Mutant Foxes

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Gutenberg-Punk — the forgotten literary genre

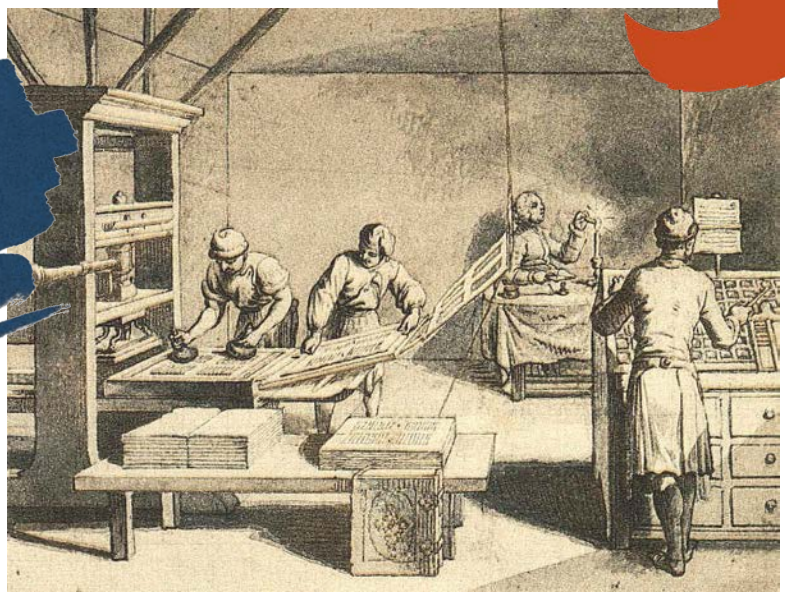


Illustration by
Daniel Niklaus Chodowiecki (1726 - 1801)

For the religious and political powers-that-were in the 15th century, the introduction of the printing press by Johannes Gutenberg was one of history's greatest catastrophes, comparable to poetry slams, back-of-the-book indexes, the death of Robin Williams, the Internet, and writing itself. Even philosophers raised cries of alarm, among them the Swiss naturalist Conrad Gessner (1516-1565) who fretted over the "confusing and harmful abundance of books" that Gutenberg's gadget had turned loose.

By spreading literacy and information indiscriminately among the formerly ignorant, Gutenberg's machine spurred the Reformation, unleashed the ideas of Copernicus, encouraged vernacular literature, and in myriad other ways turned Western civilization upside-down and inside-out.

But ... "Gutenberg-punk?" you ask.

It's not a well known genre category—we Googled it and got precisely nothing. Perhaps that's because, to the best of our knowledge, only one work in all of literature fits it—*Gargantua and Pantagruel,* by the humanist priest/physician François Rabelais (1494-1553).

Now François Rabelais was no technophobe, and he had no fear of the printing press. His entire encyclopedic novel—carnal, spiritual, cruel, compassionate, heroic, cowardly, vulgar, and sublime as it is—is really a celebration of the unfettered intellectual liberty and evolutionary potential let loose by Gutenberg. As one of his title characters puts it,

> The elegant and accurate art of printing, which is now in use, was invented in my time, by divine inspiration; as, by contrast, artillery was inspired by diabolical suggestion.... I find robbers, hangmen, freebooters, and grooms nowadays more learned than the doctors and preachers were in my time.



On this page: illustrations for *Garganua and Pantagruel* by Gustave Doré

Indeed, far from fearing technology, Rabelais seems to have had no fear of *anything.* For as the Russian critic Mikhail Baktin (1895-1975) put it in his own wondrous book *Rabelais and His World,*

> this is a work in which fear is destroyed at its very origin and everything is turned into gaiety. It the most fearless book in world literature.

Not surprisingly, Rabelais found that timid humans wouldn't do for his cast of characters. His protagonists had to be giants, preposterously huge in their appetites and curiosities, their very bodies containing vast and unexplored worlds and civilizations. Concerning a young giant's education, Rabelais tells us,

> As you may well suppose, Pantagruel studied very hard. For he had a double-sized intelligence and memory equal in capacity to the measure of twelve skins and twelve casks of oil.

And then there's the mysterious wonder-substance called Pantagruelion (a fanciful word for good old-fashioned hemp—make of that what you will!), so emblematic of the printing press in its capacity to unleash transhuman possibilities:

> In a fright the gods of Olympus cried: "By the power and uses of this herb of his, Pantagruel has given us something new to think about.... Perhaps his children will discover a plant of equal power, by whose aid mortals will be able to visit the sources of the hail, the flood-gates of the rain, and the smithy of the thunder; will be able to invade the regions of the moon, enter the territory of the celestial signs, and there take lodging, some at the Golden Eagle, others at the Ram, others at the Crown, others at the Harp, others at the Silver Lion; and sit down with us at table there, and marry our goddesses: which is their one means of rising to be gods."



