

ARTICLE

The Devourer Devoured: Curiosity and Time in Bonaventure des Périers's *Prognostication des prognostications*

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SUMMARY

Bonaventure des Périers's mock prognostication, the *Prognostication des prognostications* (1537), is an understudied text. It is often reduced to its evangelical tenor, ignoring the range of images and intertextual allusions it contains. This essay offers a close reading of this text. Besides lampooning prognosticators and their publics, the poem weaves a vivid metaphor of gluttony to depict curiosity for new and future things. The essay emphasizes the connection between curiosity and temporality in the poem. It shows that curiosity is portrayed more as a desire to master time than as a desire for knowledge. It also examines the hermeneutic implications of the unique ethos of the poem's narrator and the relationship he establishes with his audience. This reading of Des Périers's *Prognostication* offers new perspectives on the corpus of texts traditionally attributed to Des Périers. It allows for a reassessment of the much-discussed hermeticism of Des Périers's *Cymbalum Mundi* (1537) and the contrasting frivolity of his *Nouvelles récréations et joyeux devis* (1558). The essay shows how the latter two texts address the problem of uncertainty and unpredictability so as to incite readers to reflect on their own insatiable curiosity and intolerance for uncertainty.

KEYWORDS: Bonaventure des Périers, prognostication, news, *nouvelles*, curiosity, time, gluttony, *Cymbalum Mundi*, uncertainty, emblems

Few early modern texts have caused as much debate and disagreement as Bonaventure des Périers's *Cymbalum Mundi* (1537). Indeed, the history of the reception of this fourfold dialogue has been characterized by a long line of antagonisms. As Jean-Claude Carron has remarked, confronted with such a hermetic and allegorically indeterminate text, the continuing perplexity of readers is understandable. More curious, however, is the way in which one critic after another has reacted to the experience of the text's "indétermination allégorique," how they have refused to recognize its ambiguity and persisted instead in the Sisyphean task of elucidating its ultimate and univocal meaning (Carron 299). Carron suggests that the endless string of interpretations the text has given rise to may in fact tell us less about the text itself than it does about the interpretive anxieties of its learned audience (312). I would add: The insistency with which critics have sought to decipher a text that may well be indecipherable by design betrays a restless and insatiable curiosity in the face of hermeneutic uncertainty, and even a certain intolerance for ambiguity. As Carron notes, the prevalence of a vocabulary of "certainty," "clarity," "simplicity," and "transparency" in critical assessments of the *Cymbalum Mundi* is remarkable (312). Equally

remarkable, is the sheer number of articles with titles containing the terms “meaning” or “sense” (*sens*) and their persistent recourse to the trope of “keys” and “ciphers” (301).

One such effort to “unlock” the *Cymbalum Mundi*, and the one with which Carron begins his analysis, is Verdun-Léon Saulnier’s 1951 reading of it as a vehicle for “hesuchism” – a prudent evangelical taciturnity or quietism that is, nonetheless, a provocative expression of ideological intent (Saulnier 163). In order to buttress his argument, Saulnier invokes another, lesser-known, text by Des Périers, his *Prognostication des prognostications*, a parodic text first circulated in the same year as the *Cymbalum Mundi* and republished with a dedication to Marguerite de Navarre in 1544. Saulnier claimed to have found in this poem the “key” that unlocked the mysteries of the *Cymbalum*. He writes:

(C)’est la Prognostication qui donnera du *Cymbalum* l’indispensable clef. Les pronosticateurs, nous dit-elle, sont tous ces gens qui prétendent faire connaître les mystères divins. “Crocheteurs du divin cabinet,” ils voudraient, dans “leurs Progno(d’abus) stications,” profaner les secrets du haut Dieu. (170)

Ironically, while Saulnier’s elevation of the *Prognostication* to the status of “key” brought much needed attention to this little-known poem, it simultaneously reduced the text to a subservient status, thereby diminishing its intrinsic value and condemning it to little further analysis. In the wake of Saulnier’s reading, the meaning of Des Périers’s *Prognostication* has, in fact, been deemed so evident that it has rarely been studied in any depth at all. Élise Rajchenbach, to name but one example, writes: “(N)ous ne nous attarderons pas sur la *Prognostication des prognostications* [...]. La plupart des critiques s’accordent pour y lire une manifestation évangélique” (338). It certainly does not appear to have posed hermeneutic problems nor to have yielded the kind of diffidence and belligerence as has the *Cymbalum Mundi* over the years. Republished only a couple of times since 1544 (in 1841 and 1920), the *Prognostication* has remained largely inaccessible to modern readers, an issue which Trevor Peach sought to remedy, in 1990, with a critical edition of the poem – albeit a very summary one – to which I will be referring here. Yet Peach, in his preface to the poem, like Peter Hampshire Nurse in the preface to his critical edition of the *Cymbalum Mundi*, is largely content to reiterate Saulnier’s reading of the poem as a key to the latter text. If both Peach and Nurse link Des Périers’s *Prognostication* to François Rabelais’s own roughly contemporaneous mock prognostications, neither so much as mentions the broader early modern trend for such parodies. Indeed, another reason for the neglect of Des Périers’s poem lies in its subsumption into the genre of the *pronostication joyeuse*, which flourished throughout the sixteenth century. Specialists have tied one hundred or so European texts, in the period between 1470 and 1689, to this comic tradition (Manuel, Koopmans). But the genre remains largely unknown and understudied, with the notable exception of François Rabelais’s *Pantagrueline prognostication* and various *Almanachs*. Of course, there are practical reasons for such neglect: the relative inaccessibility of these texts and the absence of critical editions. Yet behind this lacuna lie two other problems: the difficulty of delimiting the formal characteristics and poetic features shared by such a loose assemblage of texts and, crucially, a tendency to dismiss them all as, at best, light parody of the foibles of prognostication and, at worst, a form of nonsense prose or poetry.

