

Bush ‘Roasted’ in Tradition of Rabelais, Boccaccio

by Nancy Spannaus

We have it on good authority that the next time that President George W. Bush signs a piece of legislation and attaches a Presidential Signing Statement, it will read that the President interprets the law to mean: “Kill Stephen Colbert!” The Comedy Central TV comedian truly roasted President Bush on Saturday night, April 29, with the President and the First Lady seated at the podium just a few feet away. As Lyndon LaRouche observed later, Bush will probably never recover from the roasting. He can be compared to the naked Emperor, parading in his “new clothes” before a credulous and dutiful collection of subjects, until Stephen Colbert, disguised as a little boy, shouted out, “Daddy, but he has nothing on!” Bush has, according to reliable sources close to the White House, gone into a near total state of rage. He reportedly did 28 hours of non-stop exercise on Sunday, in what has been already described as the longest, uninterrupted attempt—albeit failed—at anger management in Presidential history.

Bush is coming apart. And nothing that the *Washington Post* and other media sycophants try to do to put Bush back together again is going to work. The establishment media blackout of the Saturday night roast has totally failed, and their claims that Colbert just “wasn’t funny” have fallen flat. Out in the blog world, the Colbert video-stream is everywhere. (We include the transcript here, but urge you to find the video.) The nature of the animal roasted on the spit on Saturday night is clear for all the world to see. This is no joke. This was a really historic event, that will have long-term ramifications.

LaRouche situated Colbert’s performance on April 29 at the White House Correspondents’ Dinner in the tradition of

Boccaccio, Rabelais, and Cervantes. All of these great “roasters” lived in times when civilization was collapsing, when culture was hitting the bottom, and nations were crumbling. They used devastating humor to capture the tragedy of the day and rally people to fight for a better world. Boccaccio was not available, so Stephen Colbert stood in for him—and did an admirable job. The Bush Administration is the emblem of our cultural degeneration, and Stephen Colbert was provided with the opportunity to do the roasting of Bush and Cheney.

This is significant, because it gives the sense, clearly, that leading U.S. institutions are ripe for facing this reality. Someone clearly arranged for Colbert to deliver the final word on George W, by making him the speaker. This is, LaRouche emphasized, a significant comment on our nation and our civilization. There are two kinds of people: Those who were able to howl with laughter at what Colbert did in his roast, and those who live in a house of prostitution and don’t wish to be seen slinking out the back door. Clearly the *Washington Post* runs the biggest whorehouse in town, judging from the lies they published, trying to pooh-pooh the impact of the Colbert roast.

What Colbert hit upon goes deeper than Bush himself. How about the millions of Americans who voted for Bush and Cheney—twice? How degenerate are they? What would Boccaccio have said about them in his *Decameron*? What would Rabelais have said? Or Cervantes? What needs to be attacked is the controlling culture itself, which is now disintegrating, and this is a task for great artistic thinking. Bush was voted in as President as a certifiable fool, and he has lived up to that promise of incompetence.



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Stephen Colbert's "roast" of President Bush had the quality of Hans Christian Andersen's "The Emperor's New Clothes," as well as the ironical stories of the great Renaissance humorists, Boccaccio and Rabelais.

The Tradition of Classical Irony: Boccaccio

The method which Colbert was emulating, albeit on a lower level, is a time-honored humanist one, which is associated with famous humorists who emerged during periods of unspeakable tragedy for mankind, in order to raise up the population with laughter at the flaws which had led them into their fate. Particularly notable are the three whom LaRouche mentioned: the Italian Giovanni Boccaccio (ca. 1313-1387), the Frenchman François Rabelais (ca. 1494-1553), and the Spaniard Miguel Cervantes (1547-1616).

Giovanni Boccaccio, man of letters from 14th Century Florence, presents a case in point. In his masterwork, *The Decameron*, which was written in 1350, in the immediate aftermath of the Black Death, Boccaccio foregoes the moralistic or didactic approach, in order to recount a series of stories, which were allegedly told by a group of young noblewomen and men who left Florence under the pall of the plague that was decimating the city, both physically and morally. In one tale after another, Boccaccio's characters poke fun at the venality of priests, husbands, wives, rulers, and others, exposing their hypocrisy, stupidity, and greed in a manner which cannot help but bring smiles, if not guffaws, to his readers' lips.

