

Claude La Charité:

La rhétorique épistolaire de Rabelais

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Luc Vaillancourt:

La lettre familière au XVI^e siècle: Rhétorique humaniste de l'épistolaire

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Although published on opposite sides of the Atlantic, the studies of sixteenth-century French letter writing by Claude La Charité, Professor at the Université du Québec à Rimouski, and Luc Vaillancourt, Professor at the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi, have similar structures and goals. These can be explained by their common scholarly mentors and models. They have been associated with the same circles: in Canada, with GARSE-XVI (Groupe d'analyse et de recherche sur l'écriture des femmes au XVI^e siècle) led by Diane Desrosiers-Bonin, McGill University, and Jean-Philippe Beaulieu, Université de Montréal, and in France with the Atelier "Langue et littérature du XVI^e siècle" led by Mireille Huchon, Université de Paris IV-Sorbonne. The model of both studies may be Jacques Chomarat's magisterial, two-volume *Grammaire et rhétorique chez Érasme* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1981), which treats the letter under "Les Genres Oratoires". Following his examination of *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*, Chomarat analyzes Erasmus' own use of the categories the treatise describes in four letters: deliberative, demonstrative, judicial, and familiar. Both La Charité and Vaillancourt survey epistolography from the familiar letters of the ancients through the medieval *ars dictaminis* to Renaissance treatises on Latin and French letter writing before they examine the extent to which selected sixteenth-century correspondents put theory into practice. Although La Charité and Vaillancourt are well read in more recent studies of Renaissance epistolography, Chomarat's conclusions ground their own.

La Charité does begin his brief survey of epistolary rhetoric by disagreeing with Chomarat's easy dismissal of the medieval *ars dictaminis* as useless for anything but a history of diplomacy or etiquette. Lorenzo of Aquileia's *Practica sive usus dictaminis* (ca. 1300) may represent little advance over the earliest formulas, but the manuals of Italian *dictatores* (11th-13th centuries)

adapted rhetoric to letter writing, and Brunetto Latini, writing *Li livres dou tresor* in France (1262-1268), allowed variations of the rules appropriate to the circumstances of the letter. Petrarch's recognition of the difference between the letter and the oration and his use of *sermo* (conversational style, as opposed to the *contentio* of oratory) found few imitators in the Italian Renaissance. The first French manual, Pierre Fabri's *Grant et vray art de pleine rhétorique* (Rouen 1521), and others that drew upon it, are indebted to the more formulaic rhetoric of such Quattrocento humanists as Francesco Negro and Guilelmus Saphonensis. In the treatise he finally published in 1522, however, Erasmus described the great variety of letter writing, constrained only by decorum.

This survey of the history of epistolary rhetoric is too brief to break new ground, but scholars may find the monograph's appendices useful. Appendices III and IV summarize the principal points of the treatises of Fabri and Erasmus that La Charité applies in his analysis of the seventeen extant letters of François Rabelais, written in Latin and French from 5 March 1521 through 28 January 1552 (listed in Appendix I). Appendix V is the table of contents of Jean Quinerit de Mousne's undated *La maniere d'escrire par response*; Appendix VI is the preface to Barthélémy Aneau's *Epistre de S. Euchier à Valerian* (1552); Appendix VII is the preface to *Stile et maniere de composer, dicter, et escrire toute sorte d'epistres, ou lettres missives* (1553); Appendix VIII is the table of contents of *Plus elegantes fleurs, sentences et manieres d'escrire* (1563); Appendix IX provides the epigram of Jean Chapelain and the preface of Estienne de Lugré to *La maniere de dicter, et composer toutes sortes de lettres missives* (1563); Appendix X is François de Belleforest's preface to his French translation of Cicero's *Epistulae ad Familiares* (1572); and Appendix XI offers facsimiles of Rabelais's dedicatory epistles and autograph letters, while Appendix II catalogues his uses of the terms *epistre(s)* and *let(t)re(s)* in his works.

