It is to be noted that, as Avicenna [Abu Ali al-Husain ibn Sinam] says, God omnipotent created the intestines for receiving the solid superfluity that is the fecal matter from the first digestion. Said matter is held for a time in the intestines so that we need not be perpetually on the stool. He also created the bladder for receiving and holding the watery superfluity from the second digestion; said superfluity is held and preserved for a time in the bladder so that we need not urinate every hour, for this would keep man from the worldly affairs necessary to life.¹

So fourteenth-century surgeon Guy de Chauliac—Montpellier-educated, like François Rabelais, and erstwhile Lyons practitioner, also like Rabelais—“glosses,” in teleologically orthodox fashion, the functions of the intestines and the bladder. His seminal Inventarium, first printed in Italy in the 1490s, was readily available in complete and/or abridged French translation throughout the sixteenth century as the Guidon, and was one of the primary sources for Rabelais’s medical knowledge.² Moving from anatomical description to therapeutic prescription in the later chapters and drawing on the then-standard “complexion theory,” that is, the etiology of disease as an upset in the natural balance of humors, Chauliac continues: “It is to be noted that evacuation is an operation . . . which rids the body of the entire quantity of the bad humor and separates it from the nature of the blood” (as opposed to phlebotomy). Evacuation, as Hippocrates says . . . is double. The one is natural and is accomplished by the ruling virtue of the body functioning of its own accord . . ., and of this we do not intend to speak here. The other is artificial and is

¹. Guy de Chauliac, Le guidon en françoy [Paris, 1537], 66r.
accomplished by virtue of the body accepting the help of medicine which is administered by the physician, and of this we do intend to speak here. [66r]3

I have discussed elsewhere what I consider to be the symbolic and emblematic role in Rabelais of the intestines, the “solid superfluity” held (with varying degrees of success) therein, and their “artificial” evacuation effected by Pantagruel as a latter-day roi thaumaturge and Christus medicus.4 Here I would like to sketch out a complementary reading of the second, that is “liquid,” superfluity and, following Chauliac’s lead, its artificial rather than its natural evacuation, with attention to the uses early modern European society, unlike our own profligate age, found for this “superfluity.” Not only did the divinely-conceived bladder’s retentive powers allow our early modern ancestors to keep at the “worldly affairs necessary to life” with fewer interruptions, its contents arguably played a productive role in the conduct of those affairs and in the healthy maintenance of that life. How might our early modern ancestors’ more intimate relationship with and particular understanding of their urine affect their reception of works such as Rabelais’s, which feature scenes of urination or micturition, both naturally executed and artificially induced? In other words, did piss mean more or differently to them than it does to us?

POUR VEoir DE LEUR URINE

The simple ubiquity of popular phrases and idiomatic expressions in sixteenth-century French involving piss or urine should be sufficient to spark interest and alert us to a potentially significant sociohistorical and cultural difference. “Pour veoir de leur urine [to see their urine],” for example—translated helpfully if somewhat colorlessly by early seventeenth-century lexicographer Randle Cotgrave as: “to see what stuffe they be made of”—is modeled directly on the principal and all but universal diagnostic act of the medieval practitioner, uroscopy,


that is, the examination of a patient’s urine for the purposes of determining the balance of his/her humors and thus the nature of his/her illness. Whether a university-trained physician such as Laurent Joubert [like Chauliac, a Montpellier man] whose De urinis was first published in 1571, or a humble apprenticed surgeon such as Ambroise Paré, whose collected works first appeared [in French] in 1574, basic knowledge and practice of uroscopy was considered a professional sine qua non. And if I single out both Joubert and Paré from among countless others, it is due as much to the likelihood that they would have been appreciative readers of Rabelais as to their divergent careers that yet led each to end up as a royally-appointed attendant to the health of the last Valois and thus to “real life” experience of royal urine and micturition, much as Rabelais depicted in fiction.

