

A STUDY OF THE POEMS
OF FRANÇOIS VILLON

by

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FOREWORD

Of all the poets of early France there is not one whose name is better known than that of François Villon. To the French themselves he is one of the national poets of whom every school-boy reads something and from whom he can quote snatches at least; among the English-speaking peoples there are but few students of literature in whose minds a mention of France and her literature will not at once evoke the thought of Villon; and even among the unliterary masses of the general public, in the United States at least, Villon has become widely known by name as the hero of a popular novel. It might almost be asserted in general that the name of no French poet of any period is better known.

It might seem ^{therefore,} that all that could be said about Villon had already long since been said in the course of the four centuries and a half which have elapsed since his time. A merely superficial examination ^{however,} suffices to reveal the surprising fact that but little has been published in the way of careful study and explanation of the poet's work as a whole. Literary critics and historians for the most part have been content to repeat the same things, confining their attention to but a small portion of Villon's already slender work, so that where the work itself is actually known to any extent, this knowledge is limited to a few of the poems. With the man himself the case is different, and it is this fact which has contributed in no small measure to keeping the poet's name and fame alive. The very meagreness of the details known concerning his life and the strangely romantic flavor which is associated with them, coupled with the

appealing human quality characteristic of such of his works as are well known, have made of Villon a figure of romance which the popular mind has seized upon and made its own. Thus has arisen the paradoxical situation with which the student of Villon is confronted: a poet who is known far and wide to fame as such, but the knowledge of whose works is limited to not more than half a dozen short poems and the somewhat conventional remarks of literary historians. It might be added that even such parts of Villon's works as are not written in the current slang of his day or are not rendered unintelligible by references to events and persons doubtless well known at the time but now long since forgotten are by no means easy reading for the student of modern French, and this fact has no doubt aided in keeping Villon the man in the public eye at the expense of Villon the poet.

In the last few decades, only three men have published anything in the way of a careful study of Villon: Antoine Campaux, Auguste Longnon, and Gaston Paris, and of these the two last named have concerned themselves with the life of the poet rather than with his works. In 1859 Campaux published an appreciative work on the poet's productions which, quoting as it does almost his entire work along with numerous poems formerly attributed to him but which have since been proved not to have been his, practically amounts to an edition of his works. But Campaux's work, in addition to being antiquated and full of misconceptions regarding the life of the poet and, as a necessary consequence, of his work, is more of a eulogistic than of a justly critical nature, although it contains some admirable chapters of a general character.

It would seem, therefore, that an attempt to make a study of Villon's work in its entirety, in so far as this is possible,

would be justified. Certain portions of his work have always been and still are obscure to the commentators, partly because of the allusions to unimportant current events and contemporary persons already mentioned, and partly because of the employment of the argot, or jargon, of the underworld of the Paris of that day, with which Villon was, unfortunately, all too familiar. No attempt will be made in the present work to clear up such obscurities, which will doubtless always remain as unintelligible as they were already in the ^{sixteenth} century. The present study will rather be confined to an attempt to give a comprehensive view of Villon's work with such details as will be needed to make clear both the man and his work, which are inseparably linked. For this purpose a brief account of the known facts of Villon's life will precede the study of his works. In general, then, the present work will be the study of the work of a man who was fundamentally mediaeval, typically French, and, above all, intensely human, and it is from this point of view that the works will be considered.

Villon's Life

Throughout the history of France not a gloomier or a more desolate period is to be found than the second quarter of the fifteenth century. It was a time when war, pestilence, and famine had seemingly done their worst. The Black Death had swept over the country, decimating the population; the fields lay a desert of burnt ashes where had passed the warring Britons, who, tired of the hundred years' strife, were at last retiring; and the nobles ruled the land with an iron hand in which the poor man was squeezed even to yielding up his last penny that it might aid in continuing the civil strife of petty political factions. Symbolic of the famine which covered the barren land, wolves, in winter, howled their hunger at the gates of Paris and were known to enter the very streets themselves.⁽¹⁾ It was a time when the honest man, demoralized by hunger, turned thief and stole bread to subsist and, if caught in the act, was hanged therefor. Hardly less horrible than the annals of the guillotine, even during the height of the Reign of Terror, are the scenes of the gibbet of Montfaucon, about which daily thronged a multitude of the morbidly curious to witness the ghastly spectacle of death.

This distressing age, productive of little food and of less knowledge, but prolific in the fruits of war: poverty, crime, and death, gave being to François Villon, the poet of

(1) Gaston Paris; François Villon, p. 19

all three. He is a poet who sings, now gaily, now sadly, of his own wants and sufferings and, in doing so, unwittingly chants the solemn dirge of his day, for in every feature Villon was the offspring of the age in which he lived.

Whether he was ever honest is an open question, for the facts of his life are largely gleaned from his works and thus coincide for the most part with the comparative^{ly} brief period of his literary activity, and at this time he had already become a rogue, if not worse. It is chiefly in this rôle of petty thief that he has been known to posterity, which, in memory of his misdeeds, at one time fashioned from his name a word, villonie, to express trickery such as he was said to have practiced. (2) But if Villon stole, it was not because he delighted in evil doing for its own sake, but rather merely to live, to avoid that death the thought of which was so constantly with him.

Villon was born in Paris (3) in 1431 (4) of a poor family. (5) His mother, of whom he speaks in affectionate terms, was illiterate but of a strong religious faith. (6) His father was poor, was, as Villon affirms, not of noble family, (7) and had died (8) before the young man had written his first literary work, the Petit Testament, at the age of twenty-five. (9)

(2) Saint-Beuve, Galerie des Grands Écrivains Français tirée des Causeries de Lundi et des Portraits Littéraires, François Villon, p.1

(3) Le Quatrain, Né de Paris.

(4) The Grand Testament begins: Fait en 1461, en l'an trentiesme

(5) Grand Testament, XXXV, Pauvreté tous nous suyt, ^{et} trace. (de mon eage.

(6) Ballade que Villon fait a la requeste de sa mere pour prier (Nostre Dame.

(7) Grand Testament, XXXV, De pauvre et de petite extrace.

(8) Grand Testament, XXXVIII, Mon pere est mort.

(9) Petit Testament, Fait l'an 1456.

After his father's death François was sent to live with a certain Guillaume Villon, a chaplain of the church of Saint-Benoît in Paris and the owner of a house in the cloister called l'Hôtel de la Porte-Rouge.⁽¹⁰⁾ In gratitude to his benefactor, who seems to have adopted him⁽¹¹⁾, François assumed the name Villon in preference to his own name, which was possibly des Loges or Montcorbier, names which are mentioned as aliases in a certain legal document⁽¹²⁾. Thanks to the financial support and encouragement of Guillaume Villon, who had attended the University of Paris, François was able to attend that institution and pursue his studies so successfully that at the age of twenty-one he received the degree of Master of Arts⁽¹³⁾.

How much François profited by his University course it is difficult to tell, for his work offers but little evidence in this respect. In the Grand Testament he laments having wasted the time of his youth instead of studying⁽¹⁴⁾, and, if one is to judge by his later life, but little doubt can be entertained that it was with good reason. It was little enough culture, in any case, that the University could offer — a rudimentary training only in grammar, rhetoric, mathematics, music, and Latin, and still less of law, philosophy, and theology, — and to one who was, like Villon, disposed by nature to neglect his studies and seek pleasure among fellow students to his liking in the taverns of the

(10) See Longnon: Étude, Index, for information concerning Guillaume

(11) Guillaume Villon is spoken of as his adoptive^{father} (Villon) in both the Petit Testament, XIX, and the Grand Testament, LXXVII.

(12) Longnon: Étude Biographique. See Lettre de Rémission accordée par Charles VII à François Villon in appendix.

(13) ..Ibid.

(14) Grand Testament, XXVI.

Pomme de Pin⁽¹⁵⁾ and the Mule⁽¹⁶⁾, which he repeatedly mentions, the profit of even such instruction as the institution had to offer must have been very small. Indeed, much more important than the curriculum of study were the associations which he formed there, which seem to have affected his life seriously for the worse and to have aided in making of him the Villon that we know. Those were turbulent days for the University⁽¹⁷⁾. The student body was composed in great part of pickpockets, brawlers, and even murderers, who annoyed the police beyond measure by committing their misdemeanors and crimes and then seeking sanctuary at the University, protecting themselves from the prosecution of the justly indignant officers of the law by claiming their sacred right as students to trial by a University court. So serious was the turmoil resulting from the conflicts between the students and the good people of Paris and between the University authorities and the legal officials that for nine months of the years 1453 and 1454 the institution was compelled to close its doors⁽¹⁸⁾.

That Villon was a part of this spirit of unrest and disorder, if not the ring-leader that one is inclined to imagine him — this thin, dark-skinned man, vivacious, ready-tongued, and of a compelling and magnetic personality — is emphasized by the character of the persons with whom he associated. Among the friends⁽¹⁹⁾ of

(15) Grand Testament, XCI.

(16) Petit Testament, XII; Grand Testament, LXXXVII.

(17) G. Paris, François Villon, p. 25.

(18) Gaston Paris, François Villon, p. 25.

(19) For a fuller discussion of his friends see Longnon, Étude Biographique de François Villon, Index.

his youth were Colin de Cayeux, a man whose superior dexterity in lock-picking was the cause of his later ignominious death on the gibbet of Montfaucon; René de Montigny, a rascal of noble birth, who, after escaping punishment for various offenses such as the robbery of churches, attacks upon sergeants of the watch, and even a murder, was at last condemned to death; Petit Jehan and Guy Tabarie, whose names occur in the register of the criminal court in consequence of their part in a crime subsequently committed and one which played an important part in determining Villon's later life.

But as disorderly as doubtless was the conduct of this restlessly energetic youth, who seems to have wasted his schooling and his possibilities for becoming a teacher with a salary and couche molle, the lack of which he afterwards particularly deplored,⁽²⁰⁾ his misdemeanors were either not serious enough to attract the attention of the police or else they were left unpunished through the connivance of the provost of Paris, Robert d'Estouteville, who was a friend of his⁽²¹⁾. What tends to clear Villon of any charges of a serious nature is a lettre de rémission⁽²²⁾ pardoning him for his part in an unfortunate and grim affair which took place in his twenty-fifth year, on the condition that until that time his record had been blameless.

The affair in question, which is related in detail in the lettre de rémission, was a brawl which occurred in the shadow of Villon's home in the Saint-Benoît cloister, in June of the year 1455.

(20) Grand Testament, XXVI.

(21) In his honor Villon composed the Ballade que Villon bailla à
(un gentilhomme).

(22) See the Pièces Justificatives appended to Longnon, Étude.

The two active participants were Villon and a certain Philippe Chermois, a priest, who apparently was bent upon quarreling in spite of Villon's unwillingness, which amounted almost to cowardice. Forced finally to fight, Villon turned upon his assailant and fatally wounded him. He immediately fled from the city in dread of the consequences but soon found some way, possibly through his good adoptive parent, to lay the facts before King Charles VII. In view of the apparent innocence of the culprit and also of the dying man's statement that he did not wish to have action taken in prosecution of his slayer, the king granted the letter of pardon on the terms mentioned above, and Villon returned to Paris in 1456 after an absence of several months, where is not known.

It was during the same year, 1456, after his return that took place the incident which led to the writing of the Petit Testament at Christmas time of the same year.⁽²³⁾ This was an unfortunate love affair with a certain Katherine de Vauselles⁽²⁴⁾, the one true love, apparently, the poet ever had. Rejected by her, he sought again his old companions of the baser sort and acquired new ones, worse if possible than the former, among them being women of ill-fame like La Belle Heaulmière and she of the Grosse Margot ⁽²⁵⁾. Surrounded by thieves, he took to thievery and soon planned to go to Angiers upon the pretext of solacing a broken heart⁽²⁶⁾, but apparently in reality to examine the estate of a rich old ecclesiastic living there, with a view to later robbing him. This was brought out in the testimony of Guy Tabarie, who was being held in the Châtelet prison for his participation in a

(23) Petit Testament, II, sur Noël.

(24) Double Ballade.

(25) See Villon's poems of these names.

(26) Petit Testament, VI.

theft in which Villon also was implicated, which had been committed at Christmas time of the year 1456. This was the robbery of the College of Navarre, whose coffers had been broken into and emptied of some five or six hundred crowns. After being put to severe torture Tabarie revealed the names of his accomplices: Colin de Cayeulx, Petit Jehan, a monk named Dom Nicolas, and Villon, of whom the latter, he said, had gone to Angiers on the aforesaid mission⁽²⁷⁾. But the police were slow to act upon Tabarie's testimony, and the accused escaped.

Villon now set out upon a series of wanderings about the country in this period which he calls his "exile" (28), since he dared not show his face in Paris. Though he was apparently unsuccessful with women in playing the rôle of lover, he yet had a knack of winning the hearts of men which stood him in good stead in the present period of vagabondage, for the year 1457 sees the young nomad received at Blois by Charles d'Orléans⁽²⁹⁾ into his court of princely retainers and poets. Here Villon had an opportunity to match his poetry against that of the best poets of the land in the poetic tourneys that were held in such favor there, and conforming to the artificial style of his competitors, he wrote poems which won the admiration of the Duke⁽³⁰⁾. But the favor of princes is a fickle thing, and before he realized what had been his offence, Villon found himself within prison walls⁽³¹⁾.

(27) For the full account of the affair as confessed by Tabarie see the Pièces Justificatives of Longnon's Étude Biographique.

(28) Rondeaux and Epistre.

(29) G. Paris, p. 59.

(30) Ibid.

(31) Le Dit de la Naissance Marie.

Resorting to cunning, he wrote a ballade in high praise of the Duke's daughter, Marie, in which he deftly inserted much flattery of the father. The ruse succeeded, and the pleased parent liberated the prisoner.

Whether it was because he again incurred the Duke's displeasure or because he thought the princely favor was not a thing to be trusted cannot be determined, but he was soon afoot again, this time upon the road which led to Roussillon⁽³²⁾. The Village of Roussillon belonged at that time to Jean I of Bourbon, who, in his turn, became interested in the young wanderer and received him into his protecting care. From this patron Villon was able to borrow the six crowns of which he speaks in his ballade addressed to Monseigneur de Bourbon, in which he both praises the Duke in grateful recognition of past favors and asks for more.

