

E. Bruce Hayes. *Rabelais's Radical Farce: Late Medieval Comic Theater and Its Function in Rabelais*.

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*Rabelais's Radical Farce: Late Medieval Comic Theater and Its Function in Rabelais* by E. Bruce Hayes is a thought-provoking contribution to late medieval and Renaissance studies. Given the plethora of scholarship on comic and farcical elements in Rabelais, one may question the need for another volume on the topic; yet as he builds upon preexisting research, the author offers new insights into the ethos of farce and our understanding of Rabelais. Hayes's thesis is twofold. First, in his analysis of the ethics and language of late medieval farce Hayes argues that the genre is fundamentally conservative. Instead of targeting specific public figures or transgressive social groups with an eye toward change, he says, farce punishes the *démésure* or hubris of characters from all sectors of society, contains little satire, and upholds the status quo. Second, in his examination of farcical episodes in Rabelais, Hayes contends that the Renaissance author has co-opted the genre's conventions and radicalized its ethics, not to confirm the existing social order but rather to attack it from an evangelical perspective, using farce as a vehicle for change.

In addition to outlining each chapter and summarizing key traits of farce in his introduction, Hayes reviews the polemics on learned versus popular culture in Rabelais criticism, asserting that the Renaissance author uses popular elements,

including farce, in his learned discourse — not to discredit the latter, but instead to communicate an evangelical message that conflates the two registers and transcends social difference. In chapter 1, which focuses on the ethics of farce in plays from the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century, Hayes argues that the genre mocks and punishes “anonymous individuals” whose exaggerated appetites cause them to “move beyond acceptable social boundaries” (15). All actions and dialogue in these plays, he explains, aim at restoring order through a humiliating, but generally nonviolent, reversal in which the trickster is tricked and his hubris deflated. In chapter 2, Hayes examines the verbal strategies used by tricksters to bamboozle their victims and the linguistic mainsprings of their comeuppance, showing how “the genre functions . . . to destabilize meaning” (68) by subverting the relationship between words and referents. This analysis of the language of farce, which Hayes relates to debates between realists and nominalists, emphasizes the linguistic nature of justice in farce and sets the stage for a discussion of Rabelais. Chapter 3 examines the primary farcical episodes in *Pantagruel* and *Gargantua*, ranging from Pantagruel’s encounter with the Limousin Schoolboy to Panurge’s harassment of the Haughty Parisian Lady. In these scenes, Hayes argues, Rabelais uses farce to remind transgressors, including the pretentious schoolboy, the uncharitable lady, and even Pantagruel himself, of “Christian humanist priorities” (123). While these behavioral anti-models are either corrected through farce or “juxtaposed with positive alternatives” (138) in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, Hayes suggests in chapter 4 that farcical elements in the *Third Book* are increasingly unresolved, as Panurge fails to learn or to correct his hubris. As for echoes of farce in the *Fourth Book*, including the chapters on Dindenault and Lord Basché, Hayes notes that they are increasingly violent and pessimistic, reflecting the heightened tensions in France following the *affaire des placards* (1534).

In general, Hayes’s reading is thoughtful and perceptive. His insights into farcical justice are particularly successful; and his contention that Panurge and Pantagruel are *farceurs*, prone to verbal ruses that “serve a higher evangelical purpose” (122), is neatly constructed. Yet if Pantagruel is indeed a trickster in the *Third Book* whose words cannot be taken at face value, what is the logic of taking the giant’s pronouncements on the unreliability of language seriously, as Hayes does, to support the hypothesis that “none [of his advice] is meant to be sincere” (152–53)? Moreover, does Gargantua’s humanistic condemnation of astrology, proffered in a letter (P, 8) that Brault and Defaux read ironically, necessarily imply that his son also “eschews . . . esoteric interpretations” (127, 150–51) and that his interest in the occult must be feigned?

Despite these caveats, the volume successfully demonstrates that Rabelais radicalized farce. One might wish for less repetition in the introduction, more diplomacy toward scholars with differing opinions, and less reliance on a priori assumptions about Rabelais’s ideology; but overall, it is a stimulating and useful monograph.

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