But there is a second and far more significant irony to Saulnier’s reading of Des Périers’s *Prognostication*. The key to the sacred mysteries of the *Cymbalum Mundi* Saulnier claims to have

found is a text that lampoons none other than *crocheteurs* [lock-pickers] themselves! My intention here is not to contest Saulnier's evangelical reading of Des Périers's *Prognostication*, nor is it to add my name to the long list of commentators of the *Cymbalum Mundi* with which Carron gently, yet incisively, finds fault. Rather, I would like to show how a closer reading of the *Prognostication* may open new avenues of inquiry into the corpus of texts traditionally attributed to Des Périers, and into the suggestive web of intertextual relations that binds it together. Such a reading allows the much-discussed hermeticism of Des Périers's *Cymbalum Mundi*, and its indecipherability, to persist as the message itself. As Eva Kushner writes to slightly different effect, in this text, "the medium is the message" (181). From the perspective of the *Prognostication*'s critique of *crocheteurs*, the *Cymbalum Mundi* emerges, I argue, as one great provocation: a text that, by virtue of its hermeticism, performs the very problem of uncertainty and ignorance it raises and provokes in the reader precisely the kind of insatiable and indiscreet curiosity that it, and the *Prognostication*, deride. The reader experiences, at their own expense, the vanity of curiosity and the impossibility of knowing with certainty that which, by design, is not to be known. Like Trigabus at the end of the second dialogue of the *Cymbalum Mundi*, they can only conclude: "Or je reviens a moy-mesmes, et cognois que l'homme est bien fol, lequel s'attend avoir quelque cas de cela qui n'est point, et plus malheureux celuy, qui espere chose impossible" (22).

As the ironies around the treatment of "keys" in the *Cymbalum Mundi* and the *Prognostication* underscore, attempts to "unlock" the mysteries of Des Périers's texts are almost always bound to end in contradiction. How, for example, can one explain that, in the *Prognostication*, Des Périers lampoons peddlers of novelties ("marchants," v. 172, of "nouveautez nouvelles," v. 45, and "vendeurs de fariboles," v. 209) and their insatiable publics ("O glouton de nouvelles," v. 99) only to present himself, in the preamble to his *Nouvelles récréations et joyeux devis*, published posthumously in 1558, as a newsmonger himself – a "bailleur de plaisants contes" or "nouvelles" which he compares to an array of dubious "marchandises" (Des Périers, *Nouvelles récréations* 15–17)? Such intertextual ironies interpellate the reader and force them, again, to reflect on their own relationship to the matter at hand. In the case of Des Périers's *Nouvelles récréations*, the reader is confronted with their own curiosity and the avidity with which they read – or "consume" – the novelties of this world. If Des Périers performs the experience of the uncertain, the unknown, and the unpredictable in all of his works, reading his *Nouvelles récréations* alongside his *Prognostication*, in particular, sheds light on a distinctive aspect of curiosity, namely its relationship to time.

I. Des Périers and the Tradition of Prognostications

Des Périers's *Prognostication*, by general consensus, belongs to the loosely defined corpus of *pronostications joyeuses*. It does so, however, primarily by virtue of its title, since the only identifiable common denominator of texts grouped under this label is the parodic use of this very term: prognostication. Despite this, Jelle Koopmans has argued that this group of texts does constitute a genre, or rather a *mouvance* with identifiable conventions (36). As Franck Manuel has subsequently shown, these conventions were flexible enough to accommodate a range of approaches – from innocent parody to biting satire, from frivolous entertainment to serious morality (135–37). Whether they are intended to attack the very principles of judiciary astrology or simply to produce a comedy for entertainment, there is one thing that all mock prognostications have in common: their use of parody. From this perspective, Des Périers's poem is no exception. He imitates the genre of the serious prognostication in order to produce a meta-prognostication: a

prognostication on the fate of prognostication itself – a prognostication, in short, to end all prognostications.

Upon closer investigation, however, Des Périers's poem stands apart from the mock prognostications of his contemporaries. To begin with, the parodic vein is less pronounced. Of the 290 verses of the poem, only vv. 175–210 parody the future tense of serious prognostications. Moreover, this parodic section is of a remarkably different nature to the parodies of his predecessors. Des Périers appropriates the parodic convention of the truism, or tautological prophecy, in order to communicate what he perceives as the most important "truism" of all: prognosticators have been, are, and always will be, either foolers or fooled ("ou mocquez, ou mocqueurs," v.178). By extension, their prognostications have been, are, and always will be lies, fables, and nonsense ("mensonges," "fables," and "fariboles" vv. 206–09). This is a far cry from the trite and nonsensical parodies we find in other playful prognostications of the time, including Rabelais's own. Indeed, Des Périers does not reprise any of the traditional *topoi* of the genre – predictions on the movement of the planets, the changes in the seasons, the cycles of the moon, but also on sickness, poverty, harvests, amorous relations, and political events. Parody, in Des Périers's poem, is not the vehicle for a satire of proverbial societal ills and abuses but for a satire of curiosity. Instead of producing a fatuous ersatz of prognostication, he proceeds with one single mordant critique of curiosity, the vice that, according to him, sustains the market for prognostications itself. Thus, Des Périers's poem goes much further in its satirical intent. Des Périers, *pace* Manuel, is one of the rare exponents of this genre who develops a veritable satirical ethos (Manuel 147). The poem denounces the folly of prognosticators or "sotz Astrologues" and the folly of those who put their trust in them (v. 271). Crucially, Des Périers's satire is directly addressed to his reader: "O curieux, jamais n'es à requoy" (v. 31).