But soon Villon, ever offending, ever restless, began anew his travels. Of his route little is known except the names of a few cities. At Bourges he was evidently haled before the court of justice by one François Perdryer⁽³³⁾, whose accusation of him called forth from the poet bitter resentment in the Ballade Contre Les Langues Envieuses. After visiting Saint-Satur and Sancerre⁽³⁴⁾ he passed on to Saint-Genou in Poitou where he was received by two women whom he speaks of as filles très belles et gentes who taught him to speak a little Poitvin⁽³⁵⁾.

When we finally catch up with the poet errant he is being held in the dungeon at Meun⁽³⁶⁾ by Thibault d'Aussigny, Bishop of

(32) Ballade Pour Servir De Conclusion.

(33) Grand Testament, CXXX.

(34) Grand Testament, LXXXI.

(35) Grand Testament, XCIV.

(36) Grand Testament, XI.

Orleans⁽³⁷⁾. Whatever his offense had been, his protest against the injustice of his punishment is full of bitter complaint against his judge. Throughout the whole summer of the year 1461 he was in prison. His slight frame wasted away, his lungs became affected by the dampness of his prison cell, and life was kept in his body only by a little bread and water. To pass away the painful hours he wrote ballades, of which two have been preserved: the Débat d_i cœur et d_i corps d_e Villon and the Epistre à ses amis.

In spite of his misfortunes and his inherited poverty, as he chose to term it, Villon was yet born under a lucky star. If Fortune did not bring him the couche molle⁽³⁸⁾, she at least saved him from many a merited punishment. He owes his liberation from the prison at Meun to the arrival there of the newly crowned King Louis XI, who had just succeeded Charles VII to the throne of France. The occasion was made one of general rejoicing, and the King, in accordance with royal custom, freed all the prisoners in the city jails. Great was Villon's joy to find himself at liberty again and great his enthusiasm for Loys, le bon roy de France, who had delivered him from his dure prison⁽³⁹⁾.

But great as was his love for his deliverer, his hatred was unabated for him who ^{had} wrecked his health within the prison walls. It was, in fact, only the shadow of the old Villon that quietly slipped into his native town of Paris in the fall of 1461. Naturally dark complexioned⁽⁴⁰⁾, the poet had become so hollow-cheeked

(37) Grand Testament, I, and G. Paris, p. 7.

(38) Grand Testament, XXVI.

(39) Grand Testament, XI.

(40) Petit Testament, XL.

and hollow-eyed that now he appeared, as he himself expressed it, plus noir que meure⁽⁴¹⁾, and plus maigre que chimère⁽⁴²⁾. He was not recognized even by such of his former friends as still survived, for some of them, including Colin de Cayeux and René de Montigny, had in the meanwhile been hanged⁽⁴³⁾. It was in this state of physical disability and mental depression that shortly after his return to Paris he wrote the Grand Testament, as, fearing arrest, he hid it in a secret place.⁽⁴⁴⁾

But he was not secure for long, for the year 1462 finds him imprisoned in the Châtelet in consequence of another misdemeanor⁽⁴⁵⁾. His offense this time seems to have been slight, but in

(41) Grand Testament, XXIII.

(42) Grand Testament, LXXIV.

(43) For the lives of these men see Longnon's Étude, index.

(44) This secret place is the one to which he dares follow him Robin Turgis (Grand Testament, XCIII), keeper of the Pomme de Pin (Moland, p. 316), a creditor of Villon's (Grand Testament, LXVI), and one from whom Villon had stolen some wine (Grand Testament, LXXXVIII).

(45) G. Paris relates the affair (p. 67), which was merely a senseless brawl in which Villon was only slightly implicated, but does not state his source. He also affirms that Villon had been arrested some weeks earlier but, strange to say, it proved to be on a false charge, and he would have been released had not the authorities of the College of Navarre, hearing of the detention of one of the participants in the robbery of that institution, protested and brought suit against him. Their claim was awarded; but Villon, producing security, was liberated.

view of his ugly career, including the killing of Chermoie and the robbery of the College of Navarre, the provost of Paris, who was another than his old friend, Robert d'Estouteville, sentenced him to be hanged. It was with this grim prospect that the terrified poet wrote his Ballade des pendus, a ghastly poem picturing the bodies of Villon and his accomplices in this latest affair swinging from the gallows. He addressed, indeed, a petition to the Parliamentary Court of Paris urging it to pardon him, but he did not put great faith in its success⁽⁴⁶⁾.

But François underestimated the powers of his guardian angel. Be it due to the paternal care of the chaplain of Saint-Benoît or simply the result of fortunate circumstance, his appeal was received and his death sentence annulled as excessive. Instead, the Parliamentary Court of Paris rendered a decision, January 5th, 1463, that in view of his evil life Villon should be banished for ten years from la ville, prévôté, et vicomté de Paris⁽⁴⁷⁾. Again he was jubilant and wrote a ballade in extravagant praise of the court triumphant⁽⁴⁸⁾, in which he asked for a delay of three days in the execution of his sentence in order to bid his friends adieu.

This is the last fact that is known about Villon's life.

Concerning his later years Rabelais gives the following account, for which no other authority is known:

(46) This appeal, which has been lost, is spoken of by the poet in his ballade addressed to his jailor, Garnier, and falsely named the Ballades de l'appel de Villon.

(47) G. Paris, p. 71.

(48) La Requête De Villon Présentée A La Cour De Parlement.

"Master François Villon, in his old age, retired to St. Maxent in Poitou, under the patronage of a good honest abbot of the place. There to make sport for the mob he undertook to get the Passion^{acted} after the way and in the dialect of the country."(49)

Nothing is known of his death. The first edition of his works, that of Pierre Levet, appeared in Paris in 1489⁽⁵⁰⁾. As the poet would hardly have dared to publish his work himself without having first revised and purged it of at least its complaint against the Bishop of Orleans, it is probable that Villon died before that date.

(49) Rabelais; Gargantua and Pantagruel, Book IV, Ch. 13.

(50) Jannet, Ceuvres Complètes De François Villon, preface, p.XIX.

VILLON'S WORK

Villon's work, as it has come down to us, is far from being extensive, and its composition covers a period of a scant eight years. It is on the whole essentially a work of youth, the beginnings lying as far back as 1456, when Villon was but twenty-five years old. And yet there is a vast difference between the earlier and the later works, — a difference which must be ascribed largely to the gain in experience which the youth had made in the meantime. Doubtless more practice in writing contributed not a little to the better results; but, after all, it was the life which he had led and the hardships and sufferings which he had undergone, however merited they may have been, which served most to develop and mature the somewhat callow youth of the earlier work.

It is not that during this period of development he had learned his lesson and had acquired discretion and a sense of responsibility and self-respect, for he was seemingly incorrigible in these regards, his last authentic appearance on the scene being in the Châtelet; but rather that he had learned really to suffer, and his own sufferings had taught him what sorrow and suffering meant and added to his innate power of close observation the sympathy for that of others of which the reckless gaiety of his earlier years shows but little trace. The weight of life had made itself felt, and the burden had well-nigh stricken him down. It is worthy of notice that as profoundly sincere as is the accent with which he recites the sufferings of others, these sufferings are all akin to those which he had undergone in his own person. He had not learned the deeper lessons of life and acquired that

broad sympathy which inspires compassion for every form of trial and sorrow. What had not come within his own experience left him unmoved. Hence it is that his poems have such an extraordinary¹ close connection with his life, following it, as they do for a time, almost step by step, and gaining in depth and sincerity as his life taught him to feel. They are but the expression of the joys and sorrows which he himself experienced, and if their range of emotional content is thereby somewhat limited, the very limits thus imposed produced a gain in depth. Villon was no theorist, no intellectualist, no dallier with abstractions, but a keen-eyed, sympathetic, and sensitive observer who, more than anything else, recorded what he himself felt, whether that feeling was the result of what had befallen him himself or whether it resulted from his observations of the sorrows and sufferings of others.

The work in general falls into two classes: the Testaments and the smaller poems, the latter composed almost exclusively of ballades. Of the former there are two, known respectively as the Petit Testament and the Grand Testament. The first of these, the Petit Testament, is supposedly Villon's earliest composition, being by himself dated 1456, while the Grand Testament was not written until five years later, in 1461. Of the smaller poems there are some **forty - one**, most of which are included in the Grand Testament. All of them were written before 1463, the year in which Villon disappears from view.

The Petit Testament follows in the main the plan of the mediæval Testament, a literary form frequently used by Villon's predecessors, which, under the guise of being the last will of the supposedly dying poet, allowed the writer the greatest liberty, enabling him to express himself with the utmost^{freedom} in the form of

last requests made of his friends or enemies or of legacies bequeathed them. Especially was it used as a means of vindictive satire of the unfortunates who had incurred the poet's displeasure, and was often made the source of great amusement through the incongruity or special appropriateness of the request or legacy. This last is the case with the Petit Testament. Hotels, Taverns, fortunes were lavishly given away by the poet as if they belonged to him and with as much assurance as he gave away the clippings of his hair or his love-shattered heart, the whole buffoonery being carried out with so much gravity, even to the degree of invoking the name of the Holy Trinity, that one is forced to laugh in spite of oneself. Love, friendship, and fun, — these are the subjects of this work. The verse form which the poet chose consists of octrains of octosyllabic lines with a rhyme following the plan ababbcbc, which is invariable throughout the forty stanzas of the poem.

The Grand Testament follows in the main the plan and the verse of the previous work, differing from it and from the mediaeval testament only in that in this work the author has hit upon the novel idea of introducing here and there among its octrains short poems which he bequeathes as legacies to his friends and acquaintances. Scattered among the stanzas of this larger work, rightly called the Grand Testament, are twenty-one short poems which occupy a space approximately equal to that of the 173 octrains of the Testament proper. They consist of fifteen ballades, a double ballade, a rondeau, a lay, a poem entitled Lays ou plustot Rondeau, and a poem of ten octrains of a form which has no special name, and a poem of three octrains. The first third of the octrains forms a sort of prelude to the legacies and is the most

interesting part of the Testament proper for the reader of today, both because it contains the very core of the poet's soul and because the other part consists of legacies which, if not obscure in meaning, have at least lost much of their original savor. In this first part of the work especially is Villon the realistic, melancholy artist, and the scenes he paints are of suffering, poverty, old age, rejected love, and other woes, and finally of death in its physical effects, in its inexorable indiscriminate of persons, and its relentlessness in its demands for immediate forfeiture of life.

Like the Testaments, Villon's shorter poems were in form modeled after verse structures which were in common use in his day. Ballades, lays, and rondeaux formed part of a number of poetic structures which had been invented by the troubadours who had sung so beautifully and so passionately of love but which in Villon's age had long since lost all feeling and become so monotonously unvarying that their only charm lay in the music of their complex verse form. The ballade consisted regularly of three stanzas and an envoy with three or four rhymes running throughout, and this is the form that Villon used except in but one poem, the Débat du corps et du cuer de Villon, in which occur four stanzas. The meter, rhyme, and length of the stanza and of the envoy were variable, the most common form of ballade that Villon used consisting of eight octosyllabic lines rhyming after the manner of his octrains, ababbcbc, with an envoy of four lines of the same length rhyming bcbc. In such a ballade the a rhyme occurs eight times, the c ten, and the b fourteen. The practice of using the envoy to dedicate the ballade to some prince or princess whose name was not mentioned and who oftentimes was purely imaginary made

the ballade even more clumsy and difficult. The lays and rondeaux were shorter than the ballade, Villon's consisting of twelve octosyllabic lines each, with two stanzas of unequal length in which there was at least a partial refrain in the first, seventh, and twelfth lines. That these two forms were sometimes confused is indicated by the title which Villon gave to one of his poems, the Lays ou plustot Rondeau.

Although, as has already been seen, the shorter poems form a part of the Grand Testament, yet not all were written at the same time as that work. Many of them were written at some previous time without thought of a larger work in which they should be incorporated, just as certain poems were written separately after the completion of the Grand Testament. Of the latter poems there are twenty⁽¹⁾ which are unquestionably the work of Villon. A score or more of other poems, collected from various sources, have on occasion been attributed to him on the ground of an alleged similarity between them and Villon's work, but proof of his authorship is entirely lacking⁽²⁾. The twenty poems that are certainly Villon's consist of eleven ballades, a double ballade, a poem of six stanzas, a quatrain, and a group of six other ballades called the Jargon ou Jobelin. This latter group of poems may be dismissed immediately with a brief mention, since they are unintelligible except in isolated phrases. The ballades which compose it are written in a sort of argot, or slang, which Villon picked up in part, at least, at Paris and in part from a group of nomads with which he fell in during his wandering about

(1) A twenty-first, the Ballade des povres housseurs, is usually included among the poems that are known to be Villon's, but proof that it was written by him is lacking. Jannet, note to p. 119.

(2) Jannet, note to p. 133.

France⁽³⁾. In general, with the exception of these *latter*, the *forty-one* short poems which are known beyond a doubt to have been written by Villon, including those of the Grand Testament, represent the best portion of the poet's work. There are in all *thirty-four* ballades and double ballades, and it is in great part due to this fact that Villon, wherever he has been read, has been known as the ballade writer.

Testaments and short poems cover in all not a great space, — in Jannet's edition they occupy no more than 131 pages — but in this small compass lie poetic treasures, which, although somewhat covered over by the obscurities of the language, are a magnificent reward for him who is willing to dig for them; here lie dramas of purest tragedy separated by farcial interludes whose beauty lies in their unaffected sincerity and their savor of humanness, — qualities which disclose the fact that the poet has but given enduring expression to himself and that as he was, so he has revealed himself.

(3) G. Paris, p. 62.

THE PETIT TESTAMENT

The Petit Testament is the first literary effort of a young man of twenty-five who had but recently left the University where he had devoted himself to fun and frolic rather than to study, and who had not yet begun to take life seriously, if, indeed, he ever could or would. It is probable that he had never left his native city of Paris except on the one occasion when he was forced to absent himself for a few months after the killing of Chermoie, so that his experiences had been of the most limited sort. The work is the expression of the feelings of unthinking, optimistic youth, and, typical of youth, it was written in haste. If the author is sincere in saying at the beginning of the poem that he was writing at Christmas time of the year 1456 and at the end that it was "done at the time of the above mentioned date," the work must have been the product of only a week or two.

