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# The Life and Poetry of Francois Villon

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LIFE  
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ERANCOIS  
FRANÇOIS  
VILLON*

by AUSTIN E. FIFE

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by AUSTIN E. FIFE

*Professor of French*

*Thirty-Eighth Honor Lecture  
The Faculty Association*

## AUTHOR'S NOTE

The highest hope of the teacher of literature is to illuminate life in the flame of experience: not in the sense that history repeats itself, but rather that particular significance can be given to the here and now when it is experienced through minds with uniquely true sight.

One such mind is that of the fifteenth century French poet, François Villon. He sought out life with all his senses. He examined human experience with all his strength of vision, never once burying his head in the sands of wishful thinking because what he saw was beyond endurance. Though writing in the fourteen-hundreds he has been called "modern." We might say that he is great because his vision transcends time: that he is "modern" because he is timeless. Perhaps this is because he pits the precious and fragile continuum of life against the static nihilism of death, than which even the most degraded life is preferable.

This lecture is not one for experts on the fifteenth-century with a special interest in Villon. Rather it is a literature teacher's effort to concentrate in one fifty-minute capsule the substance of Villon's thought and craftsmanship for listeners willing to take a trip into realms of hyper-being where many shun to go. Villon's life and his poetic creativity are inseparable and, hence, they are interlaced in this lecture. Texts have been selected from half a dozen of the translators who have sought to inject the best of Villon's thought into the stream of English verse. In a few cases the translations are my own. In the printed brochure of this lecture Villon's own texts are given bi-laterally so that readers competent in Middle French may experience his art first hand: it is never easy and often impossible to transport great poetry across linguistic frontiers.

For the French texts we have followed Longnon (1941). Subsequent to his work more definitive texts have been established. However, since these were not available to the translators cited, we have preferred to rely on earlier texts.

— *Austin E. Fife*

## *THE LIFE AND POETRY OF FRANÇOIS VILLON*

It is Christmas eve 1456, or nearly so: Villon, seated at his study table, nervously pushes a goose quill across a manuscript which is now fifteen or twenty pages in length. He hesitates, searches for words or rhymes. As he raises his head to look through the mansard window across the room, the light from his candle falls upon his face: you would take this young man of twenty-five for a much older person. His face is thin, cheek bones and nose are sharp and covered by a swarthy skin, eyes sunken, black pockets thereunder like eggplants. His lower lip is thin, its expression wavering between sardonic humor and downright bitterness. The upper lip especially makes his expression striking for it hangs down in a knotted and ill-shaped mass bespeaking the thrust of a cutlass.

When the verses refused to flow Villon cursed, walked back and forth across the room, looked anxiously through the window into the darkness of Paris. "Why in heaven," he thought, "do I bother with these silly verses? It's Christmas eve and there is the great city out there beckoning. Ah! Well! Anyway things will be different tomorrow — tomorrow." Then he became still and thoughtful and as he leaned on the sill of his tiny window a variety of harsh emotions played on his lips and in his eyes — sadness, followed by resentment and hatred, followed by the spirit of revenge, lust, greed, cunning. Then, as he recalled the unfinished poem on his desk, he heard the bells of Sorbonne University ringing through the fog. "That's it!" he said, "Just the lines to usher in the conclusion to my poem." As he pushed his pen, he recited in a cracked voice:

Finalemēt, en escripvant,  
Ce soir, seulet, estant en bonne,  
Dictant ces laiz & descripvant,  
I'ois la cloche de Serbonne,  
Qui tousiours à neuf heures sonne  
Le Salut que l'Ange predict;  
Si suspendis & mis cy bonne,  
Pour prier comme le cuer dit.

At last, while sitting at my writing  
To-night, alone, in humour prime,  
This lay composing and enditing,  
I heard the Sorbonne belfrey chime  
At nine o'clock, its proper time,  
The Angelus rang through the air;  
And so an end was made, for I'm  
Accustomed then to say a prayer.

The five concluding stanzas flowed smoothly from mind to pen after which he rose from his chair and, reaching for a dagger on a corner of his desk, carefully adjusted it beneath the folds of his cloak. And then he pinched the candle and went downstairs on tiptoe so as not to disturb his foster father, the prior of *Notre Dame la Bientournée*, a little church close by the great Sorbonne University.

In a few minutes Villon had reached the *Mule Café* where a motley array of scoundrels, thugs, and wenches had gathered to celebrate the birth of Christ in their way. There was drinking, joking, and loud laughter as mixed groups around crowded tables drained their glasses, beat them on the table and clamoured for more wine. One table attracted particular attention: six men gathered around, glasses sparkling with red wine, yet not giving themselves wholly over to the unrestrained hilarity of the other groups. They were talking in whispers and their words were in dead earnest.