Des Périers is also one of the rare exponents of this genre who discusses in depth the vanity of curiosity and, in particular, of the curiosity for telling and hearing new and future things (Pantin 134). Most poets remained content to highlight the ignorance and ineptness of prognosticators. While they kept parodying the conventions of the genre, they refrained from challenging the art's principles, or even questioning its necessity (Pantin 131). Finally, the degree of erudition and the evangelical inflection of Des Périer's *Prognostication* is also unusual, with the notable exception of Rabelais's foray into the genre. This is expressive perhaps of a particular moment in the sixteenth-century evolution of these parodies, when they acquired a more polemical dimension. This is not to say that the idea of the futility of a restless projection into the future, or a consciousness of the foibles of curiosity, was not widespread. Nor is it to say that other poets were ignorant of the biblical and classical references invoked by Des Périers and Rabelais on the topic of curiosity. Rather, it is to highlight the self-conscious departure of these two authors, and especially Des Périers, from the parodic genre they deliberately adopted.

It is worth noting the elaborate thematic and intertextual relations that bind Des Périers's *Prognostication des prognostications* to Rabelais's *Pantagrueline prognostication* and *Almanachs*. The two authors command a common repertoire of biblical citations and, in many passages, their prognostications echo each other almost word for word. Moreover, Des Périers's poem reprises three themes already present in Rabelais's earlier parodies: it chastises excessive curiosity, specifically defined as a desire or "appetite" for novelty; it lampoons prognosticators for their impudence and deceit; it frames the satire as a reminder that only God is all-knowing and all-seeing (Koopmans 55–56).

Yet in Des Périers's poem, absent is the jovial and affectionate tone with which Rabelais addresses his readers: "Or mouchez vos nez, petits enfans: et vous autres vieulx resveurs, affustez voz bezicles, et pesez ces motz au pois du Sanctuaire" (924). Absent, also, is the simple comedy afforded by pure parody, paremiology, and parataxis verging on nonsense, that characterize other mock prognostications, including the *Pantagrueline prognostication* (Manuel 147). Moreover, Rabelais's evangelical caution in the face of curiosity does not come close to Des Périers's subtle yet vivid portrait of this vice. The latter's scathing portrayal of curiosity as gluttony is altogether new with respect to Rabelais's milder formulations. According to Rabelais, the credulity and curiosity of the "pauvre monde curieux de sçavoir choses nouvelles" (923) is, following Aristotle, only natural: "tous humains naturellement desirent sçavoir. C'est à dire, que nature a en l'homme produit convoitise, appetit, et desir de sçavoir et apprendre, non les choses presentes seulement, mais singulierement les choses advenir" (938). Admittedly, the theme of curiosity does receive greater attention in Rabelais's *Tiers Livre* (1546), echoing Des Périers's subtle treatment of the theme. This evolution retrospectively highlights the pivotal role of Rabelais's *Pantagrueline prognostication* and accompanying *Almanachs* as a transition, from the more optimistic approach to human curiosity expressed in *Gargantua* and *Pantagruel*, to the more pessimistic one conveyed in the *Tiers Livre* and *Quart Livre*. This acute intertextuality suggests that the two authors worked and reworked their poetic approaches to curiosity, novelty, and prognostication in close collaboration throughout the 1530s and into the 1540s as well.

II. Curiosity as Gluttony

Des Périers's critique of curiosity and prognostication does not hide its religious tenor. In its second edition, the poem begins and ends with evangelical fervor. After a short dedication to Marguerite de Navarre, a notable evangelist of the time (vv. 1–24), the poem paints a satirical portrait of excessive curiosity (vv. 25–174) and stresses the falsity of worldly news and prognostication (vv. 175–222). The poem culminates with the communication of a purportedly true prognostication that transcends worldly affairs: the Good News and the eternal afterlife it announces (vv. 223–90).

Des Périers's poem begins with a depiction of curiosity as a vain avidity for novelty:

Monde mondain, trop mondainement monde,
 Monde aveugle, monde sot, monde immunde
 Dont vient cela, que, soit en prose, ou vers,
 Tu vas cherchant par tout les yeulx ouvers,
 Si tu verras point choses non pareilles,
 Et qu'à tous motz tu lieves les aureilles?
 O curieux, jamais n'es à requoy,
 Tu vas tousjours querant je ne scay quoy,
 Je ne scay quoy, aussi ne fais tu pas,
 Et bien souvent pers ton temps, et tes pas. (vv. 25–34)

He addresses his reader directly as the insatiable greedy glutton whose unforgiving portrait he is painting:

O affamé, belistre, de Nouvelles,
 Paovre alteré, coquin, de vanité
 Qu'en est-il mieulx à ta mondanité?
 N'en auras tu jamais (nenny ce pense)
 Assez remply ta besasse ou ta panse? (vv. 46–50)