"Mil quatre cens cinquante et six,
 Je, François Villon, escollier,
 Considérant, de sens rassis,
 Le frain aux dents, franc au collier,
 Qu'on doit ses oeuvres conseiller,
 Comme Vegèce le racompte,
 Saige Romain, grand conseiller,
 Ou autrement on se mescompte.

En ce temps que j'ay dit devant,
 Sur le Noël, morte saison,
 Lorsque les loups vivent de vent,

Et qu'on se tient en sa maison,
 Pour le frimas, pres du tison:
 Cy me vint vouloir de briser
 La très amoureuse prison
 Que souloit mon cueur desbriser."

So begins the Petit Testament. Already, in these two first stanzas, is expressed the very pith of the poet's nature. He is the living impersonation of Lear's fool, in whom struggled for the mastery the clown's proper nature and melancholy. Glibly he quotes from the ancients, but more fluently than wisely, perhaps, since Vegetius means little to him and still less to his reader. But glibness, not wisdom, is the jester's trade, and for the moment Villon is pleased to assume the rôle of the clown. The figure in which he likens himself to a running horse with bit in teeth and neck untrammelled by collar is symbolical of the freedom which was dear to the poet's heart and which he had not as yet compromised to any extent by his actions. The time was to come, however, when this vaunted freedom was a thing of the past. The very next moment the feeling of elation has passed, and he is sad. As he writes, it is the time of heartless winter, the bringer of cold and hunger, and he hovers over the dying coals to hear the wolves outside complaining of their hunger with piteous howl. A vivid picture of the rigorous times and of his own desolation is presented by calling Christmas, which ought to be the happiest time of all the year, a morte saison.

But this is just the prelude to a drama of which the theme has been announced by the mention of a broken heart. That the events were to have a more than superficial effect upon the poet

is evidenced by the fact that five years later when he wrote his second Testament he had not yet recovered from his wound. The story, which is gleaned from scattered pages in both Testaments, is of the love of young François for Katherine de Vauselles, a relative perhaps of Pierre de Vaucel⁽¹⁾, a canon of the church of Saint-Benoît, and if so, not a distant neighbor to Villon who was living in the Hôtel de la Porte-Rouge. He was completely infatuated by the first glance he received from her:

"Le regard de Celle m'a prins." (2)

Then came acquaintance, then friendship, then love, then trysts, and the youth's hopes ran high. For, he says,

"Quoy que je luy voulsisse dire
Elle estoit preste d'escouter
Sans m'accorder ne contredire." (3)

Then supreme happiness blessed them, for

"Deux estions, et n' avions qu' une cueur." (4)

This bliss, however, was too perfect to endure. A word, a gesture, a slight forgetfulness brought misunderstanding and doubt, then charges of inconstancy.. Soon anger usurped the place of love and shared its room with bitterness and hate, at least on the part of the lady, who did not hesitate to take occasion to express her rancor in act. It can hardly be doubted that Villon had affronted her seriously, but just how is not known. At any rate, having learned of some misdemeanor which the young man had committed, she

(1) Longnon, p. 42.

(2) Petit Testament, V.

(3) Grand Testament, LVI.

(4) Grand Testament, Lay following LXXXIV.

reported it to the ecclesiastical authorities⁽⁵⁾, and Villon was in consequence flogged naked in the public square:

"De moy, pauvre, je veuil parler;
J' en fuz batu, comme a ru telles,
Tout nud, ja ne ouiers^{le} celer.

Qui me fait mascher ces groiselles,
Fors Katherine de Vauselles?" (6).

The laughing stock of the town and everywhere known as l' Amant remys et renye⁽⁷⁾ well might Villon have wished to hide his face, although when he declared that he was going to Angiers to solace a broken heart, he was far from stating his sole reason for going there⁽⁸⁾.

Disappointed in this, which seems to have been his only true love affair, his other associations with women being of a somewhat disreputable character, the young poet assumes the role of martyr to love and calls upon the gods for vengeance. That he is dying a victim of love he makes his excuse for writing his will in both the present instance and five years later. Still he is not so serious but that he can stand off like a second being and view the sorrowful picture that he presents, and the sight makes him smile, for the next instant, satirizing his condition, he bestows his broken heart upon the breaker, — a heart which he describes as being

"Palle, piteux, mort et transy."

But in spite of the light vein in which he treats the matter, with his intimation that his death is near at hand and with his invo-

(5) Grand Testament, CXV.

(6) Grand Testament, Double Ballade following DNV.

(7) Grand Testament, DNX.

(8) It will be remembered that Villon, according to the testimony of Tabarie, was planning a robbery at Angiers.

cations to the gods, this unfortunate experience stabbed him to the heart and made a wound which was not to heal as rapidly as the stripes upon his back. That this episode still rankled deeply several years later is indicated by the instructions that he gave the bearer of a poem which he wrote to Katherine, his damoyselle au nez tortu, and included in the Grand Testament, to the effect that when he met her he should address her with the words,

"Orde paillarde, d'oū viens-tu?" (9)

For young François was abnormally sensitive, and the humiliation that he suffered from this occurrence was not soon to be overcome. It is an event which must be taken into consideration in connection with a series of rude awakenings that Villon experienced in his years of vagabondage in order to explain the moods of profound depression into which he later fell.

Yet Villon was not utterly cast down; he could still find comfort and even merriment in the midst of his friends. That among them he became the center of attraction may well be supposed from the sparkle and ingenuity of his wit, which has even yet not lost all its brilliance in spite of the dulling effect of time. The legacies, as he read them to his circle of friends, as surely he did, since that could be his sole reward beyond the mere pleasure of writing them, must have caused them boundless and uproarious mirth, since they would have been able to feel their peculiar fitness keenly.

These legacies are various in nature, but are for the most part humorously or ironically intended. A few examples will serve to illustrate. His adoptive parent, Guillaume Villon, has treated

(9) Grand Testament, LXXXIII.

him with much kindness and been to him plus que père and plus doux que mère (10) ^{and}, therefore he leaves him a most precious gift — his reputation! (11)

Master Ythier, the merchant, and Jehan le Cornu, clerk of the provost's criminal court, shall have his sword of finest steel. How they shall divide it he does not stop to suggest, but goes on to add that it is now in the pawn shop and that they shall receive it straightway upon the payment of six sous (12).

To another he cheerfully bequeathes the taverns of the Cheval Blanc and the Mule, the more willingly, that they were not his property (13). That master Robert Vallée may make a new spring bonnet for his sweetheart, he leaves him his old trousers hanging on the rack. Master Robert himself, a hair-brained fellow, shall have the Art of Memory. (14)

Villon is an example of a man perfectly satisfied with the world in which he lived, however transitory he knew it to be, and his greatest trouble, his fear of death, arose from the knowledge that some day he would have to leave it for all time. His constant protest was that "honest death" (15) would not displease him if only he could really enjoy this life as long as it lasted. His philosophy of life was somewhat sordid; the couche molle (16) and meat, drink, and merriment were his highest ideals of life for himself, a poor worthless soul for whom it was useless to struggle against

(10) Grand Testament, LXXVII.

(11) , The word in the text is bruit, which, however,

as applied to Villon, is better translated by "reputation" than (by "fame").

(12) Petit Testament, XI.

(13) Petit Testament, XII.

(14) Petit Testament, XIV ff.

(15) Grand Testament, XLII.

(16) Grand Testament, XXVI.

outrageous fortune, though for others, like his mother, he realized that there was possible a nobler existence and a reward hereafter for leading it. His liking for food was highly developed, and when he directs that every day a big goose, a fat capon, and ten measures of wine be served to a friend of his, one must, perforce, think that his love for that friend was boundless. But the recipient of this kindness, Jacques Cordon, proves to be a prosperous merchant who was able to afford what he wished for his table, and so the mandate loses some of its spirit of generosity. By way of anticlimax Villon further directs that this man be given two legal suits in order that he might not wax too fat.

Whether Villon is here speaking from personal experience is difficult to say, for there is no evidence of his having been engaged in a legal suit at any time. The temptation to believe that he was, however, is strong, for, a man who had killed another, however much it may have been in self-defense, who had been flogged in the streets an account of some misdemeanor, who had taken part in a robbery, and was even now planning to commit another, — and all of this had taken place within the space of a year and a half — such a man is not likely to be found unembarrassed by legal difficulties. That Villon was especially liable to be involved in trouble is apparent from his attitude towards the law, which is one of secret defiance mingled with a profound scorn for the inefficiency of its executive officers, which he expresses in hilarious mockery. The mounted night watchman only does he fear and respect, and to him he bequeathes the heaulme, a form of head dress which came down over the eyes like a helmet and prevented clear vision. But as for the watchmen who go groping about afoot hopelessly looking for night prowlers, — then he pities and would help in their endeavors by leaving them

two bright rubies to light them on their way. As his sole return for this he demands that if he is imprisoned in the Châtelet he shall have the room known as the Troys lits, which was apparently the least uncomfortable.⁽¹⁷⁾ But in order that his friends Loup and Chollet may conceal from the eyes of the watch the duck which he bequeathes each, taken, he says, from the moats at evening, as was the custom, he leaves each a Franciscan's tabard reaching to the feet.⁽¹⁸⁾

Yet Villon in his reckless career was not insensible to the suffering which he saw in others. The impression he received from visiting the hospitals he records in a *revoltingly realistic* picture of the inmates, whom he sees

"..... gisans sou b z les estaux,
Chascun sur l'oeil ung grongnée,
Trembler a chière renffronnée,
Maigres, velluz et morfonduz;
Chausses courtes, robbe rongnée,
Gelez, meurdriz et enfonduz." (19)

To these sufferers he leaves his trunk full of spider webs, — not in mockery of their condition but rather sympathizing with it, since his own was little better. Yet such is not his attitude to three persons whom he describes as

"Paouvres orphelins imporveuz,
Tous deschassez, tous despourveus,
Et denuez comme le ver;

qui n'ont vaillant l'anse d'ung ceau." (20)

(17) Petit Testament, XXII.

(18) Petit Testament, XXIV.

(19) Petit Testament, XXX.

(20) Petit Testament, XXV.

To these he derisively bequeathes the choice of a great part of his fortune or of four sous, as they will; but little did the "poor orphans" need his largess, for they prove to be none other than three old usurers of the worst sort. (21)

A few more legacies of a similar character he makes, and then his writing is interrupted by the bell of the Sorbonne sounding the Angelus. (22) Like a good Christian he puts aside his work and kneels to say his prayers as his heart shall dictate. When he arises, he pretends to fall into a fit of absent mindedness, — not from drinking wine, he asserts, — and affects to see a vision of something highly intellectual which he mockingly tries to describe in a tangle of scholastic terms, reminiscences of his University studies. But failing in this attempt, he turns to resume his writing only to find his ink frozen, his candle blown out, and his fire so low that he could scarcely see to continue his writing. (23) These adverse circumstances furnish him with an excuse to cease work, and so, as best he can, he brings his Testament to a close with an octrain which contains one of the few passages to give even a slight conception of his appearance:

"Fait au temps de ladicte date,
Par le bon renommé Villon,
Qui ne mange figue ne date;
Sec et noir comme escouvillon,
Il n'a tente ne pavillon
Qu'il n'ayt laissé à ses amys,
Et n'a mais qu'un peu de billon,
Qui sera tantost à fin mis."

(21) G. Paris, p. 124.

(22) Petit Testament, XXXV.

(23) Petit Testament, XXXIX.

So ends the Petit Testament. As a literary work, it is entertaining because of its cleverness but is not to be taken too seriously. A love affair, a deal of vice, a flash of wit, a heap of nonsense, -these are the impressions that remain after reading it. In this first effort the poet failed to create a work which makes a lasting impression upon the reader. He has infused his spirit into the work and given what he had; his failure to attain greater success is due mainly to lack of much to give. It is the work of youth in its inexperience and irreflection, and only as such can it be regarded.

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THE GRAND TESTAMENT

Although but five years had elapsed between the composition of the Petit Testament and that of the Grand Testament, a whole life time of experience was crowded into that brief space of time. To the pain of exile from his beloved Paris had been added the hardships and sufferings of wandering about the country afoot, begging his way, doubtless often suffering from hunger and being forced to steal in order to keep himself alive, and, worse still, the bitterness of repeated imprisonment which culminated in his detention for an entire summer in an unwholesome dungeon at Meun on a scanty allowance of bread and water, from which he emerged broken in body and spirit. He had become infinitely sadder, even if not wiser, and the old spectres of poverty and death which had so often appeared to him were constantly with him now. To these, as a consequence of his unhappy experiences, there now joined itself a third: old age, the horrors of which began to impress themselves forcibly upon him. Young as he was in years, his experiences had aged him to such an extent physically that he felt like an old man. There are, to be sure, many flashes of the careless, light-hearted gaiety of the old Villon in the Grand Testament, but the general tone of the work is profoundly melancholy.

His experience at Meun was the freshest as well as the bitterest in his memory, and it is accordingly the first thing of which he treats. His sufferings there had drawn his face into wrinkles, his eyes seem to have sunk into his head, and now he appeared, as he says,

"Triste, failli, plus noir que meure,"(1)

and

"..... plus maigre que chimère."(2)

His body was just a shadow of its former self, and as he fancifully wills it to Mother Earth, he expresses regret that the worms will not find greater fatness on his bones, so fiercely has hunger waged war upon his frame:

"Les vers n'i trouveront grant graisse:

Trop lui a fait faim dure guerre."(3)

The dampness of the prison walls had evidently affected his lungs, to judge from his all too realistic description:

"Je crache, blanc comme cotton,

Jacobins gros comme ung estoeuf."(4)

And now his friends take him for a stranger, an old, worn-out man (une vieil usé regnart⁽⁵⁾), for the crack of age is in his voice also, and yet he is only a young gallant:

"De vieil porte voix et le ton,

Et ne suys qu'ung jeune coquart."(6)

Villon's wrecked physical condition must have been responsible in great part for the depressed spirits into which he so often falls, and goes far towards explaining the whole tenor of the Grand Testament. Doubtless poverty was pressing him hard, but a man of his natural activity, enthusiasm, good humor, and resourcefulness would manage to enjoy himself even in poverty if only his health were good. At the time that he was writing the Grand

(1) Grand Testament, XXIII.

