

THE COMPLETE WORKS OF
RABELAIS

THE FIVE BOOKS
OF

Gargantua and Pantagruel

IN THE MODERN TRANSLATION

OF

Jacques Le Clercq



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XXIV

OF A COURT BALL, IN THE
FORM OF A TOURNAMENT,
HELD IN HER MAJESTY'S
PRESENCE

AFTER dinner, a ball was given in Her Majesty's presence. It took the form of a contest or tournament; it proved to be a spectacular and memorable event.

First, the floor of the hall was covered with a long piece of velvet tapestry; its design was chequered, the white and yellow squares being three spans by three in area.

Thirty-two young people entered the hall, in two groups of sixteen; one group clad in cloth-of-gold, the other group in cloth-of-silver. Each group consisted of eight youthful nymphs, such as the ancients describe in Diana's train . . . a king . . . a queen . . . two archers of the palace, with headgear like bishops' mitres . . . two knights . . . and two wardens of the castle. . . .

They took their places on the tapestry as follows: the kings in the fourth square of the rear rank, the gold king on a white square, the silver on a yellow . . . each queen beside her king, the golden on a yellow square, the silver on a white . . . the mitred archers, on either side, to guard their respective kings and queens . . . the knights . . . and, on either flank of the line, the castle-wardens. . . . The front rank was filled by the eight nymphs, with one square vacant between each.

Each host had its own musicians, clad in appropriate livery; the golden army's band in orange damask, the silver's in white. Each orchestra consisted of eight different pieces. They proceeded to play tunefully and harmoniously on divers instruments of the most ingenious manufacture, varying the tone and measure according to the figure of the dance they accompanied. I was entranced by the

infinite variety of steps, advances, retreats, leaps, vaults, turns, returns, flights, traps, ambushes, moves and double moves.

Even more astounding, I thought, was the ability of the dancers to recognize, in each measure of music, the cue for a particular move forward or back; the band had not finished ere they stood in their appointed places, though these were different each time.

The nymphs, in the first row, as though spoiling to begin the fight, marched straight against their enemies, square by square, save that for their first move, they were allowed to go forward two squares. They alone of all the dancers were forbidden to retreat. If a nymph succeeded in reaching the enemy king's line, she was crowned queen to her own king, and, thenceforward, enjoyed the same privileges as any other queen. Short of such coronation, a nymph could capture a foeman only forwards and obliquely, in a diagonal line. The nymphs, and all other participants, were not supposed to capture enemy pieces if, in so doing, they left their king uncovered and in danger.

The kings advanced to take their enemies, but rectangularly; they could proceed only from white to yellow square and conversely. For his first move, however, should a king's line lack any officers save wardens, these were allowed to set His Majesty in their place and to retire beside him.

Queens were given greater liberties than any other dancers. They might move to and fro in a straight line as far as they cared to, in all directions, provided no space in the line was occupied by one of their own host. They might also move diagonally, if the diagonal line were of the same color as the square upon which they stood.

Archers had leave to proceed forward and back, far and near, but must keep to the original color on which they stood.

Knights moved to seize their enemies in a lineal manner; they could step scot-free over one square, though friend or foe occupied it. Their second step might be made to right or left, on to a square of different color. This proved dangerous indeed for the enemy; knights bore much watching, since they never effected seizures in a direct onslaught, but rather stole up unawares.

Wardens moved to capture right and left, forwards and back, resembling kings in this respect. They could advance as far as they wished over unoccupied squares, a liberty even kings did not take.

Martial law, observed by both armies, decreed that, at the end of the battle, the kings of both armies should be besieged and shut up, without possibility of escape in any direction. When His Majesty had been bottled up, beyond hope of flight or succor by his men, he had lost the day. The battle was over.

To spare him such disgrace, not one subject, male or female, but would gladly have laid down his life. Fiercely, they vied with one another in capturing a foeman, wherever the music allowed. As soon as some champion seized an enemy, he bowed deep, tapped him on the right hand, sent him off the field, and took his place.

If one of the kings stood in danger of capture, the opponents were not allowed to lay hands on him. The most the attacker could do was to salute him courteously and offer warning, with a:

“God preserve Your Majesty!”

This gave the menaced king an opportunity to seek protection and succor among his followers, or, if this were unhappily impossible, to take up his stand elsewhere.

Nor was His Majesty ever taken without a ceremonious bow from the captor, who cried “Good Morrow!” as he bent the left knee.

The king taken, the tournament came to an end.

X X V

HOW THE THIRTY-TWO DANCERS FOUGHT AT THE BALL

THE rival hosts having taken their places, their bands blared martial music. A harsh, fearsome blast. . . .