Let's look at these six men, each separately, they being so typical of the poet's self-chosen associates. First there was round-faced Guy Tabary — a student of the university who had flunked most of his courses out of indifference, if not indeed from lack of talent. But he was a good scribe and was known to have made lovely manuscripts of a novel written by a schoolmate (Villon), one which has not survived the ravages of time. But Guy was obedient and could be used as a dependable stooge in any situation from the faking of an examination to the breaking of a strongbox.

Then there was a mysterious fellow in monkish garb whom the others addressed as "Dom Nicolas." It was said that he was from Picardy, and there is a good chance that he had been the headache of more than one abbot from whose monastery he had been evicted.

Beside Dom Nicolas was a man with the clothing and mien of a gentleman. Well-dressed, with clean-cut moustache and well-kept hair suggesting the aristocrat out on a lark — except for the fact that he was suspiciously at home in this Left Bank environment: Regnier de Montigny, an aristocrat indeed, but one who was attempting to make up for the financial ruin of his family by devices illegal, immoral, or otherwise suspect. The criminal records of a few years later tell that he was hanged on the gibbet for stealing certain holy vessels from the altar of Saint Mary in a cathedral of Tourraine.

Next, our eyes fall on the chunky figure of a chap called Little John. The subsequent criminal record of this son of one of the most famous locksmiths of the fifteenth-century has not come down to us. But he was suspiciously skillful in the finer techniques of his father's trade, known as the best manipulator of locks and lock-picking hooks in all Paris. The

very brain of that fellow was in his finger-tips, and there was nothing in the way of strongboxes from a lady's vanity case to the coffers of kings that would not unfold their most secret and precious contents to his magical touch.

The fifth of the group was obviously the leader and fully qualified for his high position. He, Colin des Cayeux, had been recognized for a decade as a prince in the hierarchy of skulduggery in all of its elaborate branches — a man of mystery, said secretly to be a leader of the greatest band of thieves and outlaws of fifteenth-century France. Only Little John could beat him at the dextrous art of lock-picking, and no one of his associates ever presumed to give him back-talk. Some three years after the evening which we are describing, he was finally taken for a horrible crime comprising grand theft and highway robbery complicated by assault, battery, and rape. Court records testify that he too ended his days on the scaffold.

Finally, there was one Michel Mouton, otherwise known as François de Montcoubier, François des Loges, and François Villon. The criminal record of this man is much more complete and it is supplemented by further illuminating information gleaned from his poetry. A score of official entries in the criminal records of Paris and the hundred-odd pages of poetry which he wrote leave a record sufficient to give us a fairly accurate estimate of his moral decadence — and of his perceptive and sensitive mind. He had been adopted as a child by a professor of canon law. At thirteen years of age he had been sent to the Sorbonne to study theology and the liberal arts in preparation for the clergy. Some years later he had received the required certificates and was eligible for an appointment in the Church. He had received a fair smattering of Latin language and literature and even a bit of Greek. He had been exposed to the Scriptures and commentaries of Augustine and Aquinas and had soundly belabored the works of Aristotle. But this represented only the academic side of his "liberal education." Starting by stealing ducks in the moats that surrounded the city of Paris, he had progressively run the gauntlet of minor and major crimes which included disturbing the peace, drunkenness, pickpocketing, petty larceny, grand theft, and manslaughter, so that now he could sit beside the great Colin des Cayeux with honor. Before he was twenty he had committed all seven of the deadly sins much belabored by theologians of the day. That nasty scar on his upper lip he had received in a dagger fight with a priest who died at Villon's hand. Besides all this, he had attained some little fame as a writer of verses which, along with his scar, evoked from the thugs and wenches who knew him some awe if not admiration as well. On this very evening he had completed, although his poorest poem, still the best one that had been written in France in his century.

By about eleven o'clock the secret parley of thugs had come to an end. They leaned back in their chairs, called for more wine, and entered

cautiously into the frivolity of the crowd. A clutch of wenches sided in among them, exchanging greetings and caresses. Someone had the bright idea that it might be fun if François recited a few poems, for what, besides wine, was better to celebrate the nativity of Our Lord than poetry? Villon was flattered by the compliment, his natural reticence having been washed away by more than one glass of ruddy beverage. He climbed upon a table and in thieves' jargon recited some pleasant and rollicking verses which we shall not quote here. Then he turned to a

## *BALLADE DE BONNE DOCTRINE*

### *A Ceux de Mauvaise Vie*

#### I

Car ou soies porteur de bulles,  
Pipeur ou hasardeur de dez,  
Tailleur de faulx coings, tu te brusles,  
Comme ceulx que sont eschaudez,  
Traistres parjurs, de foy vuydez;  
Soies larron, ravis ou pillés:  
Où en va l'acquest, que ciudez?  
Tout aux tavernes & aux filles.