Few poets have vituperated the vice of curiosity as vividly and literally as Des Périers. His portrayal of curiosity as gluttony, however, is not itself original. Des Périers builds on the Bible and a long line of Christian commentaries discussing curiosity as an appetite: a *voluptas*, a *cupiditate cognoscendi*, a *concupiscentia mentis*, or a *libido sciendi*. In the Old Testament, curiosity is depicted as gluttony. It is because of her curiosity that Eve, in Genesis 3:6, succumbs to the temptations of the serpent. She quite literally “devoured” (*comedit*) the fruit of the tree of knowledge. In Ecclesiastes 1:8, the insatiability of the senses is directly linked to curiosity for novelty: “non saturatur oculus visu nec auris impletur auditu.” Such passages were to inspire later commentators such as Augustine, Aquinas, and Bernard de Clairvaux. In his *Liber de gradibus humilitatis et superbiae*, the latter invokes Eve to justify the placement of curiosity as the sin of all sins. The serpent of temptation, Bernard suggests, increases one’s cares (*auget curam*), while inciting one’s gluttony (*dum incitat gulam*). It sharpens the curiosity (*acuit curiositatem*), while suggesting cupidity (*dum suggerit cupiditatem*) (*De gradibus* X, 30). Augustine repeatedly returns to Ecclesiastes in his own discussion of curiosity in the *Confessions*, X, 33–34. He further writes of a vain and curious cupidity (*vana et curiosa curiositas*) and an appetite for knowledge (*appetitu noscendi*) (*Confessions*, X, 35). In his *Summa*, Aquinas compares the mental vice of curiosity to the bodily sins of lust and gluttony (*ST* 148, 153). He defines curiosity as an intellectual, yet still sensual, counterpart to the latter.

However, if Des Périers draws on biblical commentary, and principally on Augustine, to develop an image of curiosity as an inordinate appetite, he also develops another important Augustinian theme: the conception of curiosity as a disease (*morbo cupiditatis*) (*Confessions*, X, 35, 55). Indeed, in addition to censoring the *vice* of curiosity, Des Périers’s poem also adopts medical overtones, attempting an etiology of the *disease* of curiosity. Indeed, the evangelical structure of the poem, described above, arguably doubles as a medical one: it proceeds from diagnosis – a description of the signs, symptoms, and causes of morbid curiosity (vv. 25–174), to prognosis – a prediction of the outcome of the disease, should it remain untreated (vv. 175–222), and, finally, to therapy – a treatment which acts on the root causes of the disease (vv. 223–90). Incidentally, while the affliction of curiosity is no trifling matter in this poem, the medical inflection of Des Périers’s discourse may still be parodying the medical ambitions of astrologers and prognosticators themselves. Indeed, the latter are portrayed as dubious “guarisseurs” using deceptively medical notions such as “humeurs styptiques” (vv. 215–22). While Augustine defines this disease as a morbid appetite for knowledge for knowledge’s own sake, Des Périers, however, locates the nature and causes of this disease elsewhere: in a pernicious and distorted relationship to time.

III. Curiosity as Time Consumption

In the *Prognostication*, curiosity is defined less as an insatiable appetite for knowledge than as an insatiable appetite for novelty. Curiosity hungers after time. Indeed, so vain and superficial is the curious glutton depicted by Des Périers, that they pay no attention to the content

of the information they consume. Only the fact that it is new seems to matter. The poem offers not a single example of the content of the news and prognostications so avidly consumed. In fact, it emphasizes from the outset that curiosity is a desire without a definite object: “Tu vas tousjours querant je ne scay quoi” (v. 32). This “je ne scay quoi” that the curious glutton so avidly seeks, is in fact none other than the elusive temporal quality of events: their novelty and, ultimately, their futurity.

The curious glutton is so indiscriminate, moreover, in their consumption of news, that it makes no difference to them whether the news they consume is true or false:

Et tant tu es les Nouvelles leschant,
Que tu prens tout, le bon, et le meschant:
Car bien souvent les faulses et meschantes
Sont celles la pour lesquelles plus chantes. (vv. 65–68)

Worse still, they are willing to make up news, only to promptly consume this very news themselves. They do not seek a genuine experience of novelty but only an appeasing illusion:

Tu es bien tel, et de telle nature,
Qu’incontinent en fais à l’aventure.
Puis en garnis les sacz des souffreteux. [...]
Ce non obstant que les ayes trouvées,
Tantost de toy sont bonnes approuvées,
Tu les reprens, tu les prises et notes,
A belles dentz avec eulx les grignotes,
En te saoulant de tes Nouvelles faulses,
Comme ung souillard cuysinier de ses saulces. (vv. 81–94)

In Des Périers’s poem, producers and consumers of prognostications are conflated to the point of indistinction, since they partake equally in the economy of news and predictions driven by curiosity. Indeed, the poem offers a critical portrayal of a society hooked on printed news and an early criticism of the effects of information technology on individuals (Masse and Frigerio). This addiction to novelty and news is also a recurrent theme in the *Cymbalum Mundi*. In it, variants of the expression “et puis, quelles nouvelles” – also used by Rabelais in the preface to his *Pantagrueline prognostication* – abound. In the fourth dialogue, Hylactor and Pamphagus repeatedly return to the same observation, namely that humans are avid for novelty (*Cymbalum Mundi* 34–43). Incidentally, this peculiar equation of curiosity with a morbid avidity for novelty is shared with classical political writers, including Cicero and Livy (Romano 30–31), and also Pliny, from whose *Historia Naturalis* Des Périers most probably borrowed the expression “Cymbalum Mundi.”