(2) Grand Testament, LXXIV.

(3) Grand Testament, LXXVI.

(4) Grand Testament, LXII.

(5) Grand Testament, LXII.

(6) Ibid.

Testament he was at least in the possession of the boon of liberty which he had learned to prize so highly, and the novelty surely could not as yet have worn off. But ill-health prevented him from making good use of that liberty to obtain and enjoy those things which constituted his sum of happiness, and it is hardly to be wondered at if gloom took complete possession of him at times. And the feeling that another than he was to blame for his condition — this is what embittered him most of all. He realized, to be sure, that his own folly was to blame for his punishment,⁽⁷⁾ but his misdemeanors had not merited so severe a penalty and such harsh treatment as he had undergone.

It is in this state of mind, then, that he begins his Testament, summing up his condition in this wise:

"En l'an trentiesme de mon eage,
 Que toutes mes hontes j'eu bues,
 Ne du tout fol, ne du tout sage,
 Nonobstant maintes peines eues,
 Lesquelles j'ay toutes receues
 Sou**b**z la main Thibault d'Aussigny.
 S'evesque il est, seignant les rues,
 Qu'il soit le mien je le regny!"

Thibault d'Aussigny he regards as his greatest enemy, and to him he attributes all his ills. He does not curse him outright with foul invective; all he wishes is that God do to this man as this man has done to him. If Thibault has been compassionate, may Jesus, the King of Paradise, be so to him in soul and in body; if he has

(7) Le Débat du cueur et du corps de Villon.

been harsh and cruel to a greater degree than Villon pictures, then may God be equally so to him. But he does not express his lust for avenging punishment, for he recalls the words of the Master that we should love even our enemies, and he cuts short his wrath and, relenting, declares that he has been in the wrong and murmurs a prayer that Thibault's deeds be forgiven him by God:

"Mais l'Église nous dit et compte
 Que prions pour nos ennemis;
 Je vous dis que j'ay tort et honte:
 Tous ses faictz soient à Dieu remis." (8)

He is cruelly torn between his duty and his desire; he tries to pray for Thibault and for his lieutenant and his men, but when he thinks of the little cold water and dry bread he was given in the prison at Meun and the irons upon his wrists, he cannot utter the words:

"..... quand j'en ay memoire,
 Je pry pour luy et reliqua,
 Que Dieu luy doint..... et voire, voire,
 Ce que je pense..... et cetera." (9)

Now Villon leaves his seriousness for the moment and becomes jester again. He declares that he does not wish Thibault and his lieutenant any harm, for he loves them both — as much as God loves the extortionate money-lender, the Lombard. (10)

He will even go farther and make a prayer for him, (11) but it must be orally, for he ^{is} too lazy to read from the psalter; he will say a prayer such as the Picardians make, — those heretics who were

- (8) Grand Testament, IV.
 (9) Grand Testament, LXIII.
 (10) Grand Testament, LXIV.
 (11) Grand Testament, V & ff.

notorious for not praying for the dead.⁽¹²⁾ Others, however, who enjoy reading, may read for him the prayer of the seventh verse of the psalm Deus Laudem.⁽¹³⁾ With this he temporarily leaves the subject of his enemy, pausing only to pray that this last prayer be heard by the blessed Jesus, to whom he cries in his need and who has preserved him from "many a crime and encroachment of vile puissance."⁽¹⁴⁾

The most direct effect this episode had upon Villon's mind was to instil into it a fear of old age and its effects. Nothing shows more vividly the effects of his experience than the fact that he had now begun to look backward to the good old times of his youth and to view with apprehension the future. For him the future offered nothing but the loss of that which made the present a thing to which to hold fast; his whole ambition was to obtain the pleasure of the moment. Age to him meant nothing more than worn-out youth; wisdom, judgment, control of the passions, — these were empty bubbles. Feeling, the gift of youth, not matured judgment, the reward of age, was Villon's sole aim and his sole desire. The evils brought by age he describes with feeling and with vigor in several striking passages. For example, this is the comfort an old man has when surrounded by young people: if he tries to make himself agreeable by jesting like a young gallant, he is taken for a fool; if he remains silent he is thought a tired and tiresome old bore. Nothing can he say that pleases; not a gesture can he make that does not arouse disgust. An old monkey is always displeasing:

(12) Grand Testament, V. & ff.

(13) Psalm 108, verse 7, reads: Fiant dies ejus pauci et episcopatum ejus accipiat alter (let his days be few and let another take his office). Quoted from Moland, p. 31, note 6.

(14) Grand Testament, VII.

"Toujours un vieil synge est despaisant:
Moue ne faict qui ne desplaise." (15)

Such an old man Villon considers himself now in his broken health. It is with sorrow that he looks back upon the time of his youth, which he enjoyed more than most, and which, accompanying him to the threshold of age, left him there and hid from him its departure. Alas, he cries, whither has it flown?

"Il ne s'en est à pied allé
N'a cheval; las! et comment donc?
Soudainement s'en est vollé,
Et ne m'a laissé quelque don." (16)

Along with youth are fled the pleasures of youth. No more can he play the lover's part, and love he renounces since he is ridiculed by all as the rejected lover; his fiddle he has laid away under the bench:

"Ma vielle ay mys soubz le banc." (17)

Besides, he declares, it is hard for him to play the lover's part when his famished stomach, not a third full, robs him of all amorous sentiments. It is impossible for one to be gay when one is hungry; no one can dance on an empty stomach:

".... de la panse vient la danse." (18)

It is, however, other thoughts than those of love which concern him now, and although in pretending to be on his deathbed as he is writing this, his last will and testament, he intimates that he is dying a martyr to love, the poetical fiction is evident. It is not love but hardship and poverty which had brought him low,

(15) Grand Testament, XLV.

(16) Grand Testament, XXII.

(17) Grand Testament, LX.

(18) Grand Testament, XXV.

even if not literally to his deathbed, and it is this thought of poverty which now occupies his attention.

He had been born poor; his father never had great wealth, nor had his grandfather, Erace, and poverty had pursued all of his line.⁽¹⁹⁾

To poverty he attributes all his evil doing, for

"Necessité faict gens mesprendre

Et fait saillir le loup des boys."⁽²⁰⁾

As an instance of how hunger makes the honest man steal he quotes the fable of Alexander and Diomedes,⁽²¹⁾ which relates how the latter had been compelled by poverty to take up sea-roving in order to live and having been caught and brought before the emperor, boldly confessed the whole matter, declaring that in great poverty does not lie great honesty. The emperor admired the man's frankness and gave him not only his life but also a fortune. If, said Villon, the good Lord had given him the luck to meet another such pitying Alexander who would endow him with a pension, then if ever he consented to do evil, might he be burned to ashes, condemned by his own voice.

Poverty, the cause of all evils, Villon personifies as a sorrowful old hag ever ready to say a cutting word, or if she dare not utter it, at least she thinks it:

"Pauvreté, chagrine et dolente,

Toujours despitouse et rebelle,

Dit quelque parole cuysante;

S'elle n'ose, si le pense-elle."⁽²²⁾

(19) Grand Testament, XXXV.

(20) Grand Testament, XXI.

(21) Grand Testament, XVII and ff.

(22) Grand Testament, XXXIV.

Poverty is to blame for those creatures who go about the streets begging and half naked and who see bread only in the bakery window;

".....mendiant tous nudz

Et pain ne voyent qu'aux fenestres,"(23)

while their more fortunate neighbors dine — and here Villon seems to joy in the mere enumeration of good things to eat — ^{upon} good wines, delicate roasts with sauces, soup, fish, tarts, custards, and eggs fried and poached and cooked in other fashions.(24) To these more fortunate men God gives an abundance of food; to the poor like himself may God give patience at least:

"...aux pauvres qui n'ont de quoy,

Comme moy, Dieu doint patience."(25)

Villon's excuse that poverty was responsible for his thefts is, of course, without weight, for he was responsible for his condition of poverty. Although his parents were poor, he had been adopted by a rich ecclesiastic and given every opportunity the time afforded to make an honest living. However, the only lucrative professions for a graduate of the University in those days were those of schoolmaster and of ecclesiastic, and to neither of these does Villon seem to have felt any inclination. He was essentially a sensualist, and sought only to satisfy his appetites and desires of the moment in what seemed the easiest way. His time in the University, like that of so many of his fellow students, was ill spent accordingly, and when his course was run

(23) Grand Testament,XXX.

(24) Grand Testament,XXXII.

(25) Grand Testament,XXXI. A somewhat similar thought is well expressed in the marriage Rustebuef, a poem which Villon may have read, in which Rustebuef, similarly pinched with poverty, exclaims:

"savez comment je me demain?
l'esperance de l'endemain
ce sont mes festes."

he found himself as little equipped for making an honest living as men who had not been able to attend the University because of their less fortunate circumstances and much more indolent. Moreover, he seems to have taken no thought of the future, as the Petit Testament shows. Well does he realize now, however, how he has wasted his opportunities, and his regret is genuine as he cries:

"Bien scay se j'eusse estudié
 Ou temps de ma jeunesse folle,
 Et à bonnes meurs dédié,
 J'eusse maison, et couche molle !
 Mais quoy? je fuyoye l'escolle,
 Comme faict le mauvays enfant....
 En escrivant ceste parolle,
 A peu que le cueur ne me fend."(26)

His regret is obviously not for the wasted time itself, however, for if he had had his time to go over again he would inevitably, by the very force of his nature, have led the same life; what he really regrets is the income which he would have received if he had become a teacher or an ecclesiastic, and the pleasure which that income would have enabled him to secure. His early attitude towards his school life is humorously defined by the instructions which he now gives for the education of the "three orphans" of whom he speaks in the Petit Testament and who, he now declares, still keeping up his jest at the expense of the old usurers, have become grown and of age. Their grammar, he maintains, is too difficult for them; they shall learn the ave salus, tibi decus and no more:

(26) Grand Testament, XXVI.

"Céy estudient, et puis ho!
Plus procéder je leur deffens."⁽²⁷⁾

Instead they shall be drilled in manners like those of their adoptive guardian, however much beating may be required to accomplish it, and in imitation of their preceptor, this shall be their modest bearing:

"... les poulces soubz la ceincture
Humbles à toute créature;
Disans: Hen? quoy? Il n'en est rien!"⁽²⁸⁾

And if they take their schooling well to heart, perchance people will remark upon their good breeding. In all his melancholy brooding over poverty and distress Villon never completely lost his sense of humor. His ability to see himself as others saw him and to laugh at the impression he received, — for here it is his own conduct that he is describing, — serves, as much as his more serious nature, to make Villon seem so truly human.

But great as are the pains of poverty, poverty and life are better yet than death, and it is to this, a third theme, that Villon now turns. In view of the awfulness of the thought which this new idea calls up he reproaches himself for having grieved so greatly over poverty. Man! he cries, do not sorrow so; for if you have not the wealth of Jacques Cueur⁽²⁹⁾, at least you are alive, and it is better to live poor than to have been a great lord and lie rotting beneath rich tombs! He exclaims:

"Qu'avoir esté seigneur! que dys?
Seigneur, lasse! ne l'est-il mais!"⁽³⁰⁾

(27) Grand Testament, CXIX.

(28) Grand Testament, CXX.

(29) Jacques Cueur was a merchant and manufacturer noted especially for his enormous wealth. He died in 1456 after losing all his property through confiscation.

(30) Grand Testament, XXXVII.

In Death Villon sees not the pacifier of weary bodies but the murderer of life, not the last worker in nature's cycle but the unnatural destroyer of all. To him Death is grim and inexorable, snatching away men of every station: the rich and the poor, the wise and the foolish, ecclesiastic and layman, the noble and the mean, the great and the small; Death seizes all without discrimination. A horrible picture Villon draws of the physical effects of Death:

"La mort le faict fremir, pallir,
Le nez courber, les veines tendre,
Le col enfler, la chair mollir
Jointes et nerfs croistre et estendre."⁽³¹⁾

He goes to the chanel house and beholds the human skulls thrown together in heaps, and, like Hamlet viewing the skull of poor Yorick, he falls into gloom revery. Perhaps intermingled with these skulls lie those of some companion, — perhaps those of René de Montigny and Colin de Cayeulx but recently hanged — but he cannot tell, they are all so indiscriminately mixed,

"Ensemble en ung tas pesle-mesle."⁽³²⁾

Realizing that sometime his bones, too, would mingle there, Villon trembles with fear and tries to pray for the dead:

"Plaise au doulx Jesus les absouldre!"⁽³³⁾

But mingled with the melancholy reflection that Death takes away this life, — this life which after all with all its pains Villon claims to have enjoyed more than most men, — there is a religious element. Typically mediaeval in thought, Villon was

(31) Grand Testament, XLI.

(32) Grand Testament, CL.

(33) Grand Testament, CLI.

filled with the superstitions and doubts and despondency which were the results of the teachings of the Church. He was far from being an ardent churchman, for he recognized the faults of the wealth-corrupted Church and felt free to satirize the fat priests and ecclesiastics, such as, for example, the Bishop of Orleans, who hypocritically went about the streets blessing the poor with upraised finger, but withholding from them any share in the wine and meat he served so freely on his table. His scorn for such hypocrisy he expresses when he makes a legacy to the poor of the Hostél-Dieu. He will not make sport of them as he had done with so many others by leaving them things which are unattainable, for the poor have enough cares without being macked. He remembers that he bequeathed a goose to the mendicant friars; the bones, then, let the poor enjoy. He sums up their condition with the words,

"A menues gens menue monnoye."(34)

But although his respect for the officers of the Church was not great, the beliefs of the Church were firmly implanted in him. He realized that there was a reward for leading a good life, just as he was convinced of the existence of a horrible Hell after death for such sinners as himself if they were not forgiven through the mercy of the Lord Jesus. As with the majority of the men of his day, the fear of Hell was a more potent factor than the hope of a positive reward in influencing his conduct, although that influence manifested itself not so much in restraint of his reckless nature as in subsequent repentance for his misdeeds. Like a Christian, he believed in the efficacy of repentance and of prayer; like the publican he would smite his breast and exclaim:

(34) Grand Testament, CXLIII.