#### II

Ryme, raille, cymballe, luttés,  
Comme fol, fainctif; eshontez;  
Farce; broulle; ioue des fleustes;  
Fais, es villes & es citez,  
Farces, ieux & moralitez;  
Gaigne au berlanc, au glic, aux quilles.  
Aussi bien va — or escoutez —  
Tout aux tavernes & aux filles.

#### III

De telz ordures te reculles;  
Laboure, fauche champs & prez;  
Sers & pense chevaulx & mulles;  
S'auncunement tu n'es lettrez;  
Assez auras, se prens en grez.  
Mais, se chanvre broyes ou tilles  
Ne tens ton labour qu'as ouvrez  
Tout aux tavernes & aux filles.

#### Envoi

Chausses, pourpains esguilletez  
Robes, & toutes voz drappilles,  
Ains que vos fassiez pis, portez  
Tout aux tavernes & aux filles.

more serious vein and recited a *Ballad of Good Doctrine to Those of Ill Life*. When he had written it he may have been penitent. For this particular audience it would gain in ludicrousness in proportion to the gravity of tone given to it by the author.

## *BALLAD OF GOOD DOCTRINE TO THOSE OF ILL LIFE*

(translated by John Payne)

### I

Peddle indulgences, as you may:  
Cog the dice for your cheating throws:  
Try if counterfeit coin will pay,  
At risk of roasting at last, like those  
That deal in treason. Lie and glose,  
Rob and ravish: what profit it?  
Who gets the purchase, do you suppose?  
Taverns and wenches, every whit.

### II

Rhyme, rail, wrestle, and cymbals play:  
Flute and fool it in mummers' shows:  
Along with the strolling players stray  
From town to city, without repose;  
Act mysteries, farces, imbroglios;  
Win money at gleek or a lucky hit  
At the pins: like water, away it flows;  
Taverns and wenches, every whit.

### III

Turn from your evil courses I pray,  
That smell so foul in a decent nose:  
Earn your bread in some honest way.  
If you have no letters, nor verse nor prose,  
Plough or groom horses, beat hemp or toze,  
Enough shall you have if you think but fit:  
But cast not your wage to each wind that blows;  
Taverns and wenches, every whit.

### Envoi

Doublets, pourpoints and silken hose,  
Gowns and linen, woven or knit,  
Ere your wede's worn, away it goes;  
Taverns and wenches, every whit.

The merry-makers burst forth in peals of laughter and Villon was so overjoyed that he recited a variation on the same theme, in thieves' slang. It was for his rollicking verses in this obscure pidgin French that he was especially famous among contemporaries. Besides, he knew that the contrast between the serious tone of his first poem and the curt mischievousness of the Parisian underworld would be especially delightful to this audience.

## VILLON'S STRAIGHT TIP TO ALL CROSS COVES

William Ernest Henley

Suppose you screeve? or go cheap-jack  
Or fake the broads? or fig a nag?  
Or thimble-rig? or knap a yack?  
Or pitch a snide? or smash a rag?  
Suppose you duff? or nose and lag?  
Or get the straight, and land your pot?  
How do you melt the multy swag,  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

Fiddle, or fence, or mace or mack,  
Or moskeneer, or flash the dag;  
Dead-lurk a crib, or do a crack,  
Pad with a slang, or chuck a fag;  
Bonnet, or tout, or mump and gag;  
Rattle the tats, or mark the spot:  
You cannot bag a single stag —  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

Suppose you try a different tack,  
And on the square you flash your flag?  
At penny-a-lining make your whack,  
Or with the mummers mump and gag?  
For nix, for nix the dibs you bag?  
At any graft, no matter what,  
Your merry goblins soon stravag —  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

Envoi

It's up the spout and Charley Wag  
With wipes and tickers and what not;  
Until the squeezer nips your scrag,  
Booze and the blowens cop the lot.

By the time that the bells of Notre Dame and a hundred other churches were ringing out the birth of Christ, five of the six rogues just described were making their way through the narrow streets of Paris toward the College of Navarre, one of the faculties of Sorbonne and Villon's *alma mater*. Leaving Tabary in the street as a watch, the other four scaled the high wall and in a short time were nervously yet dexterously manipulating their hooks in the locks of the great strong box of the University. After an hour or so all the locks had given way before the touch of Little John and the thugs were dividing the spoils equally between themselves, reserving only a pittance for their dumb but faithful watchdog, Tabary. They celebrated their success over another glass of wine at the *Mule* and then, when dawn was breaking, went their separate ways.

