or not, to override nature. Nothing about Antiphysie is inherently religious. Antiphysie, according to Pantagruel, has simply always been adverse to and envious of Physis. As Rabelais writes, this animosity dates back “de tout temps” [from all time]. Antiphysie was not born of Christianity or any other particular religious sect. There is something about humans—at least there is something about a part or faction of them—that does not want to be subjected to nature. In the following chapters, the Pantagruelic company’s varied reactions to the physeter (especially those of Panurge and the artillery), more and less mindful of the creature’s nature, depict the contents of the story of Physis and Antiphysie.

A Positive Teaching

Pantagruelion embodies the theme or question of nature, which was already being established during the consultations of the banquet in the Tiers Livre. There Hippothadée had denied the reality of “nature,” which is rather God’s “pleasure.” Rondibilis, on the other hand, suggested the inscrutability of nature. Although he did exhort Panurge to become “an architect of natural consequences,” such an architect learns to deal with nature’s mysteriousness. But if the beginning and middle of the Tiers Livre give a negative teaching about nature, then the ending of the Tiers Livre and the middle of the Quart Livre offer a positive teaching. The passages about Pantagruelion and the physeter found in those segments of Rabelais’s books discourage readers from attempting to overpower other beings or nature itself, as the questers’ artillery had attempted to do. Yet they also discourage laying prostrate before others’ displays of power. The presence of nature means that one’s place in the world is not determined by power relations. Discerning one’s true place in the order of nature means thinking about limitations. This has the double-advantage of instilling humility (when grasping one’s limits) and granting belief or trust (when grasping others’

71. QL 32, 614 / CW, 507. Italics mine.
72. TL 30, 446 / CW, 350.
73. TL 32, 453 / CW, 355.
limits). The belief in nature (or πίστις) for which Pantagruelion stands, and which Pantagruelion inspires, is exemplified in the unlikely scenario of the physeter, an animal that is much more powerful than the Pantagruelic comrades but that is nonetheless governed by Atropos—as Panurge unwittingly revealed by blowing into his stick of Pantagruelion, the other physeter.

Of the three views presented in the physeter episode (the religious, the modern, and the Pantagruelic), only the Pantagruelic view respects and takes its bearings from nature. There is a certain kinship between the religious and modern views in that both deny nature its rule. The consequences of these views of course differ. The religious view grants that the “Leviathan” may do anything—though a water animal, it may shoot fire. The modern view opposes the power of nature with the power of art. Both are nonetheless children of Antiphysie. As a child of Physis, Pantagruel observes Pantagruelion and, through it, sees harmonious principles at work in the world. These principles may not be simply intuitive. It takes much thought to see that the Pantagruelion and physeter are more alike than not. Reflecting on the “occasion and necessity” of a given situation, one may begin to see that the limits of nature are different—perhaps more accommodating of human life, less hostile—than had been expected. Still, one gains wisdom from Pantagruelion with difficulty. The meaning of the plant proves “rather rough and hard to get at.”