"Je suys pecheur....."(35)

But he knew that God did not wish that he should die on that account but that he be converted and live in righteousness, for

"Mieulx tout autre que peché mort."(36)

However vile the sinner may be, God does not hate him but rather his perseverance in evil. If conscience pricks, then God in His mercy forgives. Yet if he thought that God did wish that he die for his sins in order that his fellowmen might profit thereby, he would pronounce his own death sentence. But suddenly realizing what he has said, Villon quickly suggests that a sinner like himself is not important enough to produce such an effect:

"Les montz ne bougent de leurs lieux,
Pour un paouvre, n'avant, n'arrière."(37)

In this excessive humility lies one of Villon's greatest faults. He sincerely believed that he had been born mean, that circumstance alone was responsible for his condition, and that it was useless to try to strive against fate. He would always remain poor, for poverty was in his blood; he would always sin, because, in his conception, poverty was the mother of sin; he would always repent after wrong doing, for in repentance alone lay salvation from Hell. This was his creed, and his faith in it was as sincere as any Christian's.

As regards the legacies of the Grand Testament, they show the same sprightliness and wit as those of the Petit Testament, which they follow so closely in general character as to dispense with the need of a special discussion. The only striking difference between

(35) Grand Testament, XIV.

(36) Grand Testament, XIV.

(37) Grand Testament, XVI.

the two poems in this respect is that in the larger work the poet wills away as legacies a number of shorter poems which form a large part and the best known and possibly the finest portion of his entire work. Although these poems treat in part the same subjects as the Grand Testament proper, they are not indispensable to a correct understanding of the latter, and it has seemed advisable to consider them in a group with the shorter poems which are not included in the Grand Testament . To this group the attention will be turned in the following *section*.



THE BALLADES AND OTHER SHORT POEMS

It has already been seen that with but a very small number of exceptions Villon's short poems are composed of ballades, and that it is as ballade writer that he is almost universally known. His great success in this form was due wholly to the new spirit which he infused into it. In the matter of external structure he showed no originality and no extraordinary proficiency, but accepted the form in vogue in his day without changing it.

From the very beginning the ballade had been a highly artificial form even when the troubadours breathed out their passionate souls in it, and in the course of the several centuries which had elapsed since their day it had become only a thing of sound. Limited by custom to the narrow field of love, the ballade, like other complex forms, had become a plaything in the hand of the poet to serve for his amusement rather than for the expression of himself. Ballade writing had become a game, and the aim of the poet was to show his skill. Very skillful rhymsters the poets became as they twisted the language into curious figures which were sometimes beautiful but more commonly merely ingenious. This is not to say that a note of sincerity was not struck here and there, for among Villon's immediate predecessors and contemporaries Alain Chartier, Christine de Pisan, and Charles d'Orléans had all sung beautifully and occasionally from the heart, but such cases were the exception rather than the rule.

As has already been indicated, it is to his predecessors that Villon owes the form of the ballade which he used, as well as the other poetic forms, for in this respect he was in no wise an

originator. His great originality in all the poetic forms which he employed lies rather in the subject matter. Love, to be sure, still finds a place there, but now it is merely one of the many subjects, and in Villon's hands, by no means the most important. More than anything else, it was himself which he was expressing, and love could enter into consideration only insofar as it played a part in his life. The events of his life during his short period of literary activity turned his attention elsewhere and determined other interests; and other cares, other concerns oppressed him. Thus it is that, along with love, his ballades and ^{other} verse are concerned with such topics as poverty, old age, death, religion, and patriotism, to mention but a few, and range in tone from the deepest seriousness to the most careless gaiety, from good-humored satire to the bitterest invective.

Villon elsewhere speaks of himself as being de pauvre et de petite extrace; (1) but whatever his descent and the circumstances of his birth may have been, there can be no doubt that in point of view he was of the people rather than of the aristocracy. More than that even, his life had brought him so closely into contact with the underworld that he formed part of it, while aristocratic circles were largely closed to him except on the few occasions when accident brought him into contact with them.

Now the literature of the last few centuries of the mediæval period shows a two-fold character and implies a two-fold origin in part, at least, and a two-fold destination. On the one hand was the literature cultivated in aristocratic circles for aristocratic circles, commonly, but not always and not necessarily, by

(1) Grand Testament, XXXV.

members of the aristocracy; on the other was the literature which was the product of the people for the people. The aristocratic literature in general tended to develop in the direction of over-refinement and subtlety of conceit. The demand for polish and elegance coupled with the limitation of the subject matter largely to love and chivalry inevitably led to a tendency to put the attention upon the external form, so that it became highly artificial. It centered largely about the many small courts of the period, and was in general a literature of the leisure class. The bourgeois literature, on the other hand, while crude and frequently extremely coarse in subject matter, was yet a living, vital thing which ^{arose} more or less spontaneously and not as the result of an intellectual effort. It was accordingly natural and, above all, realistic in character, dealing with the lives and the hopes and the sentiments of the people, for which it was intended. At not infrequent intervals very close points of contact between the two are to be found. Each possessed something of which the other had need. The aristocratic literature tended to wear itself out through its over-refinement and artificiality and must needs recreate itself by dipping into the spring of spontaneous inspiration of the bourgeois literature, while the latter borrowed from the aristocratic literature something of the polish and refinement which it lacked.

Such a point of contact was Villon. As we have already seen, he owed his form to the aristocratic literature, but his inspiration was wholly of himself, and he was essentially of the people. Furthermore, the circles which he frequented could furnish him only an audience of the people, and it was to such that he must address himself. Accident, however, threw him into momentary

contact with some of the important centers of the aristocratic literature of the day, and some of his ballades show the direct effects of that contact. As they were intended for such circles, it is but natural that they should conform to the prevailing taste. It is worthy of comment, however, that such traces of influence are rarely to be found outside of the ballades in question.

The most striking instance in which Villon came into direct contact with the contemporary poets of the aristocratic verse was his stay at the court of Charles d'Orléans among the latter's princely and poetic followers. There in competitive tourney with eleven other poets he composed upon a theme and with a refrain suggested by the Duke himself a poem which is known as the Ballade Villon. A few lines will serve to indicate the general character of this poem:

"Je meurs de soif auprès de la fontaine,
 Chaud comme feu, et tremble dent à dent,
 En mon país suis en terre loingtaine;
 Lez un brazier friçonne tout ardent;
 Nè comme ung ver, vestu en president."

It is composed throughout of contradictory phrases, and while the literal sense of each phrase is perfectly clear, their symbolical meaning and the meaning of the whole, if meaning it really have, escape one. The poem represents in general the carrying to extreme of the type of contrast which the vogue of the Italian Petrarch had made popular. It must be admitted that the very contradictoriness of the phrases is symbolical of the manifest contradictions of Villon's character. Especially well does he describe himself when he says,

"Je ris en pleurs, et attens sans espoir;
 Comfort reprins en triste desespoir."

One of Villon's most striking characteristics is his tendency to alternate and mingle laughter and melancholy. Seldom is he heard to laugh a deep-chested, fearless laugh; seldom is he caught sorrowing for himself without now and then a laugh, though it be only a cynical, sneering laugh; and it may be that Villon had himself in mind in writing this poem, or at least parts of it. Only in the envoy, however, is his personal touch unmistakable when, in summing up the purpose of the poem in brief, he asks the prince to give him the reward of his poetical effort:

"Que fais-je plus? Quoy? Les gaiges ravoir."

In the days before the but recently invented printing-press had been introduced into Paris, poets received but little remuneration for their efforts other than that which appreciative princes and nobles gave. Villon, however, even if his financial reward were small, still owed a great deal to the cleverness of his pen, which had aided in extricating him from more than one serious difficulty. In employing flattery to win his way he was but following a common custom, even if this flattery in which the ballade so frequently reveled was generally applied to winning a lady's heart or to softening her severity towards an aspiring admirer.

The most striking instance of this which Villon offers is Le Dit de la naissance Marie, written in honor of the birth of Marie d'Orléanâ, according to some,(2) or Marie de Bourgogne, according

(2) Jannet, p. 222, notes.

to others,⁽³⁾ and generally supposed to have been intended to obtain the poet's release from prison. In any case, the flattery of the father, while subtle, is still too evident to escape notice and indicates that the hope of some reward animated the writer.

In the Double Ballade addressed to the same Marie and evidently written much later than the preceding, the motive is not so evident, although the flattery is unconcealed. Indeed, the poet protests that while he has read that he should be considered as an enemy who praises one to one's face, yet he feels that the true man should not hide in his heart any great good which he has found. The refrain of this runs:

"On doit dire du bien le bien."

He further adjures the Princess, as one sent from heaven, to recall the poor creatures whom severe condemnation has proscribed and fortune ruined. In our ignorance of the circumstances under which this was written, it is impossible to divine the *special* purpose of it.

The Requete que Villon bailla à Monseigneur de Bourbon, on the other hand, is frankly begging, although the poet asks for nothing but a loan. A first loan of six crowns, he explains, he has spent for food, and as an argument to persuade the prince, he declares that he has never borrowed a single farthing from another prince. Everything would be repaid in the course of time, however, and the Duke would incur no loss other than the delay:

"Vous n'y perdrez seulement que l'attente."

With the possible exception of the Ballade Villon, it is the Ballade de Villon à s'ameye which shows the greatest similarity

(3) Moland, p. 159, notes.

with the literature of the day. This ballade is rhymed throughout in r, and the first stanza contains the name "François" in acrostics. More suggestive still of the aristocratic literature is the abundant use of oxymorons of the type of cherme felon. The first stanza runs as follows:

"Faulse beaulté, qui tant me couste cher,
 Rude en effect, hypocrite douceur;
 Amour dure, plus que fer, à pascher;
 Nommer que puis de ma deffaçon soeur,
 Cherme felon, la mort d'ung povre cueur,
 Orgueil mussé, qui gens met au mourir;
 Yeulx sans pitie! ne veult droicte rigueur,
 Sans empirer, ung pauvre secourir?"

In spite of the conceits which fill this poem, commonly supposed to have been intended for Katherine de Vauselles, it yet has an accent of sincerity in the evident bitterness of tone and the longing for revenge on the false beauty who has so ill requited his love. Time, however, will bring him revenge by withering her beauty, and he takes comfort in the thought, although he knows that he himself will be old, and ^{he} adjures her to mend her ways while time still permits.

This theme of old age, not the bringer of discretion and wisdom but the awful ravisher of youth and its charms and pleasures, recurs again and again and with the greatest vividness in a poem which shows few if any traces of the aristocratic literature with which its unsparing realism brings it into the sharpest contrast. This is the poem called Les Regrets de la belle Heaulmière, in which the very concreteness of the case serves to illustrate what was for Villon the underlying law. The sufferer is la belle

Heaulmière, a hat-maker who now in her withered old age can think only of the days that are past. Once she was beautiful and much sought after by the young gallants, but now that age has shorn her of her charms, she is spurned by all and so disgusted with herself that she even contemplates the possibility of taking her own life:

"Ha! vicillesse felonne et fière,
 Pourquoi m'as si tost abatue?
 Qui ne me tient que je ne me fière,
 Et qu'à ce coup je ne me tue?"

Many a man did she refuse for the love of a clever young fellow (garçon rusé), and well did she love him although he ill-used her and loved her only for her physical charm. Had he trampled her under foot, he would have had but to ask her to kiss him, and she would have forgotten all her ills and loved him all the more. Now her paramour is dead some thirty years, and all that remains to her are sin and shame and hideousness:

"Quand je pense, lasse! au bon temps,
 Quelle fus, quelle devenue;
 Quand je me regarde toute nue,
 Et je me voy si très-changée,
 Pauvre, seiche, maigre, menue,
 Je suis presque toute enragée."

What has become of her smooth forehead, she asks herself, her blond locks, her arched eyebrows, her charming expression, her straight nose, her clear-cut features? Age has implanted in their stead:

"Le fronte ridé, les cheveux gris,
 Les sourcilz chez, les yeulx estaincts,

Qui faisoient regards et ris,
 Dont maintz marchans furent attaincts;
 Nez courbé, de beaulté loingtains;
 Oreilles pendans et moussues;
 Le vis pally, mort et destaincts;
 Menton foncé, lèvres peaussues."

And now the poet paints a melancholy picture of poor old women hovering over a little smouldering fire of flax straw, meditating upon their own well-nigh burnt-out lives:

"Ainsi le bon temps regrettons
 Entre nous, pauvres vieilles sottes,
 Assises bas, à croppetons,
 Tout en un tas comme pelottes,
 A petit feu de chenevottes,
 Tost allumées, tost estainctes;
 Et jadis fusmes si mignottes!...
 Ainsi en prend à maintz et maintes."

And so in the Ballade de la belle Heaulmière aux filles de joie the hat-maker advises her young companions to make the most of life in the way of enjoyment before old age, by withering their beauty, deprives them of the possibility. The first of the two poems is not a ballade but is written without a refrain in the octrains which Villon used in his Testaments. It is in some respects the poet's best work. Unrestrained by the limitations of form, Villon gave free rein to the expression of what he felt. He does not see the sins of this woman of ill-fame but only her misfortune, and his sympathy for her is open and unapologetic. She is to him one who was at one time virtuous,

"Sans avoir reproches ne blasmes,"

and her only fault is having loved too well. Elsewhere he says, as if in excuse,

".....c'est nature féminine,
Qui tout vivement veult aymer."⁽⁴⁾

— a thought which Byron, with whom Villon has something in common, expresses as follows:

"Alas! the love of women! it is known
To be a lovely and a peaceful thing;
For all of theirs upon one die is thrown,
And if 'tis lost, life hath no more to bring."⁽⁵⁾

In the unsparingly detailed description of the loss of every charm the poem has a flavor of the risqué and is in a measure shocking to the sensibilities; its motive, however, is not to picture vice and hideousness but rather distress. Villon is in no wise a reveler in immorality but a sympathetic observer of misery, especially when that misery was brought near to him by similar sufferings of his own. The Heaulmière had been a leader in her former circle of friends and was fitted by nature to enjoy herself to the utmost; but now old age had robbed her of all that made life attractive, and this is what Villon felt that he himself was threatened with. More than this he would not see in her.

This is far from being the case, however, with the ballade entitled La Grosse Margot, which is so frankly obscene that it may be dismissed with a mere mention. It is claimed that it is the name of a wine shop of the period, but the scene described is so realistic that one can hardly doubt that it was a picture from life, ^{elsewhere.} It is, however, the only thing of the kind that one finds in Villon.

