

Voltaire

Gargantua

Translated by Victoria Harris

GARGANTUA

If ever there has been a well-founded reputation, it is that of Gargantua. Nonetheless, there are in this philosophical and critical century some foolhardy souls who have dared to deny the prodigious feats of that great man, and who have taken their Pyrrhonian scepticism so far as to doubt that he ever existed.

How can it be, they say, that there existed in the sixteenth century a hero about whom no contemporary – not Saint Ignatius, not Cardinal Cajetan,¹ not Galileo, not Guicciardini² – ever uttered a word, or about whom there is not so much as a mention in the Registers of the Sorbonne?

Leaf through the histories of France, Germany, England, Spain, etc. You see therein not a word about Gargantua. His entire life, from his birth to his death, is nothing but a tissue of prodigious feats that beggar belief.

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- After composing a letter “On Rabelais” in the *Lettres à Son Altesse Monseigneur le Prince de **** (OCV, vol.63B, p.381-90), and then an article on the same writer in *QE* (*François Rabelais*, OCV, vol.41, p.524-38, classified, curiously, under the letter ‘F’), Voltaire devoted this article to Gargantua with the aim of mocking the hypocritically pious writers [of his day]. The marvellous adventures of this character are made the subject of a disagreement between the ‘philosophes’, who are sceptical about his extraordinary exploits, and the reverend Father Louis Viret, representing everyone who thinks that his exploits are to be believed because they defy belief. This inventive piece is a clever pastiche of the polemical interventions of the Church apologists in response to the anti-biblical criticisms developed by the ‘philosophes’. Voltaire was himself the target of several polemical attacks of this kind, made notably by the Abbé Guénée in 1762 and again in 1769, and by Viret, whose name appears in this tiny satirical piece. The mythical figure of Gargantua, the subject of this article, may represent Moses, Jesus Christ or indeed the revealed Judaeo-Christian religion in general. The article became part of the *QE* corpus in 1772. There seems to have been no specific reason for Voltaire’s publishing this amusing allegory that particular year, but it is possible that he still had in mind Viret’s two polemical attacks, which had appeared in 1767 and 1770, which would explain why he takes particular aim at Viret here. In the view of Frederick II, the piece was ‘worth its weight in gold’ (D17708). The article appeared in February/March 1772 (70, vol.9, ‘Supplement’).

¹ Cajetan, also known as Thomas de Vio (1469-1534), wrote a commentary on Thomas Aquinas’ *Summa Theologiae*.

² Francesco Guicciardini (1483-1540), Italian historian. Voltaire owned a copy of his *Historia d’Italia* (BV1569; CN, vol.4, p.254-55) which he made use of to write the *EM* (CN, vol.4, p.687, n.184-5).

His mother Gargamelle delivered him through her left ear. He had scarcely been born when he yelled out for drink in a fearsome voice that was heard in the Beauce and the Vivarais.³ Sixteen ells of cloth were needed for his codpiece alone, and a hundred skins of dun cows for his shoes.⁴ He was not yet twelve years old when he won a great battle and founded the abbey of Thélème.⁵ He was given as his wife Mistress Badebec,⁶ and it is proven that Badebec is a Syriac name.⁷

They would have it that he swallowed six pilgrims in a salad.⁸ It is claimed that the stream of his piss became the River Seine, and that it is to him alone that the Parisians owe that fine waterway.⁹

All the above seems against nature to our carping philosophers, who are unwilling to assert even the most plausible things, unless they can demonstrably be proved.

They point out that just because the Parisians have always believed in Gargantua, that is not a reason for the other nations to believe in him. If Gargantua had performed even one of the exploits attributed to him, the entire Earth would have resounded with it, all the chronicles would have spoken of it, a hundred monuments would have borne witness.¹⁰ They openly go so far as to describe the Parisians who believe in Gargantua as “badauds”,¹¹ superstitious imbeciles, amongst whom insinuate themselves hypocrites who feign to believe in Gargantua in order to acquire some priory or other belonging to the abbey of Thélème.

³ *Gargantua*, ch.6.

⁴ *Gargantua*, ch.8: ‘eleven hundred skins’ according to Rabelais (*Œuvres complètes de Rabelais*, ed. J. Boulenger, Paris, n.d. [1965], p.50).