La Charité devotes the greater part of his analysis of Rabelais's letters to categorizing them under the types of letters described by Erasmus and Fabri and exploring their use of the rhetorical techniques these authors recommend for each type. He then considers the letters together under *inventio* (*accommodatio* and *eruditio*), *dispositio* (superscription and subscription, salutation and farewell), and *elocutio* (Ciceronianism and Erasmianism; *sermo* and *oratio*; *stylus negligentisculus*; *exaggeratio*, hyperbole and litotes; *macrologia* and the *venustas* of the epideictic genre). His examination of Rabelais's correspondence to exemplify sixteenth-century letter writing enriches our understanding of Renaissance rhetorical practice by revealing its subtlety and variety. La Charité's discussion of the letter types is especially sophisticated in demonstrating Rabelais's adaptation of content and style to the circumstances and audience of his correspondence (a point made again in the discussion of *inventio*). I also find particularly useful as visual aids two tables in his section on *dispositio*, one cataloguing Rabelais's superscriptions and subscriptions, the other, his salutations and farewells.

In treating *elocutio* or style, La Charité observes that Rabelais's letters fall into two distinct periods: up to August 1534 he writes in Latin (e.g. to Budé and Erasmus) with the exception of a verse epistle and a famous letter to Pantagruel; thereafter, he writes in the vernacular. The neo-Latin dedications of the first period might be called Ciceronian: "une rhétorique paganisante, formaliste et déclamatoire avec son cortège de coquetteries stylistiques, ses nombreux passages en grec et sa prédilection pour le genre démonstratif". However, the French letters of the second period show a "plus souple" rhetoric, adapted to contemporary Christianity, privileging familiar conversation, preferring letters of praise and of discussion. Familiarity, which La Charité equates with anti-Ciceronianism or Erasmianism, seems to be inherent in the French language itself.

Vaillancourt's study is the more ambitious of the two monographs. Before analyzing five sixteenth-century collections containing "familiar letters" in French, he offers 150 pages on the history of letter-writing theory and practice. In the absence of a classical rhetoric of letter writing, he collects *loci classici* that comment on the genre, then traces the formal rhetoric of letter writing from the late classical period to the end of the sixteenth century. Given the magnitude of the topic, he can devote little more than a page even to major figures, and for the most part he depends, as does La Charité, on the studies of others. But he offers in French an overview of this vast subject that I find, with very minor exceptions, quite accurate. He then examines the *Epistres familiares et invectives* of Hélienne de Crenne, the first French edition of letters in vernacular prose (1539); the *Lettres missives et familiares* of Étienne du Tronchet (1569); the *Premier livre* of Gaspar de Saillans (1569); the *Missives* of Madeleine and Catherine des Roches (1586); and the *Lettres* of Étienne Pasquier (1586).

These five collections exhibit a fascinating variety that does not fit easily into our current conception of the familiar letter, or for the most part, into the category of the familiar letter as described in Erasmus' treatise. Vaillancourt is not so much describing the familiar letter in the sixteenth century as searching for it. The title of his chapter on Madame Hélienne asks, "*contentio orationis ou sermo pedestris?*". Her letters are too formal, too grand in style, and too focused on moral deliberation to be compared, as they have been, to Cicero's *Ad familiares*. The distinction between letters "missives" and "familieres" in du Tronchet's title remains elusive, even when considered in the light of his manual of epistolography, *Finances et trésor de la plume françoise de E. du. T., Secrétaire de la Royne* (Paris: Nicolas du Chemin, 1572). His frequent shifts in tone, even in the same letter, suggest to Vaillancourt a decorum less classical than "propre à une stratégie relationnelle fondée sur l'expression d'affects". His style is not natural but has some characteristics of the familiar: "l'argumentation souple, la réflexivité et la candeur". Gaspar de Saillans' letters pretend to authenticity, but they are the first of three parts of a treatise in the tradition of books of devotion, with marriage as the theme. They offer in the public sphere a model for emulation, thus are inherently rhetorical. In contrast to Vaillancourt's understanding of the familiar letter as individual in style, they express social codes. The "missives" of the Dames des Roches are conventional letters of compliment, but they play a role in the development of conversational prose in France. They correspond, at least in their aims, to the types of letters Erasmus lists as familiar and thus participate paradoxically in the genre. Finally the letters of Pasquier, in which rhetoric is second nature, nevertheless achieve *sermo*, that is, a style that reflects the man or at least the author's *persona*.