(4) Grand Testament, LIII.

(5) Byron, Don Juan, Canto 2, Stanza 199.

It is the very realism of such pictures as the two preceding which most clearly differentiates Villon from his predecessors and contemporaries and which serves most to connect him with the bourgeois literature. Another distinctly bourgeois trait he shows in his fondness for proverbs and the skill with which he uses them or coins new ones of his own, whichever the case may be, for it is often difficult to tell whether they are original or whether Villon merely had picked them up in the course of his life at Paris and on his wanderings. All his poems abound in them, and he has a happy knack in general of summing up a situation with an expression of the type of a proverb, such as, for instance, the refrains of his ballades often are. Curious, however, is the use which he made of proverbs or proverbial expressions in two ballades entitled respectively Ballade des proverbes and Ballade des menus propos, of which the refrains will give a sufficient idea. That of the first poem runs,

"Tant crie l'on Noël qu'il vient,"

and that of the second,

"Je congnois tout fors que moy-mesme."

Rogue that he was, Villon was yet warm-hearted and generous, a good friend and a correspondingly good hater. His hatred of the Bishop of Orleans, as has already been seen, furnished him with a theme which occupies a number of the octrains of the Grand Testament, but as vindictive as his remarks there are they fall far short of his accomplishment in this respect in the so-called Ballade des langues envieuses. In this he gives a recipe for the preparation of the brew in which should be fried tongues that bear evil testimony like that born against him at Bourges by François Perdryer.⁽⁶⁾ The mixture which his wild imagination

(6) Grand Testament, CXXX.

compounds is unequalled for disgustingness of ingredients by even the witch's brew in Macbeth.

Somewhat similar in general effect is a ballade directed against those who would wish ill to France, the Ballade contre les mesdisans de la France. No punishment is great enough for them, and the poet ransacks the classics, the Bible, and mediæval history to find a series which would fit the situation. The thing that stands out prominently is the patriotism of the poet, although there is not a single word in praise of his country in the poem, the whole being devoted to suggesting punishment for him

"Qui mal voudroit au royaume de France."

Villon's love for his country was excelled only by his love for his native city, Paris. As one of the boasts of many a country and of many a city is its women because of their beauty, their cleverness, their industry, or their faithfulness, it is not surprising to hear the poet burst forth in a ballade of praise of the women of Paris for the beauty of their speech. He mentions the women of many countries famed for the beauty of their tongue — Florentines, Venetians, Lombards, Romans, Genoese, Germans, Greeks, Spanish, English, and many others, — but decides that the prize must be given to the Parisians, for

"Il n'est bon bec que de Paris."

In striking contrast to the vindictiveness of the Ballade des langues envieuses and the Ballade contre les mesdisans de la France is the good humored, rollicking satire of the Contredictz de Franc-Gontier and the Ballade et Oraison. In the fourteenth century Philippe de Vitry, bishop of Meaux, had written a work entitled Combien est he^ureuse la vie de celui qui demeure aux

champs, ou vulgairement, Les Dictz de Franc-Gontier in which he depicted the pleasant life of industry of Franc-Gontier and his wife Hélène, sweetened with the perfume of the rustic fields and charmed with the song-birds' notes. Opposed to this tempting picture Villon paints another presenting his conception of the perfect life. The first stanza is strikingly dramatic in its effect:

"Sur molle duvet assis, unq eras chanoine,
 Lez unq brassier, en chambre bien nattée,
 A son costé gisant dame Sydoine,
 Blanche, tendre, pollie et attaintée:
 Boire ypocras, á jour et á nuycée,
 Rire, jouer, mignonner et baiser,
 Et nud à nud, pour mieulx des corps s'ayser,
 Je vy tous deux, par un trou de mortaise:
 Lors je congneuz que, pour dueil appaiser,
 Il n'est tresor que de vivre à son aise."

This for Villon was the truly perfect life. As for the rustic life of Franc-Gontier — a joke! But if Franc-Gontier loves his ill-smelling onions and, after a hard day behind the plow, prefers to lie down by his fair Hélène under some rose or eglantine, choosing the hard ground instead of a downy couch, and there is pleased to give ear to the gay twitterings of the birds, it is all good and well as far as Villon is concerned. Only for his part not all the birds from here to Babylonia could induce him to spend a day in the country, — nay, not even so^{long} a time, not even a morning:

"Tous les oyseaulx d'icy en Babyloine
 A tel escot une seule journée
 Ne me tiendroient, non une matinée."

Villon's assertion, humorously exaggerated as it is, is yet not

without truth. He seems to have had absolutely no feeling for nature; the country he could not appreciate; the city was his home,— the city with its mass of swarming human life, with its gaiety and sorrow, its beauty and its filth, its morality and its lawlessness. The out-of-doors life which he was compelled to lead in the years of his "exile" has not left the slightest imprint upon the poet's nature, to judge by his works. At no time did he glimpse the all-embracing vision of the universe which elevates men to higher ideals; the scope of his vision was limited: man alone he saw, and the passions of men were his theme.

The Ballade et Oraison was written in behalf of the late master Jehan Cotard, a good old sot who had done Villon many a good turn before he drank himself to death. And now that the good old fellow is dead, the least that the grateful recipient of his kindness can do is to pray for his soul. The poem begins with a humorously serious invocation to certain Biblical characters who were noted for their appreciation of the blessings of Bacchus: Father Noah, who planted the vineyard; Lot, who permitted himself to be made drunk; and the governor of the feast at the marriage at Cana who declared it was customary to drink the best wine first. These he prays to have a care for the soul of the late good master Jehan inasmuch as he was a descendant of their line. For at no time was this good fellow lazy in the matter of drinking; rather his companions had much ado to snatch the wine pot from his lips:

"On ne luy sceut pot des mains arracher,

Car de bien boire oncques ne fut faitard."

Often he was to be seen of a night reeling and stumbling and stamping as he went home to bed, and once,— well does Villon remember it,— he fell against a butcher's stall and all but broke

his head. In brief, for drinking early and late not a better man could be found, and so, ye heaven-dwelling descendants of Noah, give entrance to master Jehan when ye hear him cry, for he doth credit to your line!

"Brief, on n'eust sçeu en ce monde chercher
 Meilleur pion, pour boir tost et tard.
 Faictes entrer quand vous orrez hucher
 L'ame du bon feu maistre Jehan Cotard."

What a bit of chuckling Villon must have had in musing upon the picture of his friend Jehan continually complaining of his burning thirst, as he appended the envoy :

"Prince, il n'eust sçeu jusqu'a terre cracher:
 Tousjours crioyt: Haro, la gorge m'ard!
 Et si ne sceut oncq sa soif estancher,
 L'ame du bon feu maistre Jehan Cotard."

In marked contrast to the carefree joyousness of the two poems which precede are several dealing with the subject of death, a theme which had an attraction for Villon and one to which he returns again and again. The fear of death possessed him and filled his thoughts; old age with all its woes and poverty, curse that it was, were of minor importance in comparison, and life even with them was preferable to death. Thus in the Problème ou ballade au nom de la Fortune, Villon represents Fortune as counselling him to take what comes and make the best of it, for when he thought over all the great men of former days whom she had suddenly struck down in death he must realize that his lot was not so bad as it might easily be, and so he makes her conclude with the refrain,

"Par mon conseil prends tout en gré, Villon!"

Noteworthy among the poems dealing with the subject of death are three in which the poet falls into a gloomy reverie upon the transitoriness of human life, and passes over in review the great lords and ladies of former times who have vanished and left no trace behind. The Ballade des Dames du temps jadis begins as follows:

"Dictes-moy où n'en quel pays
 Est Flora, la belle Romaine;
 Archipiada, ne Thais,
 Qui fut sa cousine germaine;
 Echo parlant quand bruyt on maine
 Dessus rivière ou sus estan,
 Qui beaulté eut trop plus qu'humaine?
 Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!"

Where is the wise Heloise whom Pierre Abelard loved; where the queen who commanded that Buridan be thrown into the Seine; and Queen Blanche who sang so sweetly; and Berthe of the large foot; Beatrice, Alix, Eremburges; and Jean d'Arc, the good Lothringian whom the English burned at Rouen — where are they all?

"Prince, n'enquerez de sepmaine
 Où elles sont, ne de cest an,
 Que ce refrain ne vous remaine:
 Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan!"

There is something plaintively melancholy about the refrain which has made an appeal to all and become a by-word among the French. In the beauty of its sadness is mingled a note of depression like that of Poe's famous utterance, "Quoth the Raven, 'Nevermore!'" As in Poe's poem also, the appeal comes entirely from the refrain, for most of the personages for whom Villon asks are not of any interest to the reader or to the poet himself.

One of them, however, did mean something to Villon, perhaps even a great deal. This was Jeanne d'Arc, who was burned at the stake in the same year in which the poet was born. This alone would have sufficed to make her name remembered by Villon, but to it must be added the fact that at about the time that he was writing the fame of Jeanne was just being rescued from the oblivion which had settled upon her after her death.

The Ballade des Seigneurs du temps jadis follows the same plan. In it also the poet asks vainly for personages who are likewise of little general interest: for Calixte the third, the last of his name, who for four years held the papal chair; Alphonse, King of Aragon; Artus, Duke of Bretagne, to mention but a few. In this case the refrain,

"Mais où est le preux Charlemagne!"

lacks the quality of universal appeal of the preceding and has accordingly not survived as a byword. A third ballade, written ostensibly in old French, asks for the holy priests dressed in their albs and amices and girded with their sacred stoles with which, says Villon, they were accustomed to seize the devil by the throat when he came, heated with maldesign. But king's son dies as well as slave; both are blown away as by a puff of wind. The refrain of this poem too has become a byword among the French:

"Autant en emporte ly vens."

Thus all the grand ladies and illustrious gentlemen have died like common slaves; popes, kings, princes are shrouded, dead and cold, and their kingdoms have passed into the hand of others. What now is the use of having been a lord, he exclaims:

"Qu'avoir esté seigneur!Que dys?

Seigneur, lasse! ne l'est-il mais." (7)

In all this he did not mean to belittle in any way the great of
(7) Grand Testament, XXXVII.

the land nor even to intimate that they were no better than men of his own class. He was a poet-friend of the poor classes like Robert Burns, but he did not have ^{the} pride in poverty, ^{the} love of simplicity, ^{the} defiance of nobility, and ^{the} democratic spirit of equality among all men that make the latter poet so lovable. Villon could never sincerely have uttered

"For a' that, an a' that,

A man's a man for a' that."

For Villon recognized the inequality among men due to birth and wealth, and he envied and honored those who, more fortunate than himself, were born to one or both. So when he says that kings' sons die as well as slaves he is not proudly stating that death is the leveler of castes, but rather he mourns the fact that the great must die at all and die like any mortal man. Death, as he views it, is not the one great engine of democracy but the common foe of all mankind, an enemy uncompromising and inexorable and one to be dreaded. Where victorious Death takes its captives Villon questions not: it may be to heaven, it may be to Hell, for Villon firmly believed in both, but certainly not to a place superior to this Earth. He only knows,— and the thought brings him sorrow enough,— that the great of former days have melted away like the snows of yester year and disappeared from off the face of the earth.

Not merely did Villon realize that he, too, though but a poor vagabond, must sometime die in the natural course of things as had the great lords and ladies of former days of whom he sang, but he himself had had to face death more than once, and some of his most heartfelt poems were written when he was a prisoner expecting death either by slow starvation or by speedy hanging. In

the prison at Meun , starving for food and air and companionship, he addressed a ballade to his friends — the Epistre en forme de ballade à ses amis — in which he piteously reproached them for having neglected him in his plight. He is lying in a dungeon whose walls are so thick that he cannot see the lightning's flash or hear the whirlwind's roar, and cruellest of all to one ^{to} whose meat and drink were a source of such sweet pleasure, on Sundays when all the world is feasting he does not receive even his meagre allowance of bread and water. As a result, he says, his teeth are as long as rakes from reaching vainly, not for a cake, but for dry bread! Unless they act quickly, it will be too late, for surely they will not leave him there; even pigs *do* better to one another than that:

"Ainsi se font l'un à l'autre pourceaulx,
Car, où l'on brait, ilz fuyent à monceaux.
Le laisserez là, le povre Villon?"

That his plight was serious on this occasion is evidenced by the fact that when he was providentially freed from the prison at the time of the passage of Louis XI through the town immediately after his succession to the throne, Villon's health had suffered so severely that he was physically a changed man. More serious still, however, was the danger which menaced him when, for some misdemeanor, he was sentenced by the provost of Paris to be hanged. What are probably his last poems were written while he was in the Châtelet with five or six companions awaiting the execution of his sentence. In one of them, the Ballade de l'appel de Villon, he discusses with his jailor, Garnier, an appeal which he had made to the Parliamentary Court of Paris to annul the sentence of death, declaring that it had been unjustly passed but intimating that he

had but little hope for the success of the appeal. In spite of the gloomy outlook which faced him he could still jest, as witness the Quatrain which he wrote on the occasion:

"Je suis Francoys, dont ce me poise,
Né de Paris emprès Ponthoise.
Or d'une corde d'une toise
Saura mon col que mon cul poise."

What is probably at once the most ghastly and the most realistic picture which Villon ever drew is that contained in the Epitaphe en forme de ballade que fait Villon pour luy et ses compagnons, s'attendant estre pendu avec eulx.⁽⁸⁾ In this the poet pictures the bodies of himself and his companions hanging from the gallows. It is a grim spectacle which he beholds, and, as he writes, a number of emotions succeed one another in his mind: horror of the physical aspects of death, fear of the condemnation of those who shall live after him, still greater fear of the jests which will be bandied about at the foot of the scaffold. Although their punishment is just, they should be forgiven their sins and not laughed at, for not all men are gifted with wise heads, and in life they were but poor weak mortals, swayed hither and thither as the wind now sways their weather-beaten corpses on which the magpies and crows have been feasting:

"La pluye nous a debuez et lavez,
Et le soleil dessechez et noirciz;
Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez,
Et arrachez la barbe et les sourcilz.
Jainais, nul temps, nous ne sommes rassis;
Puis cà, puis là, comme le vent varie,
A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,

(8) This is generally known as the Ballade des pendus.