Simply put, uroscopy, as distinct from the modern practice of urinalysis [which involves study for diagnostic purposes of the actual chemical breakdown of urine], entailed the optical, olfactory, and gustatory inspection of a sample, presented directly or [quite often] indirectly to the practitioner and decanted into a specially-devised, glass flask (Latin matula, French urinal, English jordan, after the river). The jordan was traditionally bladder-shaped to imitate closely the urine’s original receptacle to facilitate comparison with established charts and diagrams of color and strata variations used to diagnose humoral imbalance, that is, illness or disorder. As Rabelais quotes fifteenth-century farceur, Maître Pierre Pathelin: “Et mon urine / Vous dict elle point que je meure? [And doesn’t my urine tell you that I am dying?]” (519). Not surprisingly, as exemplified by Pathelin’s comic abuse of the practice to avoid paying what he owes a cloth merchant, uroscopy apparently encouraged all sorts of charlatanism, on the part of both pa-


As one of the toadyng ministers of the megalomaniacal Picrochle attempts to goad him into an imprudent war against Gargantuá’s father, Grandgousier: “Je voudrois bien que les plaisans chevaliers jadis Rhodiens vous resistassent, pour veoir de leur urine [I would much like to see those merry knights, formerly of Rhodes, just try to resist you so that we may see their urine].” See François Rabelais, Œuvres complètes, ed. Mireille Huchon [Paris: Gallimard, 1994], 93. Similarly, Quaresmeprenant reportedly “passoit temps à veoir l’urine des Physeters” [spent time examining whales’ urine] in the Quart livre [636]. All quotations from Rabelais are taken from the Huchon edition; all translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
tient and physician. In the English tradition uroscopists apparently became known [at least derisively] as “pisse-prophets.”

Such was the centrality of uroscopy to the practice of medicine that its figural representation became one of the chief identifying emblems and advertisements, enshrined in the popular imagination as the standard attribute of the patron saint of physicians, Saint Cosmas, who, along with his brother Damian, patron saint of apothecaries, were the interceding martyrs most often invoked against the plague, impetigo, ringworm, swollen glands and stomachs, and, more interesting for our current purposes, kidney and bladder stones and nocturnal incontinence. Martyred under third-century emperor Diocletian, they are [or were] best remembered by medieval and early modern Christians as Asclepius-style healers, immortalized iconographically as Damian the Apothecary, druggist’s jar in hand, and Cosmas the Uroscopist, diagnostic matula held high.

Uroscopy inspired one of the standard epithets for physicians as well: “Les médecins, qui visitent urines, / Guérissons gens en temps et en saison [Physicians, who examine urine, / curing people in timely fashion],” as contemporary dramatic poet Pierre Gringore’s allegorized and moralizing Coqueluche characterizes the hapless and helpless physicians during the 1510 epidemic of whooping cough in Paris and throughout France. In the Tiers livre Panurge mocks the physician Rondibilis with the standard medical student insult: Stercus et urina Medici sunt prandia prima [Shit and urine are a physician’s breakfast] (460). Likewise the matula serves as attribute of “la Diette,” the “Regime” or “Dailie Fare,” attendant upon Lady Pox in the anonymous Lyonnais but decidedly Rabelaisian Triomphe de treshaulte et puis-sante Dame Verolle, Royne du Puy d’Amours [Triumph of the Exalted


and Powerful Lady Pox, Queen of the Love Guild] of 1539. She is identified early on as the “grandmother” of Gout, with whom she is linked, together with Souvenir Amoureux [Love’s Token], in a sort of thematic triptych of the painful “morning after” of sexual excess. Love’s Token himself bears the unguent jar and spatula most commonly associated with mercury treatment for syphilis, concerning which Rabelais also waxes eloquent in the prologue to Pantagruel [214].

One of the symptoms associated with venereal disease, whether syphilis (perhaps the mal du siècle for Rabelais and his contemporaries) or gonorrhea, was obstruction of the urethra. This was treated most aggressively and successfully, if painfully, by early modern health care practitioners, falling primarily to surgeons as it involved external medicine, a physical rather than a pharmacological corrective, though the latter served invariably as accompaniment. Another Montpellier-educated, Lyons-based practitioner, physician and botanist Jacques Dalechamps, for example, published a Chirurgie française in 1570, which includes surgical instruments commonly used in such treatments. Ambroise Paré and other publishing surgeons routinely incorporated similarly precise plates with accounts of their application. Paré’s vernacular Œuvres, first published in 1574, cite two particularly vivid “case studies.” First, a life-threatening suppression of urine provoked by respectful modesty:

Which we have seen happen to many, and not long ago to a young servant who was returning from the fields on horseback, bearing behind him his mistress, an honest maiden and well accompanied, and while riding he was seized with the need to piss. He dared not dismount, however, nor even less urinate while on horseback. Upon arriving in town, attempting at last to piss, he could not, and suffering great pain and cramps [the word Paré uses is espreintes, which Cotgrave translates as “a great desire to goe to the stoole”], and sweating all over, he almost fainted. At this point I was sent for and told it was a stone that kept him from pissing. When I arrived, I inserted a catheter into the bladder and by this method he pissed about a pint of water. I found no stone, nor has he felt one since.11

Second, an ultimately deadly case of “pisse chaulde,” referred to in contemporary English medical manuals as the “burnt piss”:

This man, having committed a few excesses, did not fail to be struck down instantly with a suppression of urine, in consequence of which he was unable to urinate without the help of a catheter which he always carried with him. One day he was unable to insert it all the way into the bladder and so sent for me to make him piss, which I was unable to do, whatever possible remedy I tried. This was the cause of his death. [594]

More famously, Michel de Montaigne’s experience of his father’s agonized, ultimately fatal struggle with renal calculi fed his own fears of “inheriting” such a death and influenced, to a considerable degree, both his essays and his travel journal, the latter a record of a European spa tour undertaken, at least in part, to ease the passage of stones.

Less invasive means were, of course, employed to remedy suppression or retention of urine, and medieval and early modern pharmacology did not lack for diuretics, the most oft-mentioned of which included among home remedies taken internally, according to one contemporary German apothecary’s manual: horseradish, acorns, parsley-root, daisies, dried and ground crab or crayfish eyes; and, applied topically to the “privy member,” a hot fennel poultice, or, worse, a slivered onion inserted into the urethra, and among more expensive prescribed medications, the ground heads of cantharides, that is “green worms, sheninge with a glosse lyke golde, and a scale lyke a bittel,” more popularly known recently as “Spanish Fly,” for its purported aphrodisiac qualities. 12

LES BONNES GENS, POUR CELA, NE PISSERONT PAS PLUS ROIDE 13

Urine as abundant source of natural ammonia has long been recognized and exploited, most notably in printing, the very cutting-edge technology Rabelais cites in the prologue to Pantagruel [216]. Similar to most early modern writers, Rabelais, or so we may speculate, would have had a more intimate acquaintance with the actual mechanics of printing than we could expect of later authors. Though perhaps not as

12. Hieronymus von Braunschwig, A most excellent and perfecte homish apothecarye or homely physick booke for all the grefes and diseases of the bodye, trans. Thomas Hollybush [London, 1561], 37v.
13. Literally, “People, for all that, will not pise any more vigorously,” that is, will not be any better off. See Coltgrave, entry for “pisser.”
familiar with the smell and texture of printer's ink as Montaigne, Rabelais may well have been aware of the role urine played in the publishing trade. Colin H. Bloy traces the often determining role the material life of the early modern press and its crew played in both the form and content of books:

Having made the ink, and applied it to the type, the last problem was the removal of this ink when washing up. The general practise was to take a strong alkaline solution and scrub the type. This saponified the oil, making it easy to remove. The action was similar to that of a detergent. . . . In the earlier days of printing the use of urine was widespread. The ammonia produced by urine after a time would have a strong caustic effect. Such practices, along with the other equally noxious substances, combined to make an early printing house a most unhealthy and stinking place in which to work.

Moreover, urine was used in the production of the sheepskin balls, stuffed with wool or hair, long used for inking the type; it softened the leather, according to J. Moxon's late-seventeenth-century *Mechanick Exercises*, purportedly the earliest manual of printing in any language:

But if his pelts are dry, he lays them to soak [by choice in Chamber-ly [i.e., urine]] but I never heard or by my experience could find why it is preferred before Fair Water: For the purpose of soaking them is only to supple them.

And they were traditionally soaked in urine overnight, or during the mid-day break, to keep them supple [Bloy, 53].