⁵ *Gargantua*, ch.44, 52-57.

⁶ *Pantagruel*, ch.2.

⁷ Boulenger’s note explains: ‘In the West and South-West [of France], “badebec” means with open mouth, mouth agape. In the patois of Bergerac of the present day, “bada” means “to have the mouth gaping open”; and a “badebec” is a candlestick into which a resin candle is stuck’ (*Œuvres complètes*, p.199, n.6). Voltaire loves to mock etymological flights of fancy, with Samuel Bochart the author he most often takes aim at. The name ‘Badebec’ resembles the names of some of Voltaire’s characters of Eastern origin, in particular the fakir Bambabef in the article on ‘Fraud’ in *DP*, which had recently been reprised under the same heading in *QE*; and Babouc, the hero of Voltaire’s tale *Le Monde comme il va* (1748).

⁸ *Gargantua*, ch.38.

⁹ An invention by Voltaire. Gargantua drowns 260 418 men (‘without the women and children’, Trans. Screech, 2017) by urinating from the towers of Notre-Dame (*Gargantua*, ch.17, *Œuvres complètes*, p.75-76).

¹⁰ An argument that Voltaire uses regularly, for example in chapter 2 of *L’Examen important de milord Bolingbroke* (*OCV*, vol.62, p.177), and in the second interview of the *Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers* (*OCV*, vol.63A, p.369-70).

¹¹ Voltaire devoted a short article in *QE* to the origin and meaning of the term ‘badaud’, which in the context of the present article might be translated ‘idle gawpers’.

The reverend Father Viret, that wide-sleeved Cordelier, confessor of ladies and the King's preacher, has made reply to our Pyrrhonians in a manner not to be refuted.¹² He proves very learnedly that if no writer apart from Rabelais spoke of the amazing exploits of Gargantua then neither did any historian say anything to contradict them;¹³ that even the cautious de Thou who believes in spells, predictions and astrology, has never repudiated Gargantua's miracles.¹⁴

Nor have they been so much as called into question by La Mothe le Vayer. Mézerai holds them in such regard that he says not a single word about them. These amazing exploits took place in the sight of the entire Earth. Rabelais was witness to them. He was incapable of being either deceived or a deceiver. Had he deviated one jot from the truth, all the peoples of Europe would have revolted against him; all the gazetteers, all the journalists would have loudly decried the fraud, the imposture.

In vain do the philosophers – who come out with an answer on every topic - say there were no gazettes or newspapers in those days. There was the equivalent, is the reply to give them,

¹² Louis Viret has already been mocked in *QE* articles on 'Authors' and 'Humility' (*OCV*, vol.39, p.253; see below, p.297). In [Voltaire's] very recent *Père Nicodème et Jeannot*, Viret is one of a group whose writings are 'leaden and sanctimonious' (*OCV*, vol.72, p.367). As it happened, Viret had published in 1767 his *Réponse à la Philosophie de l'histoire* (Lyon, BV3452), which Voltaire annotated on the first page: 'by an idiot' (*CN*, vol.9). The same year that the first volume of *QE* appeared, Viret issued a long refutation of the *Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers*: the work is entitled *Le Mauvais Dîner, ou lettres sur le Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers* (Lyon, 1770). On that occasion, it seems that Voltaire did not trouble to procure a copy, but these two refutations earned Viret a minor role as an absurd and sanctimonious author here and elsewhere in *QE*. [Translator's note: Voltaire describes Viret as a 'Cordelier'. The Cordeliers were members of a religious order, also known as the Franciscans of the Strict Observance. The saying 'avoir la conscience large comme la manche d'un Cordelier' ('to have a conscience as wide as a Cordelier's sleeve') described an unscrupulous person whose conscience was easily appeased. By the late eighteenth-century, the term 'fille' ('girl', 'young woman') used without a qualifier, such as 'vertueuse' ('virtuous'), commonly implied a prostitute. Voltaire collocates it with 'confesseur', leaving his readers free to draw their own conclusions.]

¹³ Voltaire imitates a style of reasoning that was used by the 'antiphilosophes' party of the second half of the eighteenth century. As Didier Masseau explains: 'The fact that these astonishing happenings [the miraculous events of Biblical times] had impressed a wide audience and had not been gainsaid by the very people whom they had power to hurt is considered a weighty argument' (*Les Ennemis des philosophes. L'antiphilosophie au temps des Lumières*, Paris, 2000, p.220). Viret in fact makes use of this argument in his refutation of the *Dîner du comte de Boulainvilliers* in *Le Mauvais Dîner*, p.83-84.