Villon sneaked to his room on tiptoe, lighted his taper, and then, instead of going to bed, set about packing a few odd things into a sack. He spread his loot out upon his desk and counted it — 125 gold crowns — more money than he had handled in all his previous life! What he wasn't going to do with all that! What meals he'd eat: ducks, chickens, roast pork, capons, and luscious brown roasted chestnuts! What wines he'd drink now! Red sparkling Burgundy that had aged in sealed bottles for years! Crystal white Bordeaux, and exotic wines from Spain, Portugal, Arabia! And what revelries and orgies he'd indulge in! No fat bourgeois would take Margot or Janneton out of his arms now because he couldn't match the pay! Few men were ever more lustful than Villon — and few ever felt its cost more acutely.

He slipped the gold coins one by one into a money belt, buckled it securely around his waist and, shouldering his pack, slipped out of the home of his benevolent foster father, out of the city of his birth, and into the countryside of France. At first his tour in the provinces was a treat. He had no thought for money, no studies, no examinations! He was free! Especially, he was out of sight of the arrogant Catherine of Vaucelles who had led him on so heartlessly and so far and then seen him beaten and thrown into the street naked at the very moment when he believed his desire was going to be rewarded. This was the tomorrow Villon had looked forward to on Christmas eve as he was finishing *The Lesser Testament*.

Life was a paradise for a few weeks. And then, alas! A host of difficulties arose to make this dreamed-of tomorrow more ugly and more unhappy than his irresponsible and dissolute yesterday. He was thrown into prison for disturbing the peace: these provincial people were aloof and unresponsive to his urbane and amoral tastes. Worst of all, he discovered that the mad, bad, rollicking life of the great city of light was indispensable. He could live, he supposed, without the love of Kate of Vaucelles, but how could he get along without the *Mule Café*, thug friends, Margot and Janneton? To this poet, the beauties of the countryside meant nothing. One wonders if he ever noticed the sun set or the

moon pass through a white cloud or the green loveliness of a dew sprinkled pasture. No! This pastoral loveliness meant nothing to this poet. His was a mind responsive only to the trials of man's spirit, the anguish of man's soul. And so Paris with its mad array of passions, its mass of humanity, became just as necessary to him as water is to a thirsting desert animal.

Once when he sneaked back to the great city of light he discovered to his horror that Tabary had had a run-in with the police and that when they had put him to the torture he had squealed the whole story of the College of Navarre so that now he, François Villon, was a hunted man. He fled to the provinces once more. He evaded the police. He spent his money. He begged and stole, and most of all he longed for some opportunity to return to the city of his happiness.

This exile gave a new and tragically serious turn to the poet's thoughts. As he walked on and on from village to village, hiding by day and walking by night, he mulled over the whole fabric of his past life. It was horrible! What a mess he had made of life! How prodigal he had been of golden opportunities enjoyed as the adopted son of a distinguished man and as a scholar in the greatest of all universities! These thoughts and the rhythm of his walking (or of his heartbeat) led to the composition of poems in which he lays bare his very soul.  
Left, right, left, right, one two, one two —

## *BALLADE DES MENUS PROPOS*

Je congnois bien mouches en let,  
Je congnois à la robe l'homme,  
Je congnois le beau temps du let,  
Je congnois au pommier la pomme,  
Je congnois l'arbre à veoir la gomme,  
Je congnois quant tout est de mesmes,  
Je congnois qui besongne ou chomme,  
Je congnois tout, fors que moy mesmes.

Je congnois pourpoint au colet,  
Je congnois le moyne à la gonne,  
Je congnois le maistre au varlet,  
Je congnois au voile la nonne,  
Je congnois quant pipeur iargonne,  
Je congnois fols nourris de cresmes,  
Je congnois le vin à la tonne,  
Je congnois tout, fors que moy mesmes.

Je congnois cheval & mulet,  
Je congnois leur charge & leur somme,  
Je congnois Bietrix & Bellet,  
Je congnois get qui nombre & somme,  
Je congnois vision et somme,  
Je congnois la faulte des Boesmes,  
Je congnois le pouvoir de Romme,  
Je congnois tout, fors que moy mesmes,

### Envoi

Prince, ie congnois tout en somme,  
Je congnois coulourés & blesmes,  
Je congnois mort qui tous consomme,  
Je congnois tout, fors que moy mesmes.

## *BALLAD OF THINGS KNOWN AND UNKNOWN*

(translated by John Payne)

Flies in the milk I know full well:  
I know men by the clothes they wear:  
I know the walnut by the shell:  
I know the foul sky from the fair:  
I know the pear-tree by the pear:  
I know the worker from the drone  
And eke the good wheat from the tare:  
I know all save myself alone.

I know the pourpoint by the fell  
And by his gown I know the frère:  
Master by varlet I can spell:  
Nuns by the veils that hide their hair:  
I know the sharper and his snare  
And fools that fat on cates have grown:  
Wines by the cask I can compare:  
I know all save myself alone.