Urine was also used as a “mordant” in the cloth-dyeing industry that made the fortune of so many medieval and early modern communities, particularly in Italy and the Low Countries. The more effective alum was, of course, preferred, when available—only one dye formula, for example, out of scores in Giovanventura Rosetti’s oft-reedited 1548 *Plictho de larte che insegna tenger pani* stipulates urine—but when not, as in the early days of European New World settlements, urine served in its stead. Similarly, the veritable deluge of dog urine in Ra-

17. Giovanventura Rosetti, *The Plictho, instructions in the art of the dyers which teaches the dyeing of woolen clothes, linens, cottons, and silk by the great art as well as
belais's *Pantagruel*, when a mean-spirited Panurge plays a "trick" on the well-born Parisian lady who refused his advances, ends up most usefully serving the fabled Gobelin scarlet dye factory (297, and Hu-chon’s note, 1313).

The role that urine played in alchemy and the sciences being born from it in the early modern period has recently been explored in part and in both learned and lively fashions by John Emsley. A century or so after Rabelais, urine, the alchemist’s “golden stream," would prove the initial, if relatively poor, source for phosphorus, the cycle of which "governs all life on earth." Similarly, urine played a significant part in the production of saltpeter (potassium nitrate), a key ingredient in pyrotechnics of all sorts, especially gunpowder, one of the principal catalysts of social and political change beginning with Rabelais’s era.

"De leur urine," claims sheep trader Dindenaunt in the *Quart livre*, speaking of his superior breed, “les Quintessentiaux tirent le meilleur Salpeter du monde [From their urine the alchemists produce the best saltpeter in the world]” (Rabelais, 552). A century later, Nicolas Lemery’s influential *Cours de chymie* documented what was already a long and established practice of saltpeter production, whether directly from urine (primarily animal) or from humid manure, vegetation, and urine mixtures found in stables, where saltpeter forms naturally.

Urine and feces, human and animal, were also long accorded therapeutic virtues in the unofficial protocol of folk medicine. From the *Quart livre* again, where Dindenaunt left off concerning his wondrous sources, "by the common," trans. Sidney M. Edelstein and Hector C. Borghetty (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).


flock: “De leurs crottes [mais qu’il ne vous deplaise] les medicins de nos pays guerissent soixante et dixhuit especes de maladies [Using their droppings (if you’ll pardon my French) the doctors in our country cure seventy-eight types of disease]” (Rabelais, 552). The Germans, in particular, evidently made the most of it, as thoroughly recorded by physician, archivist, and historiographer Christianus Paullini in his Heylsame Dreck-Apothecke (Salutary Filth-Pharmacy), first published in 1696. The therapeutic qualities of excrement, particularly urine, have a distinguished classical pedigree—Greek physician Dioscorides’ first-century herbal, the De Materia Medica, for example, circulated widely in the late medieval and early modern period and would have been known to Rabelais (Antonioli 50–51). From a 1554 Latin translation published in Lyons: “Drinking one’s own urine is an antidote for viper bites, venoms, disease causing blisters; Scorpion stings, sea snakes and dragons.” It was especially prized, when applied topically, for its antiseptic and healing or scab-stimulating qualities, its soothing of the painful skin inflammation caused by ergotism or erysipelas (the feu St-Antoine or St. Anthony’s Fire of Rabelaisian curses), its relief of eye infections and of various postpartum womb constrictions or obstructions (strangulatus)—many of which virtues, based primarily on the presence of urea, have apparently been confirmed by modern biochemical research and medical practice. Dioscorides values above all the urine of a prepubescent boy, efficacious in the treatment of severe asthma and, once reduced with honey by boiling in a brass pot (in areo vase), most useful for cleansing wounds, cornal ulcers, and blurred vision in general (158).