Either host trembled all along the line, but soon regained courage, awaiting the signal for the charge.

Suddenly the music ceased. There was a pause. Then the golden host's band broke into an air, thus warning us their army was on the attack.

It was at once forthcoming. One more tune for the onslaught, and we beheld the nymph in front of the queen, moving. She made a

complete turn to the left, towards her king, as though to ask his leave to fight. Next, she bowed to the company. Then, proceeding with modesty and decorum into the second square ahead, she favored her antagonist with a sweeping curtsey. The golden band then ceased playing, and the silver began.

I must not neglect to mention that, when the nymph bowed to her king and his company, they returned her greeting with a full turn to the left, except the queen, who turned right to pay homage to her royal consort. Throughout the ball, this salutation was observed on both sides by all the participants.

Now the argentine orchestra played, it was the silver nymph directly before her queen, who turned, made obeisance to her sovereign, then honored the company, which at once returned the tribute. The entire procedure was as before, save that all the silverites turned to the right, and their queen to the left. The silver nymph in question advanced to the second square in front of her. Gold and silver nymphs now stood face to face, as though ready to have at one another. But they could not try conclusions, since nymphs may only capture obliquely.

The comrades of each then followed them, attempting to intervene, creating a mêlée in the midst of which the first golden nymph swerved to the left, tapped the silver nymph on the hand, put her hors-de-combat, and took her place.

But soon, as the musicians played another measure, the conqueror nymph of gold was herself conquered by the silver archer, who was at once chased off by another golden nymph. This brought the silver knight out of the line, at which the golden queen took her stand in front of her royal husband.

The silver king, terrified at the golden queen's ferocity, shifted into the place occupied by his right-hand warden, a well-guarded and safe position.

On the western front, the left-flank knights, gold and silver, now pressed forward, overhauling many a goodly nymph whose escape was blocked. The golden knight wrought signal havoc.

The silver knight, however, was not bested: he resorted to a strategical movement that proved even more telling. He could easily have snapped up a golden nymph but, instead, allowed her to forge

ahead so far, that suddenly he found himself in a position to draw up to his foe, salute the golden king and:

"God preserve Your Majesty," he cried.

The golden host, seeing their monarch's pressing need, trembled all along the battle line. Not that they could not rescue him; but if they did, it would mean the loss of their wardens and no gain in compensation. The golden king therefore retired leftward, and the silver knight seized the golden warden, to the great discomfiture of the aureate army.

Bent upon vengeance, the golden troops then hemmed in the silver knight on all sides. Desperately, he strove to flee, now right, now left, here, there and everywhere. But in vain. Though his followers resorted to every possible ruse, in the end, the silver knight bit the dust, captive to Her aureate Majesty.

The golden army, deprived of one of its stoutest champions, fought tooth and nail, thirsting for vengeance, and, in its rash, headlong advance, inflicting great damage to the enemy ranks. The silver host bided its time, coolly sacrificing one of its nymphs as bait, destined to draw the golden queen into a trap. When the golden queen took the silver nymph, she came within a hair's breadth of being herself caught by the golden archer.

His ally, the knight, then challenged the silver king and queen, bidding them good Morrow with the utmost civility. The silver archer stepped into the breach, only to be seized by a golden nymph, who, in turn, succumbed to a silver nymph. The battle waxed even fiercer, the wardens rushing into the fray. A terrible scrimmage ensued.

The silver host moved up within a few inches of the golden king's tent, but they were speedily repulsed. In another quarter of the field, the golden queen wrought miracles, laying out the enemy archer in one move, and, glancing sidewise in the next, felled a silver warden. Her silver Majesty, perceiving the damage, fell with such savage force upon the foe that she accounted for the last golden warden and a trail of golden nymphs.

A fast and vicious duel now took place between the two queens. Each lunged and feinted at the other, now striking boldly, now stealing back, determined at once to escape and to guard themselves

against the enemy king. Eventually, the golden queen captured her silver rival.

At this point, the golden king had only three nymphs, an archer and a warden; the silver king only three nymphs and the knight on his right. The fighting therefore became slower, more deliberate and wary.

The two kings, heartbroken at the loss of their beloved queens, made every effort to win this dignity for one of their nymphs. They were ready to marry and cherish forever the one who could break through to the enemy's rearguard.

The golden nymphs seemed more alert; it was from their ranks that a nymph was crowned and invested with the regalia.