In his introduction to *The Decameron*, Boccaccio paints a horrific, and truthful, scene of the Florence which had been his home, and which suffered, as did much of Europe, from the deadly epidemic of Bubonic Plague which reduced the

population of Europe by anywhere from one-third to one-half. He notes the way in which the frightful disease destroyed the city, leading people to leave their families for the sake of self-preservation, or to take advantage of others who were unable to defend themselves or their own interests. Rich and poor, virtuous and debauched, all were stricken and left bereft.

"Some people were of the opinion that a sober and abstemious mode of living considerably reduced the risk of infection," he writes. "They refrained from speaking to outsiders, refused to receive news of the dead or the sick, and entertained themselves with music and whatever other amusements they were able to devise. . . . Others took the opposite view, and maintain that an infallible way of warding off this appalling evil was to drink heavily, enjoy life to the full, go around singing and merry-making, gratify all of one's cravings whenever the opportunity offered, and shrug the whole thing off as one enormous joke," Boccaccio wrote.

"In the face of so much affliction and misery, all respect for the laws of God and man had virtually broken down and been extinguished in our city," he observed.

Could there be a more apt summary of the collapse of culture today, in terms of the willful refusal of most sections of the population to face, and deal with, the reality of the spread of poverty and despair? Yet, rather than preach, Boccaccio chose to tell often bawdy stories which would make his readers laugh at themselves, and their rulers, and thus prepare themselves to rise above their petty concerns to deal with the problems they faced.

Like Colbert, Boccaccio was attacked for having taken "too many liberties" with his language and subject, thus offending the "proper" sensibilities of his readers. He points out that the corruption is in the mind of the reader, not the language. After all, how many people who have steeped themselves in the Holy Scripture, have led themselves and others to perdition?

The Laughter of Rabelais

Physician, poet, and monk, François Rabelais' name has become virtually synonymous with the use of biting, ribald humor, as a means of taking on a stupefied, and fearful, population. Rabelais did his work in the early part of the 16th Century, writing his famous *Gargantua and Pantagruel* in 1532. This was a period of increasingly intense religious



Miguel Cervantes' *Don Quixote* takes the reader into the world of insanity of the crazed knight—which reflects back on the ills and lunacy of the Spain of his time. Here, Quixote with the prostitute Maritornes, whom he hails as the epitome of virtue. Illustration by Gustave Doré.

conflict, under the dominance of the Hapsburg dynasty and the Venetians, a conflict that would eventually lay waste to central Europe in the 1618-1648 Thirty Years War.

Rabelais was a follower of the humanist Desiderius Erasmus (who himself wrote a famous humorous book entitled *In Praise of Folly*), who was dedicated to trying to overthrow the Aristotelian horrors which had taken over the minds of the educated and uneducated alike in France. But, how to do it? In the period he was writing, those who criticized the clergy were subject to immediate retaliation, including the possibility of being convicted of heresy and burned at the stake. Rabelais' chosen recourse was humor.

"Better to laugh, than to end up roasted like grilled herrings," declared Pantagruel, one of Rabelais' larger-than-life heroes. With this in mind, Pantagruel, and his father Gargantua, are presented by Rabelais as carrying out outrageous, and outrageously funny, assaults on backward monks, manipulative and hypocritical churchmen, scholastic teachers, lawyers, courtiers, and any ordinary, small-minded individuals who clung to the feudal disease of oligarchism.

In his introduction to *Gargantua*, Rabelais presents a case for his approach. He argues that, "it is better to write about laughter than about tears, since laughter is the characteristic of man," and urges his readers to look deeper into his stories than the surface. He writes:

"Now what do you think is the purpose of this preamble, of this preliminary flourish? Is it that you, my good disciples and other leisured fools, in reading the pleasant titles of

certain books of our invention, such as *Gargantua*, *Pantagruel*, *Toss-Pint*, *On the Dignity of Codpieces*, *Of Peas and Bacon*, *Cum Commento*, may not too easily conclude that they treat of nothing but mockery, fooling, and pleasant fictions; seeing that their outward signs—their titles, that is—are commonly greeted, without further investigation, with smiles and derision. It is wrong, however, to set such small store by the works of men. For, as you yourself say, the clothes do not make the man; some wear a monkish cloak who are the very reverse of monkish inside, and some sport a Spanish cape who are far from Spanish in their courage. That is the reason why you must open this book, and carefully weigh up its contents. You will discover then that the drug within is far more valuable than the box promised; that is to say, that the subjects here treated are not so foolish as the title on the cover suggested.

