

The Sheep of Panurge

A tale of the U.S. Congress and Barack Obama, with a nod to François Rabelais

Feb. 22, 2015—Literary critics are fond of taking aim at Panurge, the dear friend of Rabelais' Pantagruel, as a crafty knave and libertine. Yet, there is much to be learned from this knave, as the following story from February 2014 reveals.

It was at that time, in Washington, D.C., when Panurge encountered a leader of sheep, one Dingdong, whom he immediately understood to be a conniving liar up to no good, constantly bragging of the value of his sheep, his wife, and his own "dingdong," otherwise described by Rabelais as "a fine eleven-inch-long branch of red coral for [his wife's] Christmas-box." Dingdong was herding his sheep through the Halls of the U.S. Congress, while he dictated the laws of the land with no interference whatsoever.

Understand: "Dingdong" was a nickname for the creature inhabiting the White House (otherwise known as Barack Obama), so-named for his long, lanky appearance, and resemblance to the male member. It had been given him by none other than the Queen-Empress, who, lacking such a dingdong herself, had greatly desired to have one at her command. The "sheep," while maintaining a physical resemblance to members of the human species, and often addressed as "members" of Congress, otherwise demonstrated all the characteristics of the ovine class: bleating, sniffing, defecating in public, and otherwise stuffing their faces.

Taking an immediate disliking to the man, Panurge proceeded to bargain with him over purchase of one of the sheep. Dingdong responded with an explosion of rhetoric on the value of his sheep:

"Now I think on't, over all the fields, where they piss, corn grows as fast as if the Lord had pissed there; they need neither be tilled nor dunged. Besides, man, your chymists extract the best salt-

petre in the world out of their urine. Nay, with their very dung (with reverence be it spoken) the doctors in our country make pills that cure seventy-eight kinds of diseases...."

I'll spare you the rest of the speech, in which Dingdong praised other characteristics of the sheep. He then demanded the exorbitant sum of 3 livres.

Panurge paid up—and at that point the story takes the decisive turn. For no sooner did Panurge purchase a fine specimen of a sheep, than "without any further tittle-tattle," he threw it out the window. When the hurtled sheep began to bleat and make a sad noise, however, all of a sudden, something very strange happened. "All the other sheep ... crying and bleating in the same tone, made all the haste they could to leap nimbly" out the window. "It was impossible to hinder them: for you know that it is the nature of sheep always to follow the first, wherever it goes; which makes Aristotle, lib. 9. de hist. animal. mark them for the most silly and foolish animals in the world."

"Dingdong, at his wits' end, and stark staring mad, as a man who saw his sheep destroy ... themselves before his face, strove to hinder and keep them back by might and main; but all in vain: they all one after the other frisked and jumped.... At last he laid hold on a huge sturdy one by the fleece, ... hoping to keep it back, and so to save that and the rest: but the ram was so strong that it proved too hard for him, and carried its master" with it, to his timely end.

Thus were the sacred halls of Congress cleared by the crafty Panurge of both the sheep and their venal master—opening the way for the thorough cleansing of the premises, and their replacement with worthy representatives of the human species, dedicated to the principles of Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

May humankind be purged of its sheeplike nature forever!