This new queen, proud of her golden crown, proposed to display her ardent prowess. Meanwhile, the silver knight bagged the golden warden as the latter patrolled the limits of his camp. This led to a second coronation, a silver nymph being raised to royal rank. She too, now sought to prove her valor, as discord and strife waxed apace. A myriad skirmishes, attacks, stands, routs and sallies were enacted, until presently the silver queen stole into the tent of her archenemy, and:

"God preserve Your Majesty," she cried.

His luckless Majesty, who could be rescued only by his newly wed queen, was now in parlous straits. As she ran to his aid, the silver knight, ranging across the field, moved to his queen's side. This placed the golden king in such a critical situation that, for his own safety, he agreed to forfeit his consort; still, he managed to hew down the silver knight. The survivors in the silver camp—one archer and two nymphs—defended their liege with might and main, only to succumb, after a last stand, and be placed hors-de-combat. Now the golden king stood alone, without a single soldier to command.

The entire silver host made genuflection and obeisance to His golden Majesty, bidding him good Morrow, thus indicating that to their monarch, King Silver, went the victory.

The two bands then intoned a victorious tune, and the first dance ended amid such enthusiastic appreciation, such courtly gestures and such rare grace that we remained rapt and ecstatic. Not without cause, we fancied we had been spirited away to Olympus, and were even now savoring its supreme delights and felicity.

The first tournament done, the two groups resumed their initial positions and prepared to wage war anew. This time the music was one-half beat faster than before; the strategy of the combat, too, was different.

I saw the golden queen, resentful at the rout of her army, sally forth at the call of her orange orchestra, an archer and a knight in tow. Almost, she caught the enemy king napping in his tent with his officers about him.

Then, realizing that they saw through her game, she skirmished briskly among the ruck of the enemy, sowing destruction amid nymphs and henchmen. That golden queen was a very Amazon; she was Penthesileia, Queen of the Amazons, scattering destruction in the Greek camp.

This havoc was short-lived. The silver host, furious at their casualties, yet carrying on calmly, laid an ambush for Her Majesty in a distant corner of the field. Her Majesty promptly fell into it, was seized by the lurking archer, and led away by a knight errant. Her followers were speedily vanquished.

(Next time Her Majesty would be better advised. She would cling to her husband's side, or, if she must make a sortie, she would do so in better company than a knight and an archer.)

Once again, the silver host won.

In the third and last figure of the ball, the two armies took their stand as before. It seemed to me they looked livelier and more determined than ever. The tempo of the music was one-fifth quicker, the tune as violent, Phrygian and rousing as that composed by Marsyas, the prince of flutists, when, in their musical bout, he was unjustly beaten by Apollo, the mellifluous lyricist.

The participants began to press forward, turning and swirling so nimbly, with the appropriate salutes and obeisance I described above, that they covered four steps to one bar of music, in a series of leaps, tumbles and curvets that recalled dancers on the tight-rope. Or, better, as they gyrated upon one foot, they reminded us of tops, spinning under the whips of children, so rapidly that their motion seems to be rest, and they "sleeping," to quote the brats' phrase. The colored dot upon them then appears not in its true likeness, but rather as a continuous line—a fact which Nicholas de Cusa, the

erudite Franciscan prophet, sagely noted in discussing questions of high divinity.

On either side, we heard loud handclapping and cheers, as one champion captured an enemy. The music played in incredibly swift time. The dancers raced at breakneck speed in five hundred combinations of ways. These battlers and queens and nymphs swayed, jumped, vaulted, skipped, capered and whirred with such agility as never to jostle one another. And as I contemplated this extraordinary exhibition of gymnastic skill, I wagered that they would have drawn smiles of appreciation from Crassus, the old sobersides who was never known to laugh in his lifetime . . . from Timon, the celebrated Athenian misanthrope . . . from even Heraclitus, who so bitterly despised man's most natural inclination to laugh. . . .

The fewer combatants remained, the more the audience enjoyed watching the extraordinary ruses and subtle stratagems they employed, as the music urged them on.

I must say this, and I have done. If this delightful spectacle swept us off our feet, dazzling our sight and thrilling our senses, the effect of the music upon our hearts proved overwhelming. It rendered wholly credible the story of Ismenias who, by merely playing the flute, so excited Alexander that the conqueror leaped from the dinner-table to take up arms.

From this, the third and last bout, King Gold emerged victor.

During these last dances, Quintessence disappeared: we did not see her again. Geber's tourist-pilgrim guides, tried alchemists all, led us to him, and had us registered as alchemists-extraordinary to Her Majesty.

Returning to Mateotechny or Vainscience Harbor, we boarded our ships at once, for we had a fair wind we were determined to make the most of.

Not in three-quarters of a waning moon could we have found such favorable conditions for our departure.

