

## Individualism In Rabelais' *Gargantua* And Montaigne's *Essays*

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### Abstract

During the Renaissance, man's view of himself and universe went through considerable changes. Within the frame of humanism, one of the most essential characteristics of man became his individuality and free will, which distinguished his dignity and rank among other creatures. These new ideas were expressed by several thinkers and writers of the time, among whom Montaigne and Rabelais are of great significance. In this paper, a comparative reading of Montaigne's *Essays* and Rabelais' *Gargantua* is presented. It is argued that both works depict man as an individual capable of governing himself without a need for religion or any kind of authority. Yet, it is seen that Montaigne differs from Rabelais in that he does not suggest abolishing law and religious restrictions completely, while Rabelais goes for it.

**Key words:** Rabelais, *Gargantua*, Montaigne, *Essays*, Renaissance, Individualism

### Rebalais'nin *Gargantua* Ve Montaigne'in *Denemeler* Eserlerinde Bireycilik

#### Özet

Rönesans döneminde insanın kendisi ve içinde bulunduğu evren konusundaki görüşü büyük değişime uğramıştır. Hümanizm çerçevesinde, insanın en önemli özelliklerinden biri bireyselliği ve özgür iradesi olmuş, diğer canlılar arasındaki yerini ve saygınlığını belirlemiştir. Bu yeni düşünceler aralarında Montaigne ve Rabelais'nin önemli bir yere sahip olduğu birçok Rönesans yazarı ve düşünürü tarafından ifade edilmiştir. Bu çalışmada, Montaigne'in *Denemeler* ve Rabelais'nin *Gargantua* eserlerinin karşılaştırmalı bir okuması sunulmaktadır. İki eserin de insanı herhangi bir din ve otoriteye ihtiyaç duymadan kendi kendini yönlendirebilen bir birey olarak gösterdiği iddia edilmektedir. Ancak, Montaigne bir konuda Rabelais'den ayrılmaktadır. Rabelais bütün yasa ve dini kısıtlamaların ortadan kaldırılmasını savunurken, Montaigne'in bunların tamamen kaldırılmasını önerecek kadar ileri gitmediği görülmektedir.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Rabelais, *Gargantua*, Montaigne, *Denemeler*, Rönesans, Bireycilik

### Introduction

During the Renaissance, the view of universe, religion and man went through considerable changes. The religious and political wars took place concurrently with the scientific developments, which changed man's perception of himself and the world he lives in. In contrast to the other-worldliness of the Medieval Ages, the Renaissance thought and literature focused more on man himself and the life in this world. That is to say, in the Middle Ages, God and religion were taken as the basis, and literary characters as well as people in real life were motivated by, and lived for the after-life. However, the changing knowledge of the world and man's place in it caused a radical transformation during the Renaissance.

This period witnessed the revival of the writings of the ancient world. In other words, Renaissance intellectuals "possessed and were possessed by" the ancient literature (Lawal et. al.: 1987: 1655). As the revival of the classics caused a simultaneous decline of religious autonomy, the intellectuals of the time acknowledged the individual as an autonomous being inherently good, and capable of critical thinking. These intellectuals who studied classics in order to understand human nature, or humanists, in short, expressed an increasing trust in man as a noble being created in the image of God, and granted him extensive freedom. This view, namely individualism, was acknowledged by many Renaissance thinkers and became one the fundamental philosophies which constituted the zeitgeist of Renaissance. As Jacob Burckhardt, a notable critic of Renaissance culture, also accepted, individualism was the fundamental characteristic of the Renaissance thought, which made man "different from all other men and gave its particular flavor to everything he did and created" (Gordon, 1960: 11). Thus, within the frame of humanism, one of the most essential characteristics of man became his individuality and free will, which distinguished his dignity and rank among other creatures.

Having embraced individualism as the main approach to man, several Renaissance writers made a critique of religious, moral and social authorities in order to emphasize the individual's autonomy. Marguerite de Navarre and Lope de Vega, for instance, depicted lower class people uprising against the abuse powers (Lawal et. al., 1987, 1660). Niccolo Machiavelli also viewed ignoring moral and religious restraints as the only way for success (Highet, 1957: 181). Thus, the dichotomy between the authorities and individuals seems to be one of the main concerns of Renaissance writers.

Montaigne and Rabelais, too, argued against these religious and social authorities and appreciated man's ability to create himself. Montaigne in his *Essays*, and Rabelais in the Abbey of Thélème, in *Gargantua*, took man as an

individual, acknowledged his uniqueness, and appreciated the fulfillment of his desires.