I know how horse from mule to tell:  
I know the load that each can bear:  
I know both Beatrice and Bell:  
I know the hazards, odd and pair:  
I know of visions in the air:  
I know the power of Peter's throne  
And how misled Bohemians were:  
I know all save myself alone.

### **Envoi**

Prince, I know all things: fat and spare:  
Ruddy and pale, to me are known:  
And Death that endeth all our care:  
I know all save myself alone.

Then he dreamed of his school lectures, of the learned works that he had read and poems committed to memory. No, he hadn't been a bad scholar. He could still recite from the dialogues of Plato. He knew the names of the great men of the past and the deeds of each. Ah! Yes! The past, the past! How mysterious, how immediate, and how remote! And if death has left us written records of the past it is only to remind us with what cruel heartlessness she had dealt with the beautiful women and handsome lords of bygone days.

### *BALLADE DES DAMES DU TEMPS IADIS*

Dictes moy où, n'en quel pays,  
Est Flora, la belle Rommaine;  
Archipiada, ne Thaïs,  
Que fut sa cousine germaine;  
Echo, parlant quant bruyt on maine  
Dessus rivièrre ou sus estan,  
Qui beaulté ot trop plus qu'humaine  
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!

Où est la tres sage Helloïs,  
Pous qui fut chastré & puis moyne  
Pierre Esbaillart à Saint-Denis?  
Pour son amour ot cest essoyne.  
Semblablement, où est la royne  
Qui commanda que Buridan  
Fust gecté en vng sac en Saine?  
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!

La royne Blanche comme lis,  
Qui chantoit à voix de seraine;  
Berte au grant pié, Bietris, Allis;  
Haremburgis qui tint le Maine,  
Et Iehanne, la bonne Lorraine,  
Qu'Englois brulerent à Rouan;  
Où sont elles, Vierge souveraine? . .  
Mais où sont les neiges d'antan!

#### Envoi

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

## *BALLAD OF THE LADIES OF OLDEN TIMES*

(translated by Austin E. Fife,  
with apologies to Rossetti for the refrain)

Tell me where, in what land of peace,  
Is Flora, pretty maid of Rome,  
Alcibiades, and fair Thaïs;  
And, hallooing from her distant home  
O'er streams that never cease to roam  
And lakes that are motionless and clear,  
Echo, whose voice was light as foam!  
O where are the snows of yesteryear?

And where is the prudent Heloise  
For whom Abelard endured great pain  
And doffed the cowl at Saint Denis?  
('Twas love that proffered him this bain.)  
Where too the queen who would ordain  
That Buridan, a sack for bier,  
Be thrown into the seething Seine?  
O where are the snows of yesteryear?

Queen Blanche, as fair as fleur-de-lys,  
Whose singing voice the sirens feign;  
Broad-foot Bertha, Beatrice, Alice;  
Eremburgis who ruled o'er Maine,  
And Joan, the maiden of Lorraine,  
At Rouen the English burned her sere:  
Where are they, Virgin who dost reign?  
O where are the snows of yesteryear?

### Envoi

Prince, I pray thee, ask not this day  
Where they may be; ne'er beg to hear,  
Lest this refrain my grief betray;  
O where are the snows of yesteryear.

Villon's knowledge of the opposite sex was quantitative and superficial and his opinion of women dismal indeed. Yet in at least two instances, his mother's service to Our Lady (which we shall come back to later), and *The Death of His Lady*, he broke the fetters of his bias to perceive and evoke if not ideal womanhood, at least his own stark dependency thereon.

Mort, i'appelle de to rigueur,  
Qui m'as ma maistresse ravie,  
Et n'es pas encore assouvie,  
Se tu ne me tiens en langueur.  
Onc puis n'eus force ne vigueur!  
Mais que te nuysoit elle en vie,

Mort?

Deux estions, & n'avions qu'vng cuer;  
S'il est mort, force est que devie,  
Voire, ou que ie vive sans vie,  
Comme les images, par cuer,

Mort!

*TO THE DEATH OF HIS LADY*

(translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti)

Death, of thee do I make my moan,  
Who hadst my lady away from me,  
Nor wilt assuage thine enmity  
Till with her life thou hast mine own;  
For since that hour my strength has flown.  
Lo! what wrong was her life to thee,  
Death?

Two we were, and the heart was one;  
Which now being dead, dead I must be,  
Or seem alive as lifelessly  
As in the choir the painted stone,  
Death!

He recalled a touching scene observed in his beloved Paris: three frail old women hugging a waning fire to keep from freezing. And he recalled that once they had been fair young ladies whose sight alone made the heart of every swain jump into his throat. Yes! Why, wasn't that one mumbling to herself the famous Helmet Maker's daughter — once renown as a queen in certain quarters for her unsurpassed beauty?