However, another conflation is observable in the poem: the merging of novelty into futurity. The poem slips imperceptibly from a description of the compulsion to devour news to an account of the compulsion to devour the future. Speaking of the consumption of news, the narrator exclaims: “Or en es tu tant glout, que tu t’apprestes / A les manger, avant qu’elles soient prestes” (vv. 111–12). The poet highlights the liminal nature of novelty as a fleeting form on the cusp between present and future. Novelty is but the arrival to maturity of the future. Conversely, the

future is but novelty still in the bud, “encor en fleur” (v. 116). The insatiable gluttony of the curious veers compulsively toward an untimely consumption of both novelty and futurity:

Car tu les prens avant le temps hastées,
Et sont par toi incontinent guastées, [...]
Et (comme on dict en ung commun proverbe)
Manger les veulx, comme ton ble en herbe.
Mais ta faim est de telle vehemence,
Que mesme en veulx manger graine, et semence. (vv. 55–123)

In fact, the attitude of the curious glutton to news is perpetually untimely. The news the glutton consumes are always either rotten (“guastées,” “moysies,” “pourriz et infectz”) or unripe (“avant le temps hastées,” “encor en fleur,” “en graine, et semence”). Furthermore, they can be reheated (“rechauffées”) or undercooked (“toutes crues”) but they are never ripe (“meures”) or ready (“à point”). The curious glutton pays no attention to the delicacy of timing, to *kairos*, but only to the crude reification of chronological time, *chronos*, that it seeks – through consumption – to master. In fact, the notion “mettre à point” (v. 140) surfaces in the poem not to refer to the appraisal of the decisive moment of cuisine but rather to the calculated concoction of an ersatz of novelty adaptable to any time.

What is systematically excluded from the copious meals of the curious glutton, however, is the past. The latter has no memory of, and cultivates no curiosity for, history. They feed incessantly on news (“neufves amassées”) without ever thinking “aux vieilles ja passées” (vv. 75–76). The curiosity diagnosed by Des Périers has nothing to do with studiousness. The kind of healthy appetite for learning from the past, that Rabelais’s Gargantua so ardently counsels his son to cultivate and nourish “curieusement” and “songneusement,” while leaving to one side “l’Astrologie divinatrice, et l’art de Lullius comme abuz et vanitez,” is absent from the poem (Rabelais 244–245). Des Périers censors not only the *impudence* of prognosticators but also, crucially, their *imprudence*: “Que pourroient ilz dire du temps qui vient, / Quand du passé mesme ne leur souvient” (vv. 211–12).

Des Périers’s prognosticators and their publics devour time but they do not devour the right time. In a manner that echoes the words of Agrippa on the imprudent credulity of the curious, “preteritorum oblita, presentium negligens, in futura preceps” (90), they forget the past and neglect the present and rush headlong into the future. They also neglect the timeless time that is eternity. To the compulsive consumption of the future – a food that is perpetually unfulfilling – Des Périers also contrasts the ultimate timeless nourishment, the Eucharistic manna bestowed by Christ. This manna is alluded to as the “horoscope unique” (v. 247), an image that evokes, in contrasting allusion, the Horapollonian pseudo-hieroglyph of the horoscope frequently illustrated in the sixteenth century as a man devouring an hourglass (Fig. 1 below).

ORVS



*Cōment ilz demonstroient celluy qui cō-
pte les heures & y prend garde que les
grecz appellent horoscope.*

Fig. 1. Horoscope eating an hourglass. Illustrated by Jean Cousin the Elder or Jean Goujon, 1543. *Orus Apollo de Ægypte*. Paris, Jacques Kerver. Translated by Jean Martin. The Metropolitan Museum of Art (CC0).

Des Périers's prognosticators and their publics, moreover, consume time but they do not consume it in the right way. They consume new and future time as waste. They engulf time into the insatiable abyss of their bellies and their wallets (vv. 46–50). Des Périers intimates that they, in fact, abuse time. He plays on the notion of “abuse” to highlight the imposture of prognostication, but this term should be taken both figuratively and literally.

Mais que quiers tu, abuseur abusé,
Qui abusant veulx bien en abuz estre,
Et d’abuser te dis docteur et maistre?
Chasses tu pas apres abusion,
Cuydant trouver Prognostication,
Où il y ayt des nouveautez nouvelles? (vv. 40–45)

Indeed, the wordplay “abuseur abusé” also evokes the Latin origins of the term: *abutor*, to use up, consume, spend, exhaust. The glutton of time, first, wastes their own time: “et bien souvent tu pers ton temps, et tes pas” (v. 34). They also ruin the time to come. The term “abusion” announces the later image: “De tel exces, et de telle despense, / Et du deguast, que de Nouvelles fais” (vv. 96–97). The portmanteau, “Prognod’abus)stications” (v. 170), further emphasizes the destructive aspect of curiosity, wastefully masticating on the future. Indeed, worldly news loses its novelty, and the future loses its futurity, from the moment each are consumed.

The problem of the curious is not only that they forget the past. They are also plagued by an inordinate anxiety about the future: a “soing” (v. 258) and a “soucy du lendemain” (v. 269) that leads them to neglect the present, the “temps qu’on a en main” (v. 270). The curious glutton yearns to consume the future ahead of its time, for fear of pending “indigence” (v. 78) and “besoing” (v. 257), and for “paour d’estre au basac” (v. 63). As G  ralde Nakam has underlined, in the context of Rabelais’s novels, gluttony is an effort to fill the void of temporal “angoisse” (23–24). Des P  riers’s curious and anxious glutton, in fact, seeks nothing more than to put an end to time itself—to consume it without remainder.