Rabelais tried to create a world in which both the individual and community would be happy. Montaigne, on the other hand, tried to understand man, which is a difficult task considering the uniqueness of each man as Montaigne himself argued:

I would willingly outdo Plutarch and say that there is more distance from a given man to a given man than from a given man to a given animal ... and that there are as many degrees in minds as there are fathoms from here to heaven, and as innumerable. (qtd. in Friedrich, 1991: 154)

It can be asserted that although their ways of articulating the ideas are different, it can be asserted that both of these writers attracted attention to man's free will and came to more or less the same conclusion that each individual is capable of governing himself. Hence, considering the individualistic approach to man as the core of Renaissance humanism, this paper aims to make a comparative reading of Gargantua's Abbey of Thélème and Montaigne's *Essays* from an individualistic point of view and to more clearly exhibit how they supported individualism in their works. Thus, the analogies between Rabelais' and Montaigne's approaches to man and his place in society will be revealed.

### ***Gargantua and Essays***

*Gargantua and Pantagruel* is, to start with, a series of five books which tell the story of two giants, Gargantua, the father, and Pantagruel, the son. Written in a humorous, and sometimes grotesque manner, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* reflects the ideals of its time. The first book of this pentalogy is *Gargantua*, which tells about the education of Gargantua until his son Pantagruel is born. It is in this book that he builds The Abbey of Theleme, an imaginary monastery which parodies the monasteries of its time. By organizing it totally different from the real monasteries, Rabelais criticizes the education system and creates a utopic field through which Rabelais' own views of freedom and humanistic education can be understood.

When it comes to Montaigne's *Essays*, it is seen that it is totally different from Rabelais' work in that it consists of short essays on a wide range of topics from personal relationships to a critique of medieval thought and institutions. By asking the question "Who am I?", Montaigne starts assessing his own life and includes autobiographical details in his essays so as to support his arguments. Based on his own experiences and his observations of the changing

world, he comes up with a personal philosophy about man's capacities, the role of religion and other authorities, and how man should live in general.

### Exercise of One's Desires

Rabelais depicts men as individuals, each having his own needs and desires. Happiness of humanity, therefore, requires the pursuit and exercise of these desires. In the Abbey of Thélème, Rabelais (1987) displays the environment where man may find almost any kind of pleasure according to his own wishes:

Right in front of the women's quarters was a kind of playing field, an arena-like space set just between the two towers, on the outer side. Here too were the horse riding circle, a theater, and the swimming pools, with attached baths at three different levels, all provided with an endless supply of myrtle water.

Next to the river was a beautiful pleasure garden, and in the middle of it stood a handsome labyrinth. Between the other two towers were fields for playing palm and tennis. Alongside the tower called Cryere were the orchards, full of fruit trees of every description. (1902)

In contrast with the medieval belief preventing man from having pleasure and happiness in this world, Rabelais encourages man to be happy, to follow only his own desires, which are unique in each individual. That is why, in addition to the playing fields and a pleasure garden, there are also training fields for practicing muskets and bows, and even for hawk trainers in the abbey (1902). Thus, it is seen that appreciating each individual's choices and desires, the Abbey of Thélème promises several opportunities to enjoy life.

In this respect, Montaigne shares the similar ideas with Rabelais. In his essay *On Experience* (1958), he describes himself as someone "who boast[s] of embracing the pleasures of life so eagerly and so deliberately". (395) He asserts that he is not of the same opinion with those who despise the idea that bodily delights are more rational. It's the individual's right to act according to his desires, since these desires are granted him by nature:

When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep: Yes, and when I am walking by myself in a beautiful orchard, even if my thoughts dwell for part of the time on distant events, I bring them back for another part to the walk, the orchard, the charm of this solitude, and to myself. Nature has with maternal care

provided that the actions she has enjoined on us for our need shall give us pleasure; and she uses not only reason but appetite to attract us to them. It is wrong to infringe her rules. (396)

As it is inherent in our nature to desire something, Montaigne cannot think of any reason why these desires should be ignored or restricted. He argues for seeking pleasures in another section of his *Essays*:

Both in sickness and in health I have readily let myself follow my urgent appetites. I give great authority to my desire and inclinations. I do not like to cure trouble by trouble; I hate remedies that are more nuisance than the disease. . . . Since there is a risk of making a mistake, let us risk it in pursuing of pleasure (832).

Therefore, both Rabelais and Montaigne appreciate man as an individual who has the right to fulfill his earthly desires. Instead of supporting the stoic side of Christianity which tells its followers to stay away from fulfilling desires, Rabelais and Montaigne teaches the opposite. The Abbey of Theleme provides opportunities for its residents to take pleasure like the playing fields, and *Essays* shows the reasons why these pleasures should be followed. This hedonist approach exemplifies the individualism in *Gargantua* and *Essays*, which support that pleasure, as well as senses, goals and desires are provided by nature, and are personal rights of each person.