## *LES REGRETS DE LA BELLE HÉAVLMIERE*

### I

Advis m'est que i'oy regreter  
La belle qui fut hëaulmiere,  
Soy ieune fille soushaicter  
Et parler en telle maniere:  
“Ha! viellesse felonne & fiere,  
Pourquoy m'as si tost abatue?  
Qui me tient? qui? que ne me fiere?  
Et qu'à ce coup ie ne me tue?”

### VI

“Qu'est devenu ce front poly,  
Ces cheveulx blons, sourcilz voutliz,  
Grant entroeil, le regart ioly,  
Dont prenoie les plus soubtilz;  
Ce beau nez droit, grant ne petit;  
Ces petites ioinctes oreilles,  
Menton fourchu, cler vis traictiz,  
Et ces belles levres vermeilles?”

### VIII

“Le front ridé, les cheveux gris,  
Les sourcilz cheuz, les yeulz estains,  
Qui faisoient regards & ris,  
Dont mains marchans furent attains;  
Nez courbes, de beaulté loingtains;  
Orielles pendans & moussues;  
Le vis pally, mort & destains;  
Menton froncé, levres peaussues;

### X

“Ainsi le bon temps regretons  
Entre nous, povres vielles sotes,  
Assises bas, à crouppetons,  
Tout en vng tas comme pelotes,  
A petit feu de chenevotes  
Tost allumées, tost estaintes;  
Et iadis fusmes si mignotes! . . .  
Ainsi emprent à mains & maintes.”

## THE COMPLAINT OF THE FAIR ARMOURESS

(translated by Algernon Charles Swinburne)

### I

Meseemeth I heard cry and groan  
That sweet who was the armourer's maid;  
For her young years she made sore moan,  
And right upon this wise she said;  
"Ah fierce old age with foul bald head,  
To spoil fair things thou art over fain;  
Who holdeth me? who? would God I were dead!  
Would God I were well dead and slain!

### VI

"Where is my faultless forehead's white,  
The lifted eyebrows, soft gold hair,  
Eyes wide apart and keen of sight,  
With subtle skill in the amorous air;  
The straight nose, great nor small, but fair,  
The small carved ears of shapeliest growth,  
Chin dimpling, colour good to wear,  
And sweet red splendid kissing mouth?

### VIII

"A writhled forehead, hair gone grey,  
Fallen eyebrows, eyes gone blind and red,  
Their laughs and looks all fled away,  
Yea, all that smote men's hearts are fled;  
The bowed nose, fallen from goodlihead;  
Foul flapping ears like water-flags;  
Peaked chin, and cheeks all waste and dead,  
And lips that are two skinny rags:

### X

"So we make moan for the old sweet days,  
Poor old light women, two or three  
Squatting above the straw-fire's blaze,  
The bosom crushed against the knee,  
Like fagots on a heap we be,  
Round fires soon lit, soon quenched and done;  
And we were once so sweet, even we!  
Thus fareth many and many an one."

Out of desperation at ever fleeing from justice Villon decided to present himself to Charles of Orleans, then residing in his castle at Blois, and to beg protection. Now Charles was the brother of the King of France and the best poet of the fifteenth-century, after Villon, of course.

He entertained benevolently, encouraging and protecting poets of whom a dozen or more were then in residence at Blois. Villon's fame both as a poet and as a thug had preceded him. Villon's early poems and his implication in the robbery of the College of Navarre were familiar to Charles. Nevertheless, this benevolent nobleman deigned to receive Villon in his court and to give him a pension. But Villon was not long for a show-window life such as this. So much attention to dress and ceremony and petty court trivialities were downright boresome to a man whose body and spirit had been ever free to explore every spiritual and earthly frontier. How he must have yawned while long and stupid poems were read before the assembled court! If there was anything that Villon couldn't stand, it was verse filled with sweet nothings, and the court of

Charles of Orleans was a mass production plant for just such poetry. One day, so the story goes, when the "court of love" was opened and Charles announced that all the poets there assembled would improvise and recite a poem on the theme, "I die of thirst beside the fountain," it all suddenly became clear to Villon. Here he, François Villon, was wasting away in the heart of plenty, thirsting, indeed, in a very oasis! He turned the topic over a time or two in his mind, and without asking for a pen, he chose his rhymes and composed his piece. After a dozen poems were recited in which Venus, Aphrodite, Adonis, Beleraphonte, Hercules, Sisyphus, Tantalus, and the nine muses, each named separately, were all presented as dying of thirst beside the fountain of love or something, Charles asked Villon to recite. He stepped forth and began nervously:

## BALLADE DV CONCOVRS DE BLOIS

### I

Le meurs de seuf au près de la fontaine,  
Chault comme feu, & tremble dent a dent;  
En mon païs suis en terre loingtaine;  
Lez vng brasier frissonne tout ardent;  
Nu comme vng ver, vestu en president;  
Le riz en pleurs, & attens sans espoir;  
Confort reprens en triste desespoir;  
Le m'esiouys & n'ay plaisir aucun;  
Puissant ie suis sans force & sans pouvoir;  
Bien recueully, débouté de chascun.