Male urine, not to mention male feces, seems to have singular value. Pliny, Dioscorides’ first “vulgarizer” to the West, confirms that it “re-

22. Christianus Paullini, Neu-Vermehrte, Heylsame Dreck-Apothecke, . . . [Frankfurt, 1714].
24. Forms of urea are commonly used as humectants in cosmetics and as preservatives in hypoallergenic products. See, for example, NZDermNet, the website of the New Zealand Dermatological Society, http://www.dermnetnz.org/index.html [accessed September 7, 2005]. Also the Eucerin Medical Website, http://www.eucerinus.com/medicalsite/medical.html [accessed September 7, 2005], which lists urea among ingredients in a number of skincare products. It is also the principal source of nitrogen for fertilizer and is primarily obtained as a by-product of the petrochemical industry. For an explanation of its commercial synthesis see, for example, the European Fertilizer Manufacturers Association [EFMA] on-line publications, e.g., Production Of Urea and Urea Ammonium Nitrate, http://www.efma.org/index.asp [accessed September 7, 2005].
lieves gout, as is shown by the testimony of fullers, who for that reason, they say, never suffer from it.”25 That of physically exemplary young men, all the better for a bit of wine, was apparently especially prized. Even in the late seventeenth century, the letters of Madame de Sévigné’s declining years cite the topical application of “essence” or “esprit d’urine,” to ease muscular pain, and its ingestion as a soporific, to which she seems to have had relatively frequent recourse (cited in Root-Bernstein, 126).26 Her preferred brand, it seems, was distilled by the Capuchin order. Old urine, notes Pliny, again following Dioscorides, was the most effective ingredient in salves for skin rashes of all sorts (28.19).

Female urine had its value as well, judging from the following recipe for a catholicon included in something of a latter-day Materia Medica, the aforementioned Hieronymous von Braunschwig’s Liber de arte distillandi, first published in Strasbourg in 1500. This “precious water” was considered to be particularly successful in the cure of that most unclean and characteristic of medieval parasitic and contagious infections, leprosy. From a 1527 English translation:

Take fylynge of yron, of copper, of tynne, of lede, of latton, of golde, & of sylver, of each lyke moche: all these thynges shall be layd a daye and a nyght, in warme uryne of a chylde that is yet a mayde, than a day and a nyght in whyte wyne, than laye it a day & a nyght in the iuce of fenel, than a day and a nyght in the whyte of an egge, then lay it a day & a night in rede wyne. Than a day and a nyght in the whyte of .vi. egges, Than mixe all these subsaunces that the sayd fylyngys have layde in togdyer, and put it in to the vessell that ye will dystille in, and do that with softe fyre. And the same that cometh out of your stylatory ye shall sepe in a sylver vessell for that this water clenseth and heloth all maner of lepry, natural & onnatural and it purfyythe all uncleenes of the body hath been proved, but I shewe not all the vertues of this water for he that knewe all his vertues wolde be to prowde.27

Paullini’s late seventeenth-century Dreck-Apothecke makes even more impressive claims for the analeptic virtues of both liquid and

27. Hieronymus von Braunschwig, The Vertuose Boke of Distyllacion of the waters of all maner of herbes . . . [1527] [Amsterdam: Theatrum Orbis Terrarum / New York: Da Capo Press, 1973], xiv [emphasis added].
solid waste: "almost all, yes! even the most difficult, the most deadly illnesses and sorcerous injuries, from head to toe, both internal and external, can be successfully cured" (title page). Martin Schopf, the somewhat obsequious author of the work's preface, reminds us, with perhaps a bit of exegetical license, that man himself is formed of the filth of the earth. He asks rhetorically whether, since we are nurtured for those first critical nine months of gestation inter fæces et urinam, we should not, homeopathically speaking, be restored by the very same substances. As promised, Paullini delivers quite literally "home grown" remedies for everything from headache to hair loss, from epilepsy to impotence, from madness to melancholy. His work may be eccentric in emphasis, but the very traces of such thinking, either espoused or rejected by myriad medical writers of the medieval and early modern period, attest to a shared and deep-rooted current of belief in the therapeutic value of excrement, in its ability, figuratively speaking, to help one "pisser plus roide," or piss more vigorously.

**COMME SI DIEU Y EUST PISSÉ**

How might even this cursory survey of such seemingly arcane contemporary cultural and scientific knowledge, pieced together primarily from a hodge-podge of anecdotal sources, influence a reading of Rabelais and, more generally, of early modern French or European literature? There are two major acts of human micturition in *Pantagruel*. The first concerns a diabolically potent diuretic administered by Panurge to the giant hero after a particularly well-watered feast, on the eve of the climactic encounter between King Anarch’s forces and the valiant but woefully outnumbered band of Utopian defenders.