IV. *Tempus edax* and the Devourer Devoured

As Des P  riers depicts the insatiable curiosity that plagues both consumers of novelty and their providers, the imagery he employs gradually blends with that of all-consuming time, the devouring force which is lamented in book XV of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*: *Tempus edax rerum, tuque invidiosa vetustas omnia destruitis vitiatque dentibus aevi paulatim lenta consumitis omnia morte* (vv. 234–36). [O Time, thou great devourer, and thou, envious Age, together you destroy all things; and, slowly gnawing with your teeth, you finally consume all things in lingering death!] Art historians have discussed at length the iconography of devouring time, highlighting how these temporal motifs, drawn from Antiquity, persisted in the Christian imagery (Cohen 33).

Gluttony, greed, theft, and consumption are recurrent symbolic attributes of chronological time. This time, like curiosity, also consigns the past to oblivion, neglects the present, and hurtles headlong into the future. Incidentally, the triumph of all-devouring time is summoned explicitly by Robert Granjon, in his 1558 preface to Des P  riers’s *Nouvelles r  cr  ations*:

Le Temps glouton devorateur de l’humaine excellence, se rend souventefois coustumier (tant nous est il ennemy) de suffoquer la gloire naissante de plusieurs gentils esprits, ou ensevelir d’une ingrate oubliance les   uvres exquises d’iceux.... Or [...] ayant arrach   de l’avare main de ce faucheur importun [l’  uvre du feu Bonaventure des P  riers], je vous le pr  sente avec telle   loquence que chacun cognoit ses autres labeurs estre douez. (3)

Such metaphors are also present in Rabelais’s novels. In the *Pantagruel*, Gargantua, mourning the death of his wife Badebec, describes the destructive forces of time and death using the classical image of the untimely reaper (225–26). In the *Tiers Livre*, Fr  re Jean reminds Panurge of the destructive force of *Chronos* as well: “le temps matte toutes choses” (Rabelais 438), further addressing Panurge as a “Couillon flatry, C. Moisy” (439) in light of his advancing age. This theme was already evoked in Des P  riers’s own *Cymbalum Mundi*: “Car le temps envieillit toute chose et leur faict perdre la grace de la nouveaut  ” (41).

But Des Périers also invokes a host of subsidiary images in his *Prognostication* that serve to highlight the correspondence between curiosity and time. For example, he spins an agricultural metaphor. The depiction of the latter as a “dangereux riffleur,” whose untimely reaping of news mimics the agricultural attributes of Time and Death – except, of course, that the curious possesses neither a scythe nor a sickle but a mere riffler, a small device serving to scrape up the seeds of the future (vv. 116–23).

The mirror effect that binds curiosity to its nemesis, Time, is also produced in Des Périers reference to teeth. It is with their teeth that the poem’s curious glutton devours the news: “A belles dents [...] les grignotes” (v. 92). The image of teeth returns further on, this time to depict the action of prognosticators as “arracheurs de dentz” (v. 166) – an expression commonly used to refer to charlatans. With Ovid’s proverbial devouring time in mind, however, one may be tempted to imagine these curious prognosticators as plucking the teeth of time itself: a vivid literal rendition of the biblical principle of reciprocal justice – *a tooth for a tooth* – in the great war against the injustice of Time.

The teeth of Des Périers’s curious glutton reproduce the *grignotage* [nibbling action] of rodents to which they and their prognosticators are compared in the poem.

Il est bien vray que Prognosticateurs
 Semblent avoir esté expilateurs,
 Ou crocheteurs, par leur art gent et net,
 Du hault tresor, et divin cabinet,
 Et avoir veu tout ce que Dieu nous cache,
 Secrettement, voire sans qu’il le sache,
 Et avoir leu en ses sacrez registres,
 La fin des Roys, des Papes, et Belistres,
 Prins les fuseaux et toutes les menées
 Des soeurs qu’on dict Fatales destinées,
 Et desrobé avec leurs Lunaisons
 De l’avenir les temps, et les saisons,
 Et avoir prins tout en leur sphere entiere,
 Comme tous ratz dedans une ratiere. (vv. 145–58)

Yet the last four verses of this long quotation are grammatically ambiguous. Indeed, it is not clear what the rats symbolize in this passage. Do they represent the prognosticators themselves, as they pilfer future time and seasons in order to build their worldly nest? Or, do they represent the time and the seasons themselves, as they are caught in the astrological rat trap?

We know that from Augustine through to Alciatus, rodents are frequently invoked as a symbol of vice and especially of the vice of curiosity (Fig. 2 below). The snare the rats get caught in is their own voracious appetite for worldly pleasures (Berchtold 24–55). In Des Périers’s poem, however, the “ratiere,” is described as a “sphere” which suggests the firmament but also echoes the instruments of prognostication to which the poem later refers (“Astralabe et Compos,” v. 168).

CAPTIVVS OB GVLAM.