¹⁴ Voltaire inserts an authentic observation into this fictional article. He greatly esteemed de Thou, but a marginal note in his copy of *l'Histoire Universelle* (11 vols, Basle, 1742, BV3297) states: 'de tout croit à la sorcellerie' ('de Thou believes in witchcraft') (*CN*, vol.9). Indeed, at this place in his history de Thou writes: 'It is commonly believed that she [Diane de Poitiers] resorted to the aid of love potions and spells to inspire in Henry II the passion he conceived for her' (vol.1, p.241). The two authors mentioned after de Thou were equally well regarded, although to a varying degree, by Voltaire. In the 'Catalogue des écrivains' in his *Siècle de Louis XIV*, Voltaire heaps praise on La Mothe Le Vayer, whom he describes as a 'great Pyrrhonian, and well known as such' (*OH*, p.1173). Mézeray, whose writings were a major source for Voltaire's own work, particularly for *EM*, is given a rather less eulogistic review: 'audacious rather than accurate, with an uneven style'. Mézeray had nonetheless the merit of having 'lost his pensions for having said what he believed to be the truth' (*OH*, p.1186).

and leave it at that. Everything is impossible in the history of Gargantua: and for that very reason it is incontestably true. For were it not true, we would never have dared to imagine it, and the great proof that we must believe it, is that it is unbelievable.¹⁵

Open any issue of the *Mercure*, or of the *Journal de Trévoux*, those immortal works that serve to instruct the human race. You will not find in them a single line in which the history of Gargantua is repudiated. It was reserved for our century to produce those monsters who seek to establish their frightful Pyrrhonism on the pretext that they are in some measure mathematicians, and that they love Reason, Truth and Justice. How pitiful! I need just one argument to confound them.

Gargantua founded the Abbey of Thélème. Its title deeds are untraceable, it is true: it never had any. But it exists;¹⁶ it enjoys an income of 10,000 gold pieces.¹⁷ The River Seine exists; it is an eternal monument to the power of Gargantua's bladder. Furthermore, what does it cost you to believe in him? Should you not take the surer side?¹⁸ Gargantua can procure you money, honours and credit. Philosophy will only ever give you spiritual satisfaction:¹⁹ no great gain there. I tell you, if you are greedy, ambitious, with an eye to the main chance, believe in Gargantua; you will do very well out of it.

¹⁵ The articles headed 'Faith' in *DP* (*OCV*, vol.36, p.121-28) and *QE* (*OCV*, vol.41, p.460-65) mock this paradox.

¹⁶ The first person 'je' ['I'] in [the last sentence of the penultimate paragraph of] this article can allow himself this pleasantry, since Rabelais, in ch.52 of *Gargantua*, gives a precise location for the abbey of Thélème, opposite the abbey of Bourgeuil, 'in the little island of grazing ground, watered by the Indre, the Vieux Cher and the Loire', giving the illusion that it is a real place (*Œuvres complètes de Rabelais. Gargantua*, ed. J. Plattard, Paris, 1955, p.244, n.). The 'I' personality here thus claims that the abbey exists because the geographical location exists.

¹⁷ The reference to an abbey gives Voltaire the opportunity to mention the huge income enjoyed by the monasteries. See the article 'Biens d'Eglise' (the Church's possessions) in *QE* (*OCV*, vol.39, p.367-81). The Benedictine abbeys of St Pierre de Bourgeuil and St Florent that Gargantua offers to Frère Jean (ch.52) were very wealthy.

¹⁸ This is an allusion to Pascal's Wager: 'Let us weigh the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager then, without hesitation, that He is.' (Brunschvicg 233; *Œuvres complètes de Pascal*, ed. J. Chevalier, Paris, 1954, p.1214) [Translation <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/18269/18269-h.html>]. Voltaire comments on this text of Pascal in his *Anti-Pascal* (*Lettres philosophiques*, vol.2, p.191).

¹⁹ Voltaire drops the apologist's mask he has been wearing and finishes the article in a biting satirical tone.