

VILLON, FRANCOIS

Francois Villon; the mystery of his work and life. Francois Villon (1431-disappears into the mist, ca. 1480)) was the strongest French lyric poet of the Middle Ages, and to our day one of the most influential French poets, regularly translated, staged, and put to music around the globe. And yet this man was a rascal, as they said in his time, meaning actually a serious criminal. How is this state of affairs possible? Is it not significant that he was born in the same year in which Joan of Arc was burned to death at the stake, as a supposed heretic.

Villon's Life. Born Francois de Montcorbier (or Des Loges or Corbueil or Corbier) he assumed the surname of his foster father, who was a Professor of Canon Law kind enough to take Villon into his house, after the early death of Villon's parents. Francois received both a Bachelor's and a Masters degree at the University of Paris (1452) and seemed destined to be a clergyman; but on the way to that career he became associated with a band of vagabonds and thieves and got into serious and lifetime trouble with the law. (In 1456 he was involved in a 'scuffle' argument in which he was apparently found guilty of murdering a priest—who was part of the brawl; not long after he was suspected of involvement in the robbery of the chapel of the College de Navarre, after which he given a sentence of banishment—later reprieved; whereupon he set out on four years of wandering, one step ahead of the law, writing his major poetry—*Le Grand Testament*—and, as we know from his poetry itself, picking up every nuance of the street and underworld language of the time.

Villon's Work. Villon's poetic output was small. His two longest works were *Le Petit Testament* (1456) and *Le Grand Testament* (1461), in which he bequeathes many imaginary objects and qualities to his friends and enemies—who range from dignitaries to ruffians. Inserted within the Testaments are many short lyrics, chiefly ballades and rondeaus. Two famous lyrics are the 'Ballad of Lost Ladies' and the 'Ballad of the Hanged.' Many of these poems are difficult to interpret today, because they turn on in-jokes, slang, or the kinds of socially unpermitted language of the streets—the attack level we find in the *Roman de la Rose*, which Christine de Pisan found so objectionable.

Villon's world view. Villon is justly praised for the depth and sincerity of his emotions and for the vigor and precision of his style. He combines feeling with a hearty sense of humor. He can weep over the transiency of beautiful things, and yet jest grimly about his approaching execution. He has infinite zest for physical pleasures—wine, food, warm shelter in winter, beautiful women. Nature, for him, is nearly always harsh or cruel, and he has great pity for poor suffering rascals. Yet he never whines with self-pity, nor does he blame his own miseries on Fate; he confesses his guilt and prays only for God's mercy and forgiveness. This last preoccupation of Villon is deeply typical of his time, clerical throughout and saturated with the doctrines of the Church, but living the secular life to the hilt, as though to guarantee oneself enough to confess.

Reading

Primary source reading

Georgi, D., editor and translator, *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 2013.

Secondary source reading

Fein, David, *Francois Villon Revisited*, 1997.

Further reading

Kinnell, Galway, translator, *The Poems of Francois Villon*, 1982.

Original language reading

Le Testament, "Ballade de bonne doctrine," ed. Richner and Henry, 1974.

Suggested paper topics

Do you know other poets than Villon whose lives and works were created from the social depths, in or out of crime? Is there a tradition of the poet as a social misfit? When did this tradition form? Where? Does it apply today? Does this tradition have a presence in Asian, as well as Western, literature?

Does the dark and often cruel humor of Villon's poetry go with the Christian world view which forms the backdrop of his work? Is there room for play in the Mediaeval Christian world picture, which offers assurance of salvation but keeps the sinner, which we all are, hanging cheerfully on the brink? Is the gargoye tradition, on Gothic churches, part of this dark hilarity of the Christian Middle Ages?

Excerpt

<http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/ballade-to-our-lady/>

*Lady of Heaven and earth, and therewithal
Crowned Empress of the nether clefts of Hell,—*

*I, thy poor Christian, on thy name do call,
Commending me to thee, with thee to dwell,
Albeit in nought I be commendable.*

*But all mine undeserving may not mar
Such mercies as thy sovereign mercies are;
Without the which (as true words testify)
No soul can reach thy Heaven so fair and far.
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.
Unto thy Son say thou that I am His,
And to me graceless make Him gracious.
Said Mary of Egypt lacked not of that bliss,
Nor yet the sorrowful clerk Theophilus,
Whose bitter sins were set aside even thus
Though to the Fiend his bounden service was.
Oh help me, lest in vain for me should pass
(Sweet Virgin that shalt have no loss thereby!)
The blessed Host and sacring of the Mass
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.*

*A pitiful poor woman, shrunk and old,
I am, and nothing learn'd in letter-lore.
Within my parish-cloister I behold
A painted Heaven where harps and lutes adore,
And eke an Hell whose damned folk see the full sore:
One bringeth fear, the other joy to me.
That joy, great Goddess, make thou mine to be,—
Thou of whom all must ask it even as I;
And that which faith desires, that let it see.
For in this faith I choose to live and die.*