### II

Rien ne m'est seur que la chose incertaine;  
Obscur, fors ce qui est tout evident;  
Doubte ne fais, fors en chose certaine;  
Science tiens à soudain accident;  
Le gaigne tout, & demeure perdent;  
Au point du jour, diz: "Dieu vous doint bon soir!"  
Gisant en vers, i'ay grand paour de cheoir;  
I'ay bien de quoy, & si n'en ay pas vng;  
Eschoicte attens, & d'omme ne suis hoir;  
Bien recueully, débouté de chascun.

### III

De riens n'ay soing, si mectz toute ma paine  
D'acquérir biens, & n'y suis pretendent;  
Qui mieulx me dit, c'est cil qui plus m'attaine,  
Et qui plus vray, lors plus me va bourdent;  
Mon amy est, qui me fait entendre  
D'vng cigne blanc que c'est vng corbeau noir;  
Et qui me nuyst, croy qu'il m'ayde à pouvoir;  
Bourde, verité, aujourd'uy m'est vn;  
Le retiens tout; rien ne sçay concevoir;  
Bien recueully, débouté de chascun.

### Envoi

Prince clement, or vous plaise sçavoir  
Que i'entends moult, & n'ay sens ne sçavoir;  
Parcial suis, à toutes loys commun.  
Que fais ie plus? Quoy? Les gaiges ravoir,  
Bien recueully, débouté de chascun.

*BALLAD WRITTEN BY VILLON UPON A SUBJECT  
PROPOSED BY CHARLES DUC D'ORLEANS*

(translated by John Payne)

I

I die of thirst, although the spring's at hand;  
Hot as fire, my teeth with cold do shake:  
In my own town, I'm in a foreign land;  
Hard by a burning brazier do I quake;  
Clad like a king, yet naked as a snake.  
I laugh through tears, expect sans hope soe'er  
And comfort take amidward despair;  
Glad, though I joy in nought beneath the sun,  
Potent am I, and yet as weak as air;  
Well entertained, rebuffed of every one.

II

Nought's dim to me save what I understand;  
Uncertain things alone for sure I take;  
I doubt but facts that all unquestioned stand;  
I'm only wise by chance for a whim's sake;  
"Give you good-night!" I say, whenas I wake;  
Lying at my length, of falling I beware;  
I've goods enough, yet not a crown to spare!  
Leave off a loser, though I still have won;  
Await bequests, although to none I'm heir;  
Well entertained, rebuffed of every one.

III

I care for nought, yet all my life I've planned  
Goods to acquire, although I've none at stake;  
They speak me fairest, by whom most I'm banned,  
And truest, who most mock of me do make:  
He is my friend, who causes me mistake  
Black ravens for white swans and foul for fair;  
Who doth me hurt, I hold him debonair;  
'Twixt truth and lying difference see I none;  
Nought I conceive, yet all in mind I bear;  
Well entertained, rebuffed of every one.

Envoi

Most clement Prince, I'd have you be aware  
That I'm like all and yet apart and rare;  
Much understand, yet wit and knowledge shun:  
To have my wage again is all my care;  
Well entertained, rebuffed of every one.

It was in vain that Charles asked Villon to remain at Blois. No! The open road and flight from the law were better than to play at life as children play at dolls. Again Villon wandered, and again his nine and twenty ways of getting money, most of which were unscrupulous, were not sufficient to pay bills incurred by his ninety and two ways of spending money, many of which were indecent. So one evening we see Villon slip into a church. Twirling his three-cornered hat nervously in his fingers he walks slowly to the shrine of the Holy Virgin Mother and kneels down before her image. "I know," he began, "that you won't condemn me just because I am an indecent sinner and a thief. You pardoned Theophilus even after he had sold his soul to the devil. You sanctified Mary of Egypt though she had seduced a boat load of pilgrims.

*Necessité fait gens mesprendre,  
Et faim saillir loup du bois.*

'Tis need drives men to devilment.  
And hunger wolves to leave the wood!

And so, Holy Virgin Mary, I beg you to forgive me."