Plus becquetez d'oyseaulx que dez à couldre.

Ne soyez donc de nostre confrairie,

Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!"

He concludes with a prayer to the Lord Jesus that *He* will save them from the grip of Hell and that *they* may have no transactions with it, no payment to make it:

"Prince Jesus, qui sur tous seigneurie,

Garde qu' Enfer n'ayt de nous la maistre:

A luy n'ayions que faire ne que souldre.

Hommes icy n'usez de mocquerie

Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!"

The grimness of this picture is increased by the fact that it was drawn while Villon was actually facing the death portrayed, and it would have been still worse had he actually undergone the penalty. As it happened, however, his appeal was considered by the Parliamentary Court and the sentence of death commuted to banishment from Paris. In a ballade entitled La requeste de Villon présentée à la Cour de Parlement the poet overflows in jubilant and extravagant praise of the Court, which he hails as

"Mère des bons, et soeur des benoistz anges!"

It might well be expected that after such an exp^rience Villon would be content to mend his ways and settle down. As a matter of fact, this is his last appearance on the scene, and one must conclude either that he did settle down or else that he died soon after in some way other than by due course of law. The temptation to accept the second supposition is strong, for after his many escapades it is difficult to imagine Villon's leading a life which would keep him out of the clutches of the law for any length of time, seemingly so incorrigible was he. And yet it was not that

he did not realize where the fault for all his troubles lay, in spite of his plea that it is poverty which makes ^{men} do wrong, -- and he had been born poor! He was not sparing of good advice to others, as witness the Double Ballade sur le meme propos, the Belle leçon de Villon aux enfans perdus, and the Ballade de bonne doctrine à ceux de mauvaise vie, contained in the Grand Testament. Unmistakable, however, is the testimony offered by the Débat du cuer et du corps de Villon, written during his imprisonment at Meun. The poem represents a debate between the poet's heart and his body, -- in reality, of course, between his conscience and himself. Conscience reproaches him for the sad state to which his mad pleasure-seeking has reduced him, declaring that as a man of thirty years of age he was old enough to know better. To this, however, the poet replies that he is not to blame, since the trouble was due merely to his having had the misfortune to be born under an evil star, an argument which his conscience scornfully rejects on the ground that Solomon had written that a wise man has power even over the planets and their influence. Significantly enough, Villon, or, if you choose, the body, refuses to be convinced and declares,

"Je n'en croy rien; tels qu'ilz m'ont faict, seray."

As fatalistic as Villon was with regard to the possibilities of his own betterment, and as pagan as he was in many respects, he yet believed firmly in the existence of a Heaven which was the reward for those who had led a good life, and of a Hell where unfortunate sinners like himself were liable to be sent for punishment unless they were saved from it by the intercession of some one whose prayers would be heard. Nowhere does this stand out more clearly than in the tender and touching Ballade que feit

Villon à la requeste^dsa mere pour prier Nostre Dame, a manifestation of love for his mother and of genuine repentance for the pain and bitter sorrow which he has caused her which throws a new light on his character. In it the poet represents his mother as praying to the Virgin Mary — his own lips were too defiled — to intercede with her son Jesus for her. Well does she realize her own unworthiness, but the goodness of the Virgin is far greater than the weight of her sins. Her creed is narrow but her faith is boundless. She is an old woman, poor and illiterate, but she has been taught at the monastery to believe in a Heaven of harps and lutes and in a Hell where the damned are burned; the former gives her joy, the latter frightens her; let her, then, have the former:

"Femme je suis povrette et ancienne,
 Ne rien ne sçay; oncques lettre ne leuz;
 Au monstier voy dont suis paroissienne
 Paradis painct, où sont harpes et luz,
 Et ung enfer, où damnez sont boulluz:
 L'ung me faict paour, l'autre joye et liesse.
 La joye avoir fais-moy, haulte Déesse."

Her prayer ends with a simple and touching confession of faith in the Lord Jesus:

"Vous portastes, Vierge, digne princesse,
 Jesus regnant, qui n'a ne fin ne cesse.
 Le Tout-Puissant, prenant nostre foiblesse,
 Laissa les cieulx et nous vint secourir;
 Offrist à mort sa très clère jeunesse;
 Nostre Seigneur tel est, tel le confesse.
 En ceste foy je vueil vivre et mourir."

While the prayer does not come as from Villon's own lips, it yet never could have been written by one who did not share some of the simple faith that it expresses. Villon's trust in the monastery and the Church was not great, perhaps, — these institutions in the^r corruption did not merit great faith — but the principles of Christianity and faith in Christ were fundamental with him. His mother in her simple faith may have been responsible for instilling into him that fear of a burning Hell which was so strong a weapon of the Church of that day and which affects in such degree the tenor of Villon's work.

Once again did Villon venture to pray, and this time it was directly for himself. This was a brief prayer contained in the Grand Testament in the Lays which he wrote for the dead and which was evidently written shortly after his liberation from the prison of Meun and his return to Paris, and while he was still feeling the effects of his unhappy experience. In this he prays that when his soul shall quit his worn-out body, as his body has just left the prison walls, it may be received above by the Lord into His House:

"Plaise à Dieu que l'ame ravie
En soit lassus, en sa maison
Au retour!"

And with this the present *section* may well be brought to an end.

CONCLUSION

It is a very significant fact that a long and somewhat detailed discussion of Villon's works has failed to disclose any very original or striking ideas. Even his themes were not new: joy and sorrow, hope and fear, love, patriotism, poverty, old age, death, the life to come — all these had been used before Villon's time just as they have been used again and again since then; the writers of classical antiquity had used them, and mediaeval literature was not ignorant of them. And yet no other poet of the mediaeval period has survived as uninterruptedly and to the same degree as has Villon, and few French poets are today more widely known than he, by name, at least. The solution of the problem which this fact offers is seemingly not to be found in any originality in theme or idea. Furthermore, even were it possible to show such originality, the latter would not serve to explain the continued popularity of some of the poet's verse and the remarkable hold which he has kept on the public mind, since in the long period that has intervened such originality would have led to so many imitations and repetitions that themes or ideas would have become a commonplace in literature, and our poet would inevitably have fallen into neglect and have been forgotten by all save literary historians. The merit of originality is one which is quickly lost sight of as the years go by, since the original of one period may become the commonplace of the succeeding.

Nor can it be maintained that there were not greater poets who preceded Villon in the mediaeval period, just as there have been greater poets since his time. Other poets there were before him who show greater fecundity or range of idea, still others who

show greater polish and elegance of form, and certainly since his day there have been poets who have excelled him in both respects. How many of them, however, have survived as living poets? How many of them are known except to the literary historian, who must dig them out from the oblivion which has settled upon them like the accumulated dust of centuries?

If the problem is looked at from another point of view and an examination be made of the degree to which Villon is known today to the general public, it will be seen that what has survived is in great degree the man and not the poet. Villon is, to be sure, known to the world as a poet, but this same world knows little about his poetry, its interest in this being subordinated to its interest in Villon the man, or, if you please, in Villon the rogue.

That the selective process of the ages has contributed largely to this result is beyond question. Within a century much of Villon's work had become unintelligible, to such a degree was it local in both time and place, and doubtless this was also the case even within a few years after its composition. Time has gradually eliminated still more from general interest, so that today all that remains is a few poems, chief among which are those dealing with the two related subjects of old age and death. It is ⁱⁿ consequence of this that Villon has become known, in some respects erroneously, it may be maintained, as the poet of death.

That death is a prominent theme in his work is evident from the *sections* which precede, but it is equally evident that it is far from being the only theme or one which colors all his work. However that may be, the fact remains that it is as a poet of death that Villon has survived. Closely connected with this idea is the knowledge that some of these poems were written under the stress of

threatened or averted danger which was incurred through more or less serious misconduct on the part of the poet. As a result, therefore, it is as a rogue whose knavery brought him to the very jaws of death from which he escaped only by more or less good luck, that Villon has remained in the public mind. But all this still does not solve the problem, although it narrows it down to the question of the source of the general interest in Villon the rogue.

Rogues are by no means lacking in literature, and French literature is no exception to the rule. Many periods can show them, and but few perhaps are lacking in them. None, however, has gained and kept the hold on the public mind which has been the lot of Villon. And yet the bare details of his appearance on the scene, as meagre as they are, are sordid enough. A waster of his youth, a frequenter of taverns, a companion of thieves and murderers and women of ill-fame, himself a thief and a murderer, an exile, a vagabond, a prisoner repeatedly and once threatened with death by hanging — it is as such that he appears in the pages of history, even if that history is in part gleaned from his own work. It need hardly be said that such a picture will in no wise account for the wonderful vogue which he has enjoyed. Rogue he undoubtedly was, but it is not solely as such that he has so fired the popular imagination. If sordidness is the cause underlying such an effect, why has Verlaine not had a similar lot — Verlaine, whose life too was unspeakably sordid even if in a somewhat different way?

But, it may be finally asked, is such sordidness all that Villon's life has to show? In ^{the} answer to this question lies the real explanation of Villon's popularity and vogue. As far as the

facts of his external life are concerned, they are indeed few and, as already *indicated*, far from being attractive; not a single courageous or noble deed can be pointed out. With regard to his inner life, however, our knowledge is relatively extensive. Here he has laid himself open to inspection, so to speak, and the man stands revealed. He knows no reserve in this respect, — is perhaps not conscious of any need of it, or else of what he is doing — and writes as he feels. It is his own life that furnishes him his material, not so much his life in its external manifestations, for such serve only to explain what might otherwise be obscure; but rather his inner life, his reactions to external events: his joys, his sufferings, his feelings of every description, his hopes, his fears, his likes, his dislikes, — everything in short which went to make up his personality. This it is which fills his work; this it is which differentiates him from his predecessors and contemporaries, which differentiates him even from most of his successors in point of time; and this it is which has given the man and to a certain extent his work their extraordinary vogue, and that in spite of the fact that the most contradictory opinions have been held concerning the character of the man revealed. Be that as it may, it is the extraordinary degree of humanness which pervades his work that has made Villon live and still keeps him alive. Rogue though he was, unlovely as was his career in almost every respect, he was yet intensely human, and as a true poet he has infused that quality into all his work and transmitted it to us in some respects as fresh as if it were but of yesterday. Gone are the snows of yester year and with them has vanished much of Villon that was no doubt highly esteemed in its day, but what has remained has remained because it was not of

any time or of any place but universally human, and therefore imperishable. He was a poet in the most modern sense of the term, and, within his well defined limitations, to such a degree as but few others have been.

One of the striking characteristics of early mediaeval literature is its impersonality. The author, for the most part unknown, is lost behind the work. He does not speak for himself; he is rather the spokesman of his people, of his nation, of which he is himself but a single individual, and if his personal bias colors his utterances, the fact is rarely to be distinguished. Furthermore, it is the external world which largely occupies his attention and the facts of which appeal most to his imagination. The general law he does not perceive or is not interested in; the concrete case is quite sufficient to satisfy him. It is ⁱⁿ some respects the childhood of the race which he represents, and like children his auditors are interested only in the concrete facts of their daily lives or the lives of others. He has no incentive, even if he had the inclination, to go into himself and analyze his inmost being and then to express in his poems what he feels. He is and remains impersonal.)

As time goes on, however, the situation gradually changes somewhat. The poets became known by name at least, and in increasing degree a personality begins to make itself felt behind their poems. The facts of the poet's life serve more and more to explain his works, and more and more do they bear his stamp until they reach a point where it would have been impossible for another than he to have produced them. In the period immediately preceding Villon the poets have acquired a certain degree of personality, but they are still timid and hesitating in this respect, and

one needs but to study their works with the known facts of their lives, ^{in mind} to realize that after all it is but a comparatively small portion of their work that these facts have been instrumental in coloring to any degree. As an instance may be cited Villon's great contemporary rival, the charming and graceful Charles d'Orléans. The life of this man was filled with sorrow: his father was murdered; his mother died of grief; he himself as a warrior on the battle-field saw many a pitiable and gruesome sight; for twenty-five years he was held a prisoner in England; and his political career was a deep disappointment to all his friends and to a certain extent to himself. And yet his songs are of spring and roses and love, a deep emotion such as he must have felt rarely finding utterance. His life was nearly as highly colored as Villon's, even if in somewhat different fashion, but his achievements in the way of expression of himself cannot be compared with those of his humble rival.

This, then, is the secret of Villon's popularity: he has laid himself open for inspection in giving us an intensely human picture of his inner self. It cannot be denied that the known events of his life, as unlovely as they are in many respects, have contributed somewhat to the hold which he has had on the popular imagination, and that the very meagreness of these details has increased that hold by allowing the popular imagination to fill in the many gaps to its own liking. The fact is too obvious to permit of denial, but these things would have been powerless to act had the poet never projected himself into his work as unreservedly as he has done.

It is a strange and whimsical picture which he offers of himself, but one which is fascinating through its very strangeness

and whimsicality. Who of us cannot find in it something which comes near to him personally, be it nothing more than the feeling that we are dealing with another human being, a frère humain? Which one of us has not been guilty, if guilt be involved, of the same inconsistency, of the same hesitation, of the same uncertainty in his thoughts, as decided as he may seem in action, of which Villon seems guilty — he who was but expressing a momentary, passing feeling? For it must be remembered that Villon wrote largely under the immediate stress of circumstance, and doubtless wrote rapidly. The Grand Testament was written while he was in hiding after his return to Paris; some of the short poems were composed in the prison at Meun ; still others were written in the Châtelet; and a connection between the circumstances of their composition and the works themselves is inevitable.