Soubdain print envie à Pantagruel de pisser à cause des drogues que luy avoit bai1é Panurge, et pissa parmy leur camp si bien et copieusement quil les noya tous: et y eut deluge particulier dix lieues à la ronde. [315]

Pantagruel suddenly got the urge to piss, due to the drugs that Panurge had given him, and he pissed in the middle of their camp, so well and copiously that he drowned all of them, resulting in a flood for ten leagues around.

28. I thank Josef Schmidt for bringing this volume to my attention, and Eva Sänger for help with translations.

29. "Par tous les champs es quelz ilz pissent, le bled y provient comme si Dieu y eust pissé. Il n’y fault aultre marne, ne fumier [In all the fields in which they pissed, the grain sprouts as if God had pissed there. There is need of no other marl nor manure] (Rabelais, 552).
While waiting for the purgative dose to take its calculated effect, Pantagruel sows the gaping mouths of the snoring enemy with salt, and, when an artfully assisted nature finally calls, he directs her diluvian stream—a much more apocalyptically scaled piss, or so the narrator points out to us, than even that of his father Gargantua’s mare—against the surprised, gasping, and aptly-named Dipsodes, drowning a good number of them. The expected allusions to both epic Classical and Biblical acts of “ethnic cleansing”—the Ovidian myth of flood and the Israelite Yaweh’s 40-day inundation—are linked explicitly to the evacuation of what is in the process of becoming the Rabelaisian body politic, Pantagruel himself. His urine, his artificially-induced act of micturition, relieves and cleanses not only himself but the world.

It is perhaps not surprising to find this therapeutically purgative act repeated more pointedly at the chronicle’s close [Rabelais, 333–34]. A victorious Pantagruel is struck down with a monumental case of the “pisse chaude,” referred to in contemporary English medical manuals as the “burnt piss,” an affliction Ambroise Paré profiles as follows:

the burnt piss, or burning urine, is a yellowish, sometimes greenish, sometimes bloody serosity which comes out of the penis, close in quality to an undercooked and fetid pus, with a sharpness which most often gnaws at and ulcerates the urinary tract, provoking a painful erection of the penis and genitals . . . so witness sufferers who say it is like a cord that pulls the penis downward . . . Since the tract is ulcerated, the sufferer feels grievous pain on urinating, because the urine passing by the ulcers, bites and pricks them. Now the flow of said serosity can continue two or three or more years, which leads us to believe that the burnt-piss has nothing in common with gonorrhea [which he had defined earlier as an involuntary flux of semen] . . . since it is impossible that semen could flow out of the body for such a long time without the body becoming languid, debilitated and weakened . . . and eventually dying. [592]

30. On the etymology of “Dipsodes” (“the Thirsty”), see Huchon’s note 209.1 [Rabelais, 1233]. Rabelais’s Gargantua has a similar adventure in Paris, where he “pays” the citizens their due by pissing on them from atop Notre-Dame: “Lors en soubriant destacha sa belle braguette, et tirant sa mentule en l’air les compissa si aigrement, qu’il en noya deux cens soixante mille, quatre cens dix et huyt. Sans les femmes et petiz enfans [Then, smiling, he untied his beautiful codpiece and, pulling out his tool, he pissed all over them so copiously that he drowned two hundred and sixty thousand four hundred and eighteen of them, not counting the women and little children]” [48].

Its causes are three: from “excessive repletion,” e.g., over abundance of blood, too long on horseback in the sun, or over-indulgence in hot and flatulent foods; from “excessive inanition,” e.g., exhaustion stemming from over-heated over-indulgence in sexual activity; and from “contagion,” i.e., the result of keeping company with those who are already infected, whether man or woman (593), the wages of sin, “attributable to the wrath of God, who has allowed this illness to afflict the human race in order to moderate its lascivious and disproportionate concupiscence” (579).