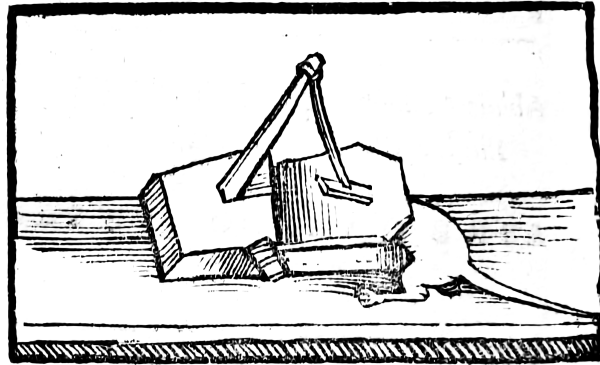


Fig. 2. Andrea Alciato. *Emblematum liber*. Heinrich Steiner Augsburg 1534, p. 70.
Passau, Staatliche Bibliothek. (NoC–NC 1.0)

Nibbling rodents could also illustrate the damaging effects of devouring time. Perhaps the most famous example of this symbolism is to be found in the tale of *Barlaam and Josaphat*, attributed to John of Damascus. This narrative was well known at the time, not least through Vincent de Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale* and Jacopo della Voragine's *Legenda Aurea*. This legend narrates the adventures of the powerful king Avenir whose son Josaphat, against his father's wishes, becomes a follower of the Christian religion through the monk Barlaam. In the fourth apologue of the narrative, Barlaam narrates a parable to Josaphat on the vanity of worldly pleasures. In this parable, two rats, one white and one black, as day and night, represent the passage of time. They gnaw away at the tree of life to which a man is precariously suspended (Fig. 3 below).



Fig. 3 Detail of fol. 175r in Vincent de Beauvais, *Mirouer historial*. BnF Ms. Fr. 51.
Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France.

This ambiguity of rodent symbolism also underscores the confrontational nature of the correspondence between curiosity and time. The devourer is perpetually devoured, in an unending cycle of mutually assured destruction (Fig. 4 below).

Des Périers examines a morbid curiosity aroused by the anxiety of time and by the uncertainty of things to come. But in drawing attention to the temporal causes of curiosity, Des Périers suggests that the remedy for the reader of news and prognostications may not lie solely in evangelical faith. It also lies in a reconsideration of their worldly relationship to time. The curious glutton establishes an impudent, impatient, and imprudent relationship to time. They should, instead, cultivate modesty, patience, and prudence.

ORVS



*Comment & par quelles figures ilz signi-
fioient laage & les ans du temps.*

Fig. 4. Ouroboros as a symbol of time. Illustrated by Jean Cousin the Elder or Jean Goujon. 1543. *Orus Apollo de Ægypte*. Paris, Jacques Kerver. Translated by Jean Martin. Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

V. Time and Curiosity in Des Périers's *Nouvelles récréations*

It is not insignificant that the printer of Des Périers's *Nouvelles récréations*, Robert Granjon, should invoke the metaphor of all-devouring time in his preface (Arnould 31). Indeed, temporality is a central theme throughout the collection – and one which is explicitly addressed in the narrator's "première nouvelle en forme de préambule" (Des Périers, *Nouvelles récréations* 13–19). This preamble offers counsel to the reader regarding how to consume the tales that follow. It invites the reader to reconsider their relationship to time and to develop, precisely, a more modest, patient, and prudent approach.

In the introduction to this essay, I highlighted two contradictions that emerge when reading Des Périers's *Cymbalum Mundi* and his *Nouvelles récréations* alongside his *Prognostication*. While Des Périers condemns curious attempts to decipher mysteries in his *Prognostication*, he tempts his readers into doing just this with his *Cymbalum Mundi*. While he condemns avidity for news in this same poem, in his *Nouvelles récréations*, he tempts his readers with a feast of "nouvelles." The proverbial rat is caught in the trap. Yet in the *Nouvelles récréations*, the case is at once more complicated and more simple: more complicated, because curiosity takes on an explicitly temporal dimension – more simple because there is a narrator to guide the reader through the challenge of curiosity, where in the dialogues of the *Cymbalum Mundi* there was not.

Before turning to the theme of time in the preamble to the *Nouvelles récréations*, it is worth noting that, as in the *Prognostication*, "nouvelles" are portrayed as comestible. They are compared to fragile yet enticing commodities such as saffron, spices, and wine. The narrator adds:

(S)i d'aventure il y en ha quelques unes d'entres vous qui soyent trop tendrettes [...] je leur conseille qu'elles se les fassent eschansonner par leurs frères, ou par leurs cousins, afin qu'elles mangent peu de ce qui est trop appétissant. [...] O quantes dames auront bien l'eau à la bouche. (13)

The preamble focuses not just on how to consume "nouvelles" but also on how to consume time. It presents the principle of enjoyment as a remedy to time-induced melancholy and anxiety. Indeed, already in the preliminary sonnet to the collection, the reader is invited to welcome a degree of folly – that is to say recreation – actively, so as not to be passively overwhelmed by a more pernicious sort of folly: "Donnons, donnons quelque lieu à folie / Que maugré nous ne nous vienne saisir" (2).

The preamble opens with the experience of waiting, expectation, and anticipation:

Je vous gardoys ces joyeux propos à quand la paix seroit faicte, affin que vous eussiez dequoy vous resjouir publiquement, et privéement, et en toutes manieres. Mais quand j'ay veu qu'il s'en falloit le manche, et qu'on ne sçavoit par ou le prendre: j'ay mieux aymé m'avancer, pour vous donner moyen de tromper le temps, meslant des resjouissances parmy vos fascherries, en attendant qu'elle se face de par Dieu. (13)

The narrator acknowledges that this experience, and the uncertainty it implies, threatens to result in listlessness and despair: "Une trop grande patience vous consume. [...] Et pour cela, vous faut-il désespérer?" (14). Yet rather than offer appeasing news (*nouvelles*) that may allow readers to anticipate the future – the kind of "nouvelles" the curious of his *Prognostication* so seek – the narrator of the *Nouvelles récréations* offers tales (*nouvelles*), and enjoins his readers to embrace patience. They should not meddle with the order of time: "Ne vaut-il pas mieux se réjouir, en attendant mieux, que se fâcher d'une chose qui n'est pas en votre puissance?" (14).