Of the external man we are given to understand that he was dark-skinned and thin, and more we do not need to know, for each can complete the picture to his liking. There can be no doubt that he was alert and vivacious in manner. His friendships and the known or unknown protectors who seem to have stood back of him with aid, both financial and otherwise, in the course of his many troubles would point to a magnetic personality, and of this his works themselves bear witness. He must also have been of ready wit, a good talker and quick at repartee. He was a frequenter of taverns, led thither not alone by desire for the food and drink of which he was so very fond, but quite as much for the sake of companionship, for he was social in disposition, a good friend, faithful to his comrades and ready to help others in his way, and an equally good hater, although it should be noted that his hatred was directed solely against individuals. He was unmoral in a sense,

rather than immoral, possessed of strong appetites and of a tendency to seek instinctively the means of gratifying them, not stopping to consider or not realizing that it might be at the expense of others. He asked nothing better than to be allowed to enjoy life as his nature impelled him to enjoy it, and instinctively he sought for a chance to do so. In no wise was he in revolt against society; for that he loved men too much, was too humanly conscious of their humanity. The existence of the social classes he accepted without question, and he begrudged no man what the latter had in advantage over him. He envied them, to be sure, but merely from the point of view of the superior comfort which they enjoyed. All men were equal to him just because they were human beings, and he was as ready to be the friend of prince as of pauper. He was grateful to those who befriended him although not above a jest at their expense, and hated no one but him who he thought had done him wrong. Like a child he cried out when he was hurt, and the pain which he felt was the unreasoning, bewildered hurt of a child. Like a child, also, while naturally light-hearted, carefree, and gay, he was easily cast down, so that he became subject to fits of depression and despondency, and his moods alternate, changing suddenly from deep dejection to joyous merriment, or vice versa, seeming all the more intense for the contrast involved. Never does he completely despair, however, and even at the very height of his trouble he is able to jest. His ill health weighed him down after his imprisonment at Meun, and the deeper melancholy of the Grand Testament was due to that fact. Like that of a child is his delight in the things about him, which he observed with a keen eye and detailed with the naïvely unsparing straightforwardness of a

child. He is sympathetic with the sufferings of others, but it is worthy of note that his sympathy is limited to such sufferings as arose from causes similar to those which had produced his own sufferings and goes out especially to those who lacked what he himself felt the need of. He had a wonderful ability to put himself in the place of others in such respects and of feeling what they felt and of reproducing that feeling. This was partly the result of that sense of a common bond of humanity which was so strong in him that he could see himself in them. Himself he sees in the starving man of the street; himself in the fat monk enjoying the fullness of a life rich in sensual comforts; himself in the woman whose beauty in departing has carried away with it all that made life worth while; himself in the rich and powerful whom Death has claimed; himself in the criminal hanging from the gibbet — sometimes not a criminal by nature but an honest man gone wrong under the lash of hunger — and an icy chill passes over him and leaves his heart dead within him. He is always conscious of himself, of his poverty, of his humble condition, of his misfortunes. At the same time, however, he has the saving grace of humor and the strange power of being able to stand off and view himself objectively, as it were, and then the wit to laugh at himself for his melancholy and depression or his outbursts of hatred of the moment before.

His religious ideas are largely ~~those of a~~ child. The moral aspects of things do not enter into consideration for him, indeed, do not exist for him. He is, as has already been said, unmoral rather than immoral. Religion has for him two phases: on the one hand were the privileges in the shape of exemptions and of temporal good things enjoyed by the ecclesiastics, whom he knew to be for the most part no better, even if they were no worse, than

other men; on the other hand was the idea — the result of the teachings of the Church — of the transitoriness of this life with a life beyond made up either of a Heaven of harps and lutes or of a burning Hell. It is hardly to be doubted that the former had but little attraction for one in whose eyes this earth contained everything that he needed to realize his conception of perfect happiness, and one whose only protest was that dame Fortune had played him so ill that he had difficulty in obtaining a sufficient quantity of these good things. He has no complaint to make against life in its potentialities; to him it was the reverse of a vain and empty thing. The good things were there to be had; the sole difficulty was to get them, and for that fortune was to blame. His choice of the two alternatives, however, occasioned him no difficulty; if the first was unattractive in itself, the second was still more so, and he was perfectly sure which he desired. Heaven, to be sure, he realized, was destined as a reward to those who had led a good life on earth and Hell as a punishment for sinners, and from time to time he is seized with fits of remorse for his evil deeds, but such fits, like all his moods, are of but momentary duration. Besides, as resulted from the teachings and practices of the Church, it was too easy to obtain remission and absolution for his sins to make it necessary to worry very much about them. It was not so much a matter of gaining the rewards of Heaven as of avoiding the pains of Hell. There was no more morality involved in the matter than there is in the average child's conception of good and evil and of a life to come. Villon accepts the doctrine of Christianity without question, with the simple faith of a child, but to him it was something which had no connection with the problem of every day living, which was not an active force for better-

ment, for upright living, but rather something which dealt exclusively with the life beyond, and the longer the latter could be delayed in coming the better. Hence arose his fear of death, the horror of which consisted largely in the mere ceasing to be, in the being cut off from everything which made this life so potentially attractive. The life beyond offered but small compensation, however it might be viewed.

Villon's offenses are too great to permit of much leniency in judging them, but it is possible to explain their source. He is utterly and absolutely lacking in dignity of character, a thing of which he had no conception. Morally he was and remained a child. His temperament was peculiar, and his reaction to his environment was inevitable. On the one hand the disorders of clerical and University life were too general and far-reaching to have given him the impulse to growth in such a way as to have developed the sense of responsibility and self-respect so utterly lacking in him, and yet apparently from an early period it was in clerical circles that he lived. On the other hand, the time was so thoroughly demoralized in general, with the country ravished and laid waste by civil and foreign wars and famine rampant, that it could offer but little in the shape of enlighten^{ed} public opinion and example to a youth constituted as was Villon. Environment aiding, therefore, in accomplishing the result, Villon remained throughout a child in point of view.

In this respect he is distinctly a product of his time, than which a worse is not to be found in the history of France. Men stole, killed, and were hanged because they wanted to subsist; to live was the cry, and all else was secondary. The present moment was the only thing of reality; the future could take care of itself.

Life became viewed as a transitory thing, valued as a precious flame which was to be cherished and enjoyed as long as possible before it went out and the darkness came. Then came a fear of the darkness, the extinguisher of light, which was aggravated by the thoughts of the torments of Hell as preached by the Church. This was an age, not of ideals or morals, but an age of reality, frightful reality.

In all this it must be remembered that Villon was still but a young man when he wrote his last works, and that the majority of them were written when he was thirty or younger. Doubtless most or all of them were written hastily and under the inspiration of the feeling of the moment. The early age at which his production ceases, whatever may have been the cause, coupled with the fact that Villon was a man of such a temperament that he probably never would have grown up in the ordinary way, is quite sufficient to explain why it is that throughout his work shows the point of view of youth, its lack of reasoning and its immature judgment. The development which is observable between the Petit Testament and the Grand Testament is distinctly not one in the direction of maturity of judgment but rather in the way of realization of suffering and sorrow. He had not learned to reflect but merely to feel. His poetry is passionate, emotional, rather than intellectual in character. It does not express conviction but rather instinctive feeling; it is spontaneous and not reasoned. Hence it is that he has given such a candid picture of himself — a picture that is attractive partly with the attraction of viewing another human soul laid bare and partly with that which comes from the fact that what is exposed is the human soul shorn of all veneer and pretence

and deception.

It is hardly necessary to inquire further as to the source of Villon's poetic ability. It lay within him, in his power to feel and to express that feeling. While nothing is known of his father except that he was dead, his mother, ^{was} at least, illiterate; but he had himself had a University education, and although he confesses to having wasted his time — and there is no reason to doubt his statement — his University education had doubtless given him training in writing, at least through familiarizing him to some extent with works of literature, both classics and mediaeval, although by the very nature of things he has no occasion to show a very profound knowledge, even had he had it to show. Furthermore, his contact with the contemporary poets of the court of ^{Charles} d'Orléans and possibly elsewhere doubtless did a great deal towards refining his style.

When all has been said, however, Villon's style was and remains his own. It is a part of himself, an expression of his personality. Characteristic of the man himself is the restless vivacity with which he hurries from theme to theme in the longer poems, darting hither and thither, changing abruptly from one thing to another and then coming back to the first as abruptly. Similarly, his moods alternate, as has already been seen, and in this lies one of the charms of his style. It is not his high spirits with his gaiety, sparkling wit, and pungent satire which charm us, nor is it his low spirits with his melancholy brooding over death and kindred subjects; the charm lies in the mixture of the two, unaffectedly and naturally made. This same principle of contrast is carried out in the detail of his poems. The pathos of the woes of la belle Heaulmière, for instance, is dependent entirely upon the

contrast between her former beauty and her present hideousness; the humor of the argument of Les Contreditz de Franc-Gontier depends upon the contrast between the absurd presentation of the life of the countryman with his onions and song birds on the one hand and the picture of the luxurious life of the fat monk on the other, and the contrast is carried out in every detail. Sometimes emphasis is obtained by contrasting single sentences or phrases, as, for example, by placing the great lords by the side of those who see bread only through the windows; sometimes the contrast is brought out between words by an oxymoron of the nature of hypocrite douleur. Incongruities of thought, such as those upon which the humor of most of his legacies depends, are another common type of contrast, as also is the juxtaposition of the delicate and the coarse in the matter of thought and of statement. In direct contrast to this, however, is Villon's fondness for childlike exaggeration and repetition, of which some of the ballades offer good examples, such as the Ballade des langues envieuses, the Ballade contre les mesdisans de France, and the Ballade des proverbes. Somewhat similar is his liking for long enumerations of personages, as in the Ballade des Dames du temps jadis and other poems.

Another striking element of Villon's style is his masterly use of words and expressions. He excels in choosing the precise term to call up a vivid picture, and his work throughout is remarkable for its conciseness of expression. He is very frequently quaint and picturesque with his homespun figures and proverbs, although at times his language passes beyond the bounds of mere buffoonery even and, becomes incredibly coarse and vulgar, smacking of the circles where it probably originated. Especially striking is his knack of seizing upon an appropriate refrain to sum up the

thought or purpose of the poem, of which many examples were cited in the preceding chapter.

It is difficult to tell to what extent Villon profited by his University education. His style, as has been seen, was so thoroughly his own that there can be but little doubt that his education affected it only indirectly. He abounds in allusions to classical, Biblical, and mediaeval events and persons, but in no case is there any indication of very extensive knowledge. He seems to have read something of classical mythology and ⁿ ancient history, and to have known something about contemporary history. Of the literature of the middle ages he is familiar with the Roman de la Rose, the farce of Pathelin, which may have been a production of his own time, and perhaps the Miracle de Théophile, at the same time that he was not familiar enough with the French of the preceding centuries to be able to write it correctly, as his Ballade en vieil françois shows conclusively. He is acquainted with the Commentary on Aristotle of Averroès, and knew enough logic to be able to burlesque the scholastic arguments of the day. Beyond this there is very little to be gathered from his works.

In thought and attitude Villon was distinctly of his age. It was a period of transition from the middle ages to the Renaissance, and like all periods of transition was one of general chaos. The old age was disintegrating, and the new had not reached such a stage of development that it was as yet taking definite form. Doubt was beginning to assail the mediaeval fortress of faith; new ideas were beginning to come in to struggle with ^{the} old and to blaze the way for the age of enlightenment. Villon's religious being with his faith in God and his fear of death and Hell after death for the sinner is typically mediaeval. His disrespect for the

officers of the Church in their corrupt lives is the effect of a new influence which was to grow into a protest and bring about a revolution and a reformation in the Church. Villon was not a reformer nor an advocate of reform, but his cry of distress because of the poverty which filled the land through the whims and petty selfishness of the nobles who wanted war for the sake of their own aggrandisement is but the expression of the discontent which already possessed the hearts of the lower classes and which was destined to grow into bold speech of protest and finally into the roar which attended the storming of the Bastille. Furthermore, in his lack of serious thought, in his policy of laissez faire, and in his pessimistic belief in the supremacy of fate, Villon is mediaeval. In one respect, at least, he anticipated the Renaissance, and that is in his doctrine of the necessity of enjoying the moment, a theme which the poets of the Renaissance employ repeatedly. In more ways than one Villon personifies his day. He is an incarnation of the esprit gaulois which informs so much of the mediaeval literature and which has reappeared in different guises and in different degree in many writers since then, the two most striking instances being, perhaps, Rabelais and Molière. In so far at least is Villon typically French..

His popularity seems to have been great. The first edition of his works in 1489 was followed by at least ^{fourteen} others before the careful edition of Clément Marot appeared in 1533, and this in its turn was followed by a number of others. Still more striking evidence of the popularity of the poem is that given by Marot in the preface to his edition where in speaking of the methods which he had followed in emending the corrupted text of the earlier edition,

hé says that he had done it partly with the aid of some good ^{old} men who knew some of the poems by heart⁽¹⁾. After the time of Marot, however, interest in Villon waned. This was due partly to the fact that much of his work was no longer intelligible, but more especially to the reformation in poetry brought about by Ronsard and the Pléiade and the consequent contempt which was felt for everything that had been produced anterior to that movement. The seventeenth century evinces little or no interest in Villon, although Boileau speaks approvingly of him.⁽²⁾ Between 1542 and 1854 but three editions of Villon were published: those of 1723, 1732, and 1742, respectively, the latter at the Hague. In more recent times Villon has been the subject for investigation by a number of scholars, but interest in him has been confined largely to small circles of admirers. The most noteworthy attempts to revive interest in him in modern days have been made by the Villon Society of England, a group which, composed in part of noted poets like Swinburne, has done much by discussion and translation to further a better understanding of the obscurities in which Villon abounds. Finally, it may be mentioned in passing that Villon in his character of rogue has been the prototype of a number of works of fiction, beginning shortly after his own day and extending down to very recent times.

Critics have generally agreed in assigning to Villon the honor of being the first modern French poet, and the justice of this is not to be questioned. If the picture which he presents is appallingly sordid, with its taverns and its prisons, its thieves,

(1) Jannet, p. 2.

(2) Art Poétique, *ChI*, 116-117.

its murderers, and its women whose characters are far from being doubtful, it is none the less startlingly real; if the revelation which he makes of himself is that of one who was utterly lacking in strength and dignity of character, who was a petty thief and swindler, it is none the less vividly human. One may regret that Villon was not an honest man, but if he had been we would probably have lost the poet; and, as Théophile Gautier remarks, poets are much scarcer than honest men, although honest men are none too abundant.⁽³⁾ In taking leave of him, then, let us at least feel grateful to him for what he has given us and pity him as he requests, if we can:

"Frères humains qui après nous vivez,
N'ayez les cœurs contre nous endurciz."⁽⁴⁾

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(3) Les Grotesques. Edition of Charpentier p. 13.

(4) L'Épitaphe.

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