Rabelais provides no specific clue as to which of the three causes is responsible for Pantagruel’s affliction, but there is no reason not to allow the exemplary Christian Humanist Prince the moral high road, all the more so as “excessive repletion,” as defined by Paré, can safely be said to characterize the activities of the preceding chapters.32 Be that as it may, Paré’s prognosis runs as follows: “A case of the burnt-piss should not be neglected, because several pernicious accidents can come of it, among which some are incurable . . . leading to a complete suppression of urine . . . and sometimes death” (594). His suggested course of treatment is much the same as that of Pantagruel’s own physicians—“mais ses medicins le secoururent et tresbien avecques force de drogues lenitives et diureticques [but his doctors cured him, and well, with many soothing and diuretic drugs]” (Rabelais, 333)—provoking almost instant relief. Fortunately for Pantagruel, aggressively mechanical intervention was not required. That relief comes in the form of a second diluvian act of micturition, one which both purges the body politic and offers a teleological explanation for certain celebrated hot springs. The spa of Cauterets, for example, point of departure for the characters and the narrative of Marguerite de Navarre’s Heptamerón, figures first on Rabelais’s list. He also includes a number in Italy later visited by Montaigne. Whether they drank of or bathed in them, Early Moderns, such as the Heptameron’s fashionable and fashionably eloquent invalids, associated therapeutic virtues with thermal springs, specifically for sufferers of intestinal complaints and of renal

32. Pantagruel’s halitosis of chapter 32 evidently was a result of over-indulgence in a garlicky stew—“alors qu’il mangea tant d’aillade” (332). The victory over Anarche had also been marked by bonfires and “belles tables rondes garnies de force vivres dressées par les rues. Ce feut un renouvellement du temps de Saturne, tant y fut faictc lors grande chere [beautiful round tables bountifully laid. It was a return to the age of Saturn, so plentifully did they eat]” (Rabelais 323).
Thus are Pantagruel’s subjects, the diverse members of the body politic, themselves purged and healed, in the very life-giving urine of their sovereign.

Tested by all the trials of the chronicles, Pantagruel’s career culminates [at least temporarily] in a personal, physical trial, most pointedly and specifically in that most characteristically human and humiliating one of illness in the bowels, one that inflicted both pain and burning prior to purification, and one that promises to replicate itself therapeutically among his subjects as long as the hot piss springs flow. Let us return to early modern “uses” of urine sketched in this essay. “Pour voir de leur urine,” or “by their urine shall we know them”: the piss of the allegorized and idealized Christian Humanist prince, whose body is both private and public, that is, of the prince and of the realm, may be read “uroscopically” to determine the health of that body, a “golden stream” that both cleanses the body it evacuates and the bodies it touches, whether it be a negative purgation in the drowning of invading hordes or a positive purgation in the curing of ailing bathers and drinkers. The goodness of the prince thus extends even to his urine, urine that represents quintessentially the Dreck-Apotheke, the “filth pharmacy”: the excrement of the prince’s body heals the corruption of his subjects, literally and metaphorically “comme si Dieu y eust pissé,” that is, “as if God himself had pissed there.”

Rabelais’s “bathroom humor,” far from detracting or distracting from his chronicles, actually reinforces what many have contended is their political and evangelical agenda, proof in the lowest things of the highest purpose and design. Reintegrating Pantagruel’s piss into the cultural context from which it flowed, recovering both the prosaic and the poetic relationship—all but lost to us—that Early Moderns arguably enjoyed with their excrement, as the foregoing reference to two minor vernacular passages only begins to do, suggests strongly that it might be fruitful to reconsider like references in other contemporary works. Restoring early modern urine to its material history, to its history as material, that is, as physical and cultural product, standing in specific and at least partially salvageable relationship to its producers, interpreters and, yes, consumers, could very well enrich our understanding of early modern culture and literature. And, who knows? Taken from a robust if bibulous domestic or prepubescent virgin, and applied topically, or, perhaps merely figuratively, urine, hot or cold, may indeed
heal us of the “blurred vision” Dioscorides mentions, the one that explains our blind distaste for and quick dismissal of the frequent reference to human excrement that so obviously inspired the authors we here read and whose leavings nourish us, both materially and spiritually.