### “Do What You Will”

Besides the pursuit of one’s desires, individualism supports free will in all aspects of life, which may be considered as the main argument of Rabelais’ work. In such a place where people are not restricted in following their desires, the only law in Thélème is “Do what you will.” This promotes the fulfillment of free will and shows man as capable of controlling his own deeds.

No more law other than “Do what you will.” is needed; because as Rabelais (1987) puts forth, “free men and women, wellborn, well taught, finding themselves joined with other respectable people, are instinctively impelled to do virtuous things and avoid vice” (1905). In this respect, Rabelais eliminates all kinds of authority. He believes man is capable of distinguishing between good and evil and living accordingly. Therefore, with the help of his nature and with a good education, man can lead virtuous lives needless of social institutions and laws. Laws, contrary to their aims, result in man’s doing what is not desirable:

Such people, if they are subjected to vile constraints, brought down to a lower moral level, oppressed and enslaved and turned away from that noble passion toward which virtue

pulls them, finds themselves led by that same passion to throw off and break any such bondage, just as we always seek out forbidden things and long for whatever is denied us (1905).

That is to say, Rabelais believes that man is inherently good, and inclined to do virtuous things. However, whenever laws are imposed them, they tend to break those rules, which is why he objects to any kind of restraints.

Like Rabelais, in his *Essays*, Montaigne (1958) also puts forward his trust in humanity and his ability to guide himself. He suggests that man has wisdom given by nature: “As nature has provided us with feet for walking, so she has given us wisdom to guide us through life” (354) Considering the individual’s wisdom, he complains that there are too many laws and says “The most desirable laws are those that are fewest, simplest, and most general; and I even think that it would be better to be without them altogether than to have them in such numbers as we have at present.” (345) As he continues, he quotes from Epicurus and says “As we once suffered from crimes, so now we are suffering from laws”. He also adds that “Nature always gives us happier laws than we give ourselves” (345). Apparently, Montaigne does not see applying so many laws on individuals as efficient and helpful.

He accepts the individuals’ capability and free will; however, he does not go so far as Rabelais in his criticism of laws and authority do. He is aware that the laws imposed on people do not bring individual happiness, but he regards them necessary for the happiness of the whole community. As Keohane (1977) puts forth,

on the one hand, he prizes individual freedom very highly; he urges his readers to exercise their own reason and critical judgment against the world, and provides excellent examples of such exercises in his own essays. Yet, on the other hand, he insists upon obedience to the customs whose trivialities and absurdities he has so cleverly exposed, and to authorities whose excellence cannot be demonstrated by any rules of reason or of nature. Montaigne resolves this tension for himself, at least, by setting up a double standard for behavior: a standard of private critical reflection, and public conformity that provides a central keynote of the *Essays*. He teaches his readers to submit scrupulously to the restraints of public authority in public, but to retain the freedom of private judgment in criticizing the absurd or vicious aspects of that authority in their own solitary meditations, and among close friends. (379)

To conclude, both Rabelais and Montaigne believe in the individual’s ability to behave virtuously. Rabelais says that individuals are inherently good

and they tend to behave in good manners even without any rules. Montaigne, too, believes that nature has provided man with wisdom so that he can make his own decisions. However, while Rabelais suggests doing away with laws for the happiness of both the individual and the community, Montaigne still believes in the necessity of laws to maintain order and happiness in society. He shows his trust in the individual only when he suggests free judgment of authority in private life, but when it comes to public life, he seems to lose confidence in man and prefers maintaining and obeying authority.

### **Humanistic Education**

In the society both Rabelais and Montaigne depict, individuals have self-reliance and independence. This self achievement is both nature's product and also the result of the humanistic education. Rabelais, in order to create such individuals and to give them free will, draws the frames of the necessary education in *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. He gives the vivid description of Gargantua's education. In the Abbey of Thélème, too, there are allusions to this kind of education. It has, for instance, beautiful reading rooms "well stocked with books in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, French, Italian, and Spanish, carefully divided according to the languages in which they had been written." (Rabelais, 1987: 1899) These beautifully designed reading rooms appeal to the residents' thirst for knowledge so that they read, educate themselves in the areas they feel necessary, and as a result become individuals who are independent and capable of virtuous behaviour. In this abbey, Rabelais eliminates the dogmatic and cliché system of education and turns to the individual instead (Yılmaz, 2011: 231). In other words, he provides an alternative to the prevailing mode of education that depends on memorizing and ignores individual differences by imposing the same training plan on everyone. Rabelais, on the contrary, suggests a beautiful design of libraries so that knowledge becomes something appealing. Also, providing a wide range of material in a wide range of languages, he hints that not everyone has to learn the same thing. They may choose according to their wishes, which shows that Rabelais also acknowledges that each individual is different.