"But even suppose that in the literal meanings you find jolly enough nonsense, in perfect keeping with the title, you must still not be deterred, as by the Siren's song, but must interpret in a more sublime sense what you may possibly have thought, at first, was uttered in mere light-heartedness."

Cervantes' 'Don Quixote'

Following fast on the heels of Rabelais was Spain's most famous humorist, Miguel Cervantes, who lived under two of the most cruel Inquisition-run Hapsburg tyrants of that nation, Kings Philip II and III. Cervantes wrote his immortal *Don Quixote* in the early 1600s, as a hilarious means of

holding up a mirror to the decadent society of which he was a part.

Cervantes too was an Erasmian, who used humor to present one paradox after another to his readers. He is widely thought to have modelled his Quixote on Philip II, a monarch who started off emitting good intentions, but ended up setting Spain on the path to decay, by clinging to the anti-Renaissance, Aristotelean Counter-Reformation.

A touch of the irony, and paradox, which Cervantes is invoking comes through in the statement by Don Quixote, which appears in Part II, Chapter 17:

“No doubt, senor Don Diego de Miranda, you set me down in your mind as a fool and a madman, and it would be no wonder if you did, for my deeds do not argue anything else. But for all that, I would have you take notice that I am neither so mad nor so foolish as I must have seemed to you. A gallant knight shows to advantage bringing his lance to bear adroitly upon a fierce bull under the eyes of his sovereign, in the midst of a spacious plaza; a knight shows to advantage arrayed in glittering armour, pacing the lists before the ladies in some joyous tournament, and all those knights show to advantage that entertain, divert, and, if we may say so, honor the courts of their princes by warlike exercises, or what resemble them; but to greater advantage than all these does a knight-errant show when he traverses deserts, solitudes, crossroads, forests, and mountains, in quest of perilous adventures, bent on bringing them to a happy and successful issue, all to win a glorious and lasting renown.”

Cervantes thus poses the question: Who is the true madman? The Don who tilts at windmills? Or the Spanish grandee who gains honor by fighting a bull in front of his king? A similar question could be asked today, as, in fact, Colbert did: Who is the bigger fool? The President who chooses his opinions by the “gut,” regardless of truth? Or the press (and implicitly, population) which permits him to do that, or does the same?

Whither the Bush Administration?

Colbert’s roast brought some devastating truth to light, regardless of the “official” denials that have prevailed. And, in its aftermath, the process of disintegration of the Bush Administration which that roast reflected, has continued apace.

The President’s popularity has sunk even lower, and his Administration’s grip on the Congress, specifically, the ruling Republican leadership, continues to be precarious, and slipping. Only the pusillanimity of the Democratic Party leadership prevents the Congress from acting to reassert its constitutional powers, and to derail the plunge into a Dark Age which will be equivalent to, or worse than, that which Boccaccio and his contemporaries faced.

But ultimately, as LaRouche’s comments imply, the obstacle to the Democrats, and sane Republicans, taking the



Panurge seeks the advice of Pantagruel and his friends as to whether he should marry.

“Better to laugh, than to end up roasted like grilled herrings,” declared Pantagruel, one of Rabelais’ larger-than-life heroes, whom we see depicted here with his father Gargantua. Rabelais took this same approach in roasting his opponents with humor.

right action, is that they are controlled by the same cultural disease which has produced George W. Bush, and his Administration. Beneath the varying political positions, lies an axiomatic commitment to choosing comfort, and “feelings,” and all other kinds of sophistry, over the necessity of tackling the problems of mankind by application of thought, principle, and truth. The way in which certain leading liberal columnists and legislators, including Democratic Minority Whip Steny Hoyer (Md.), rushed to attack Colbert, exemplifies the seriousness of this problem.

Fortunately, there is a solution at hand, as the emergence of the LaRouche Youth Movement’s role in the Democratic Party, and the ever-increasing credibility of LaRouche’s approach to the crisis, demonstrate. We can not only afford to laugh at Colbert’s brave, and incisive, roast of the President; we can’t afford not to.