In analyzing these collections, Vaillancourt employs the same broad categories as La Charité (*inventio, dispositio, elocutio*), but his choice of rhetorical terms to guide his analysis appears arbitrary: for *inventio*, Aristotle's *logos, ethos, and pathos*; for *dispositio*, Fabri's cause, intention, and consequence; and for *elocutio*, Hermogenes' categories of style. Vaillancourt seems not to have chosen these on the basis of his rather impressive survey of the history of epistolary rhetoric. French writers might well have read Fabri, but while Johann Sturm introduced Hermogenes to Parisian scholars, his move to Strasbourg meant that this *auctor* was most frequently used by Protestant educators in Germany and England. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* gained popularity comparatively late in the sixteenth century and was most used as a guide to letter writing in areas of Europe speaking Germanic languages. Teachers there seem to have turned to it as an escape from Ramist pedagogy at the university level, where Aristotle was still central to the curriculum. The rhetorical categories that Vaillancourt chooses are useful enough, but many others drawn from ancient rhetoricians might have been at least as appropriate as those of Hermogenes and Aristotle. One wonders why Vaillancourt did not base his analysis, as La Charité did, on Erasmus' influential treatise, since he also sees Erasmus as pivotal in restoring the letter to its classical conception, a conversation between absent friends.

This shared interpretation of Erasmus' role in the evolution of style from rhetorical formality (*contentio*) to conversational intimacy (*sermo*) is grounded in the history of rhetoric of such eminent scholars as Marc Fumaroli and Chomarat. La Charité cites Fumaroli's judgment that Petrarch's letters are nothing less than an "essai" au sens de Montaigne", an "autobiographie morale fragmentée" (*Revue d'histoire littéraire de la France* 1978, p. 888). Erasmus has been considered Petrarch's principal heir before the late sixteenth century, when Justus Lipsius and others began to champion the intimacy of the familiar letter. Chomarat acknowledges Erasmus' extensive use of rhetoric in the *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*. Erasmus' opening chapters refuse to limit letter writing to a simple style, he advises teachers to assign letters as rhetorical exercises, he classifies letters as deliberative, demonstrative, and judicial, and he discusses *topoi* that seem to Chomarat more appropriate to judicial oratory than to letters. Chomarat finds Erasmus inconsistent in repeating ancient rules of rhetoric after criticizing contemporary humanists for doing the same in their treatises. Yet Erasmus' quotation of classical descriptions of the letter as a conversation between absent friends, his satire of barbaric medieval formulas, and his addition of the familiar letter as a fourth category in his classification, together with his own epistolary practice, convince Chomarat that "pour Erasme, malgré ses concessions à la tradition oratoire (invention), l'essence de la lettre par l'élocution est du côté de la conversation: c'est la lettre familière qui est la vraie lettre" (*Grammaire et rhétorique chez Érasme*, p. 1026).

Chomarat discovers three themes in Erasmus' description of epistolary types that support the classical conception of the letter as familiar. First, Erasmus distinguishes the letter from the oration by its relation to the audience; that is, the letter writer knows his correspondent better than the orator knows his judge, but, unlike the orator, cannot adjust his composition in real time as his correspondent reacts to his words. Second, the letter writer must adapt his style to his subject matter and to the individual circumstances and traits of his correspondent. Third, this adaptation requires skill in amplification and attenuation. Amplification may go even as far as flattery, which Erasmus finds distasteful, in order to elicit a desired psychological reaction, for instance, to convince a prince to act virtuously by praising him for doing so. Analyzing Erasmus' own correspondence, including the dedication of his edition of Cicero's *De Officiis*, Chomarat notes that Erasmus charts a middle course between medieval formulas and equally rigid Ciceronianism. He concludes that in spite of reliance on rhetoric, Erasmus very often makes the letter a "confidence, épanchement ou libre conversation; on est passé de l'*oratio* au *sermo*, des traités d'art épistolaire à la spontanéité" (op.cit., p. 1051).