Arrogant and overbearing? Certainly. Hubristic and profane? Without a doubt. Gross and scatological? Unless you've read it, you have no idea. But above all else, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* paints a picture of world overcome by a tsunami of pure Story, and it's a genre unto itself—a Gutenberg-punk masterpiece. It evokes a crazed giddiness that many of us feel in the infoworld, that unchartable terrain that we once described as

> … an infinite ocean of uncut metaphor, a neuroelectric realm containing the absolute essence of literally everything.

In 1612, a London playwright named William Shakespeare came upon the first English edition of *Don Quixote*, Part I.

It's a pretty good guess that he was a fast reader, so he quickly spotted among its pages a subplot about a young man maddened by love and betrayal. Notorious for snatching up his stories catch-as-catch-can, Shakespeare drew on this story for his now-lost pastoral romance *Cardenio*, written in collaboration with John Fletcher.

Or so many scholars believe.

Don Quixote: A 17th-Century Viral Sensation

The invention of the printing press helped give rise to the modern novel. After its first printing in 1605, Part I of *Don Quixote* became the first international bestseller. Miguel de Cervantes' masterpiece was translated almost immediately into French, Italian, and English.



Illustration for *Don Quixote* by Gustave Doré

With *Don Quixote* then taking Western Europe by storm, Shakespeare couldn't have guessed that his Spanish contemporary wasn't exactly thriving in his newfound literary celebrity. Cervantes had sold the publication rights to Don Quixote for a flat fee, which scarcely relieved his lifelong poverty, and *Don Quixote* was soon pirated all over the place. Shakespeare and Cervantes both died in 1616—Shakespeare in bourgeois prosperity, and Cervantes, despite his international fame, in desperate poverty.

But what became of *Cardenio*, the play that Shakespeare and Fletcher based on an episode from *Don Quixote?* Tellingly, it probably disappeared because it never found its way into print! Shakespeare, ever the brass-tacks businessman, regarded his plays as commodities for the theater, not immortal works of literature to be sanctified by publication. (He was wrong, of course!)

In the centuries since their introduction to the world, Don Quixote and Sancho have taken on lives of their own—lives that Cervantes couldn't have anticipated. What wou;d happen if Cervantes and Quixote could meet and talk out their roles in each other's lives? That's what happens in Wim's "play for voices," "Don Quixote in Hollywood."

In "Don Quixote in Hollywood," Wim's "play for voices," Don Quixote and Sancho Panza are magically transported to today's America, where they are groomed to become media sensations. They are slated to appear in a movie about their lives, but artistic differences predictably arise. When Quixote insists that all his supposedly imaginary adventures must be shown to be absolutely real, the director retorts that no one will pay for tickets to see "a sane Don Quixote." "You talk complete nonsense," Quixote replies. "How can I admit to my madness and still be mad? That would make me sane."

The play culminates in the following exchange between Don Quixote and Miguel de Cervantes.

Cervantes: Greetings to you, Knight of the Mournful Figure.

Quixote: Who are you, sir?

Cervantes: I am the one you call the "Wicked Wizard."

Quixote: Miguel de Cervantes?

Cervantes: The very same.

Quixote: You look more like a soldier than a wizard.

Cervantes: A soldier I am—and a bit of a wizard also.

Quixote: Surely you are, for you have created this mysterious realm full of dragons and countless other wonders.

Cervantes: No, I did not, Quixote. But I did create *you*.

Quixote: How can that be?

Cervantes: I shall explain. As young soldier, I fought battles far and wide. I was no knight-errant like you, but I showed great bravery. In one battle, I received three gunshot wounds—two to the chest, and one which left this hand of mine completely useless. Later, I was taken into captivity and sold into slavery. I remained a slave for five long years, until I at last made my way back to Spain. There I grew old and poor and was often in prison. Desperate to earn money, I turned to writing plays and poems, few of which were successful. Once night in prison, I struck upon an idea for a novel about a mad knight and his simple squire—you and Sancho. I meant you as little more than puppets, figures of fun worthy solely of ridicule. But you became much more to your readers. People fell in love with you and Sancho, even came to admire your crazy dreams. During the centuries after I died, you grew more and more alive in millions of imaginations. So alive, in fact, that you recently took the form of flesh and blood. Through the magic of belief, you became real men in the real world.

Quixote: Your words are so mad that I believe them.

Cervantes: Then you are wiser than I meant you to be. But this is wrong, Quixote. It is not right for a character to defy his author, to take on a life of his own. You do not belong in the world of men and women. You can bring them no happiness, only sad, crazy dreams. You'll break their hearts in the end. Come back to my imagination and die along with me, your creator.

Quixote: It is too late for that, Unhappy Wizard. I am no longer merely ink trails on a page, but a man. And I shall live the life of a man. Do not dare try to stop me. When you gave me a will of my own, you granted me freedom—whether you meant to or not. I am not yours to command.

Cervantes: You are right, noble knight. And it appears that I shall be forgotten by humankind, but that you will live forever in the hearts of all. Farewell, and may all your adventures lead to victory—although I wish for what's impossible.

A version of "Don Quixote in Hollywood" was published in *READ* magazine in 2006; it was a 2007 finalist for a Distinguished Achievement Award from the Association of Educational Publishers.
You can download the play here.

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