

Rabelais Unsheathes the Book: The Linguistic Critique Offered by the Catalog of Saint-Victor's.

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Library Scholarship

Rabelais Unsheathes the Book: The Linguistic Critique Offered by the Catalog of Saint-Victor's

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Abstract

In the seventh chapter of *Pantagruel*, written in 1532, François Rabelais seized on the relationship between titles and books to pose a serious linguistic challenge to the stability of the book and its tenuous role in supporting an architectonic system of knowledge. The chapter consists primarily of a disordered catalog of invented titles, and the author assures us elsewhere that if we wish to grasp his deeper meaning we should examine these titles closely. A first look shows us that he is mocking particular authors and titling conventions, while further exploration reveals the catalog as a whole to serve as a



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macro-critique of scholastic attempts to order and regiment knowledge. But his critique also operates on the micro-level of the title as a function of naming. A close examination of the titles suggests a disturbing continuum between instable names and stable things, and impugns the integrity of the system's basic unit: the book. Attempts to make sense of Rabelais' book-less titles impose the recognition that these titles only "parse" if we make conjectures about the alleged books. Books and titles are co-texts. Reflecting his partiality for linguistic views found in Plato's Cratylus, Rabelais deploys his titles as models of the regressively self-referential nature of language. In the context of this chapter, focused on an ancient Parisian library, the inference is clear: books are not solid, static monuments, but porous and contingent entities subject to the vagaries of language.

Disciplines

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Victor's Challenge [Book Review, as was shown above, phylogeny immutable.

Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005, 286 pp.,£ 18.99 pbk.,£ 58.00 hbk.). Edward Newman and Oliver P. Richmond

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