Montaigne (1958) suggests the similar path of education, and he goes further to equip man with a critical approach to what he learns so that he will make up his own independent belief system. To achieve this, he suggests that

the tutor should make his pupil sift everything, and take nothing into his head on simple authority or trust. Aristotle's principles must no more be principles with him than those of the Stoics or the Epicureans. Let their various opinions be put

before him; he will choose between them if he can; if not, he will remain in doubt. (56)

By giving autonomy to the pupil in his education, Montaigne argues that the pupil will transform and fuse together the passages that he borrows from others, to make of them something entirely his own; that is to say, his own judgment. His education, his labor, and his study have no other aim but to form this (56).

With these suggestions, Rabelais and Montaigne make the portrayal of humanistic education. It is seen that both writers support the view that individuals may have different interests and opinions. Thus, in their system of education, nothing is imposed on individuals. Their aim at this is to provide man with enough opportunities so that he can choose his own path to follow for self achievement so that he can have a virtuous life without any need for authority.

### **Religious Authority**

In the individualistic society of Thélème, people are not dependent on the laws and rules imposed by the social and religious institutions. To show his trust in man and to criticize the decay in religion, Rabelais (1987) mocks monasticism by organizing life in Thélème in the opposite way:

*Item:* because both men and women, after they'd entered a cloister and served their probationary year, were obliged to spend the entire rest of their lives there, it was decided that men and women who came to Thélème could leave whenever they wanted to, freely and without restriction.

*Item:* because monks and nuns usually took three vows – chastity, poverty, and obedience – it was decided that in Thélème one could perfectly honorably be married, that anyone could be rich, and that they could all live wherever they wanted to. (1898)

Letting the residents of Thélème get married, be rich and leave whenever they want to, Rabelais criticizes religious restrictions. Monasticism and other restrictions in Christianity are human inventions. By eliminating them, Rabelais has a “deregulated – i.e., re-Christianized – community in which all are free to do as they wish, and in which each voluntarily defers to the whim and pleasure of the others.” (Duval, 2011: 100) In short, Rabelais chooses to trust in the individual rather than authority.

When it comes to Montaigne's view of religious institutions and religion in general, it can be claimed that Montaigne (1958) is not as rebellious as Rabelais against religious authority. He believes he owns “the faculty ... for shifting the truth, and [his] independence in not easily subjecting [his] beliefs to



those of others". (220) However, he still needs, and is faithful to Church. As Friedrich suggests

The Church is to him something that has been a given and which has created order since olden times; anyone born into its circle of influence will do well to submit to it. His approval of its institutional power arises in the same manner as his approval ... of the positive legal axioms and inherited social systems. (112)

As he deviates from Rabelais in the case of the necessity of laws in society, he differs in his attitude towards the authority of the church, too. In contrast with his individualism and his trust in man's free will, he chooses to stay under God's authority fearing that "otherwise [he] could not keep [himself] from rolling about incessantly" (Cited. in Friedrich, 1991: 113)

### **Conclusion**

Both Rabelais and Montaigne paved the way for individualist thoughts such as the appreciation of one's desires and free will and decreasing their dependence on religion and laws on condition that they are provided with a humanistic education, in their works, *Gargantua* and *Essays*. They acknowledge individuals' different thoughts and desires and provide a wide range of choices for both pleasure and education. They also reject authority and appreciate humanistic education and thirst for knowledge as the only method for individual's self achievement.

In Rabelais' Abbey of Thélème, there are lots of opportunities for pleasure: everyone is free to behave according to his wish, and there are not any rules other than "Do what you will." He tries to appeal man's wish for knowledge by providing him with numerous books written in different languages. He argues that nature has given man the capacity to govern himself, and by getting a humanistic education he learns to use this capacity. In other words, on condition that he acquires the necessary knowledge and worldview, he does not need any law to arrange his life. Also, in this abbey lots of religious restrictions such as the prohibition of marriage and property for monks are abolished. They are free to pursue their will. Therefore, while depicting a place where the happiness of the community is achieved, Rabelais also gives importance to the happiness and self-actualization of individuals.

In his *Essays*, Montaigne, similar to Rabelais, expresses his trust in the individual and encourages him to follow his desires, because they are granted by nature. He also argues that man can conduct his free will when he achieves self-realization and a critical point of view through the humanistic education. He

agrees with Rabelais in that individuals are capable of guiding their lives, and laws and religion restrict their freedom. However, he is more conservative than Rabelais, because he does not suggest abolishing laws and religious restrictions at all. He perceives them necessary in organizing social life although they restrain individual happiness and freedom.

As stated before, together with humanism, individualism was one of the most important views that flourished during the Renaissance. By expressing their trust in mankind and by appreciating his desires and free will, both of these distinguished writers of the Renaissance encourage individualism and freedom of man in their own ways. Therefore, reading their works may help understand the notion of individualism that was widely shared by the Renaissance writers and reflected in their works.

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