Jacqueline Cerquiglini has underlined the aspiration to master time implicit in the expression "passer le temps" (39). In the sixteenth century, one reads to pass the time, one writes to pass the time, and, indeed, the pastime becomes a literary genre. When Des Périers employs expressions like *passer le temps* and *tromper le temps* he is no doubt conscious of the expression's pedigree, but he does not use it to convey a desire to master time. Rather, he expresses an ideal of

cheerful patience and enjoyment. Cheating time, *tromper le temps*, thus emerges as a way of inuring oneself to time's pernicious effects.

The narrator continues: "Prenez le temps comme il vient: laissez passer les plus charges; ne vous chagrinez point d'une chose irremediable" (14). In the *Nouvelles récréations*, this counsel may be read as an invitation to distance oneself from worldly cares and not seek to match the rhythm of those who hurriedly charge into the future without taking the time to care for the present. "Prenez le temps comme il vient," "bien vivre et se resjouir," "en attendant mieux": these are the maxims offered by the narrator to his readers as they approach the collection.

The anecdote about the Plaisantin with which the preamble ends perfectly illustrates this ideal of a peaceful and patient relationship to time: "Je loueroyz beaucoup plus celuy de notre temps [...] le Plaisantin [...] tant il mourut plaisamment" (18). His bed, we are told, had been moved close to the hearth for him to benefit from the heat of the fire. When the priest counsels him to commend himself to God, he replies:

"Et qui y va?" dict il. "Mon ami, vous irez aujourd'huy, si Dieu plaist." "Je voudrois bien être assure," disoit il, "d'y pouvoir estre demain pour tout le jour." "Recommandez-vous à luy, et vous y serez d'huy." "Et bien," disoit-il, "mais que j'y soys, je feray mes recommandacions moy mesmes." (18)

The narrator interjects: "Que voulez vous de plus naif que cela? Quelle plus grande felicité?" (18). The Plaisantin, would like assurances about the future and about what lies ahead but he also cheerfully understands that each thing happens in its own time.

Reading tales becomes a way of practicing one's patience. As Guy Demerson notes and, I would add, contrary to the structure of the *Cymbalum Mundi*, Des Périers's *Nouvelles récréations* are not fashioned as enigmas in need of a key (72). The narrator states: "Il n'y ha point de sens allegorique, mistique, fantastique" (15). The tales do not frustrate the curiosity to know but the tempo of curiosity itself. Lionello Sozzi highlights the inconsistencies of narrative rhythm in the *Nouvelles récréations* (256–75). The narrator accelerates and decelerates his storytelling at pivotal moments, intentionally disturbing the reader's expectations and provoking the frustrations of impatience. As in the *Prognostication*, albeit with an entirely different ethos, the narrator thus incites the reader to reflect on their reactions to the narration: to pay close attention to time, to their own attentiveness, and to their expectations. There is an art to patience in Des Périers's *Nouvelles récréations*. It is not only the patience of waiting, "en attendant mieux," but also the experience of a liminal duration that is pregnant with uncertainty and unpredictability (Demerson 72).

The unexpected and the unpredictable are frequent motifs in the tales (*nouvelles*) as well. These motifs serve to highlight the vanity of those consumed by the fear of time. As Bénédicte Boudou has shown, behavior such as avarice, avidity for news and predictions, but also excessive precaution are frequently ridiculed (315). For a reader of Des Périers's *Prognostication*, such behavior will sound familiar. Indeed, the tale that perhaps best illustrates this motif is none other than the twelfth, titled "Comparaison des Alquemistes à la bonne femme qui portoit une potée de lait au marché," which derides those who are too busy thinking about future prospects (Des Périers, *Nouvelles récréations* 63–65). Like the curious gluttons of Des Périers's poem, the characters in his tales often fail to realize that their anxieties cannot be soothed by predictions. Consuming the

future and consumed by the *thought* of the future, these characters end up forgetting the present entirely. Faced with time's unpredictability, the only attitude to adopt – many of the tales in the collection suggest – is that of patience, presence, and adaptability. In this sense, the collection, in its tales *and* in its form, aims neither to nurture patience or impatience *per se*, but rather to invite the reader to rethink time as a medium for prudent creation and joyful recreation.

Des Périers's examination of curiosity and time cannot be reduced to religious questions alone. Any contradictions that may emerge in readers' interpretations of the *Cymbalum Mundi*, the *Prognostication des prognostications*, and the *Nouvelles récréations et joyeux devis*, should rather bring the reader back to themselves, to a careful study of their own curiosity and their own relationship to uncertainty. If, as Carron notes, a text like the *Cymbalum Mundi* illustrates better than any other the observation "on ne trouve que ce que l'on cherche" (313) – and, indeed, what observation could be more fitting to a discussion of prognostication? – then Des Périers's playful ethos may offer its readers the greatest opportunity yet: to finally recognize what they were looking for all along.

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