La Charité and Vaillancourt both seek this Erasmian achievement in the French correspondence they study, and they equate *sermo* with humanist individualism. In his discussion of *elocutio*, La Charité shows most clearly his debt to Chomarat. He suggests that scholars who have found Rabelais's letters "Ciceronian" fail to define the term clearly and to distinguish among Latin and French letters, fictional letters, dedications, and personal correspondence. La Charité describes three kinds of "Ciceronianism": (1) a declamatory rhetoric imitating Cicero's oratory, (2) the rigid ideal of stylistic purity that Erasmus satirizes in *Nosoponus* in his dialogue *Ciceronianus*, and (3) Erasmianism, capturing the true spirit of Cicero through decorous but lively and powerful persuasion. La Charité concludes that, in Rabelais, "on peut estimer que le passage du latin au français marque aussi la transition chez l'épistolier du cicéronianisme à l'erasmisme: de l'*oratio* au *sermo*". Vaillancourt acknowledges that sixteenth-century writers cannot escape rhetoric, but they eventually develop a familiar style that applies to intimate diaries, autobiographies, memoirs, essays and dialogues, as well as to letters. Erasmus' "valorisation" of the *ingenium* of the writer is a step in this direction. Epistolary prose evolves by gradually privileging *ethos* over *logos* and *pathos*, and *elocutio* over *inventio* and *dispositio*. Erasmian *apte dicere* encourages an art that conceals art in interpersonal exchanges.

Much as I admire the Francophone tradition of scholarship represented by these studies, I am troubled by their conclusions. Certainly Erasmus was ahead of many in his own time in urging the teacher to propose models that fit each student's *ingenium*. The "Ciceronians" that Erasmus opposed replied that Cicero was a master of every style from the *contentio* of the oration to the *sermo* of the letter: they were clearly aware of the different styles the ancients assigned to these genres and of Cicero's own use of them. Erasmus did not find the letters of Christoph de Longueuil declamatory; he found them trivial. The attention the Ciceronians paid to *elocutio*, especially pure diction and syntax, drew attention to words (*verba*) and away from *inventio* and *dispositio*, that is, from argument (*res*). The Renaissance had made the letter central to learned discussion and political debate. Erasmus did not want to see his contemporaries destroy this protean genre that was so essential to achieving the humanist ideal of statesmanship. Thus Erasmus' *Opus de conscribendis epistolis* is above all a treatise teaching the devices of rhetoric that may be used in all categories of letters, familiar ones among them, and he insists that the letter may be written on any subject. Emphasizing decorum in style, he concludes logically (and in agreement with Angelo Poliziano) that the genre may appropriately be written in any style, following a variety of models. The themes that Chomarat identifies in Erasmus' treatment of epistolary types all focus not so much on the writer (*ethos*) as on the audience (*pathos*). In any case, *ethos* in the rhetorical tradition is not an expression of individualism but a self-presentation designed to persuade an audience. The artist should conceal this art, as Erasmus himself does. In his voluminous correspondence he develops an extraordinary command of all types of letter writing, including intimate, conversational letters, but demonstrating his versatility is not the same thing as championing *sermo* over *contentio*. In his *Opus de conscribendis epistolis*, Erasmus naturally quoted classical definitions of the letter, but he did not let classical theory or practice interfere with effective communication for his own time. That is ultimately the point of his anti-Ciceronianism: a recognition that sixteenth-century language can never be that of Cicero.

To explain the development of such familiar genres as the essay or the familiar letter, and their emphasis on the "moi", we must therefore look beyond Erasmian rhetoric to the retreat into the self, with its redefinition of the public and private, that becomes recognizable toward the end of the sixteenth century. Scholars suggest that it was fostered by multiple forces, but clearly it was increasingly necessitated by religious conflict, the devastating wars it produced, and the absolutism and censorship that a longing for order encouraged. La Charité, whose study ends with Rabelais's letters in 1552, does not openly consider this development. Vaillancourt, whose study extends almost to the end of the century, briefly glimpses but leaves it to others to explore in detail. He only suggests that the letter, a more individualized form of writing, contributed to the affirmation of the self. With that suggestion I agree.

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