He crossed himself and got up. One by one he removed the burning tapers from the silver candelabra before the statue of the Holy Virgin and stood them one by one directly upon the altar. He slipped the silver candelabra and chalice under his gown and stole away into the night. I like to think that as he fled the Holy Mother smiled a bit and thought to herself, "Oh, well, the good Bishop will have another service for me and poor Villon is so wretched!" Whether this was her thought or not I don't know, but I do know that the Bishop of Meung was not indulgent. He alerted the police and in a few days the wretched poet was hunted down and imprisoned. He had committed the most serious crime one could commit in the fifteenth-century next to murder, and he was sentenced to hang. But before being hanged Villon was tortured in order to get him to confess to certain other crimes committed in the region. Particularly, they wanted him to tell what he knew about the famous band of the *Coquillards* that had wrought havoc in this section of France for

a decade and of which Colin des Cayeux, whose reputation we already know, was probably a leader. But just a day or two before Villon was to "hang by the neck until dead" a gratuitous event took place. Charles the Seventh had died and his successor, Louis XI, was passing through Meung on his way to Orleans. Now in those days it was customary for a king, when traveling, to free convicts along his way as a symbol of benevolence. So, fortuitously, Villon was saved from the gibbet and given his freedom.

By this time he had been nearly four years away from his beloved Paris. It was all he could stand. Come what may he had to go back to his old haunts, and perhaps there, he thought, he could pull himself together and patch up the pieces of his shameful life. And besides, surely the affair of the College of Navarre had blown over by now! So he returned to Paris and, remaining in seclusion most of the time, he gave his *Great Testament* its final shape. This poem is his masterpiece and contains the greater part of the poems presented in this lecture. In the guise of making his last will and testament the poet bestows abundantly upon friend and enemy the few things that he really did possess and many that he did not. His old shoes to this one, his sword, which was in pawn, to another if he would pay the pawnshop charge. Among the bequests is one of the finest inheritances that any person ever received:

*Item, donne à ma povre mere  
Pour saluer nostre Maistresse,  
Qui pour moy ot douleur amere,  
Dieu le scet, & mainte tristesse;*

Item. I leave to mother dear,  
Who suffered from my evil ways  
God knows, the song ensuing here  
Wherewith to give our Lady praise;

And then follows the ballad which critics cite as the best poem in praise of the Virgin Mary ever written.

*BALLADE QUE VILLON FEIT A LA REQVESTE DE  
SA MERE POVR PRIER NOSTRE DAME*

Dame des cieulx, regente terrienne,  
Emperiere des infernaux paluz,  
Recevez moy, vostre humble chrestienne,  
Que comprinse soye entre vos esluez,  
Ce non obstant qu'oncques riens ne valuz.  
Les biens de vous, ma dame & ma maistresse,  
Sont trop plus grans que ne suis percheresse,  
Sans lesquelz biens ame ne peut merir  
N'avoir les cieulx, ie n'en suis iungleresse.  
En ceste foy ie vueil vivre & mourir.

A vostre Filz dictes que ie suis sienne;  
De luy soyent mes pechiez aboluz:  
Pardonne moy comme à l'Egipcienne,  
Ou comme il feist au clerc Théophilus,  
Lequel par vous fut quitte & absoluz,  
Combien qu'il eust au deable fait promesse.  
Preservez moy, que ne face iamais ce,  
Vierge portant, sans rompure encourir  
Le sacrement qu'on celebre a la messe.  
En ceste foy ie vueil vivre & mourir.

Femme ie suis povrette & ancienne,  
Qui riens ne sçay; oncques lettre ne leuz;  
Au moustier v<sup>o</sup>y dont suis paroissienne  
Paradis paint, où sont harpes & luz  
Et vng enfer où dampnez sont boulluz:  
L'vng me fait paour l'autre ioye & liesse.  
La ioye avoir me fay, haulte Deesse,  
A qui pecheurs doivent tous recourir,  
Comblez de foy, sans fainte ne paresse.  
En ceste foy ie vueil vivre & mourir.

Envoi

Vous portastes, digne Vierge, princesse,  
Jesus regnant, qui n'a ne fin ne cesse,  
Le Tout-Puissant, prenant nostre foiblesse,  
Laissa les cieulx & nous vint secourir,  
Offrit à mort so tres chiere ieunesse.  
Nostre Seigneur tel est, tel le confesse.  
En ceste foy ie vueil vivre et mourir.

## *HIS MOTHER'S SERVICE TO OUR LADY*

(translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti)

Lady of Heaven and earth, and therewithal  
Crowned Empress of the nether clefts of Hell, —  
I, thy poor Christian, on thy name do call,  
Commending me to thee, with thee to dwell,  
Albeit in nought I be commendable.  
But all mine undeserving may not mar  
Such mercies as thy sovereign mercies are;  
Without the which (as true words testify)  
No soul can reach thy Heaven so fair and far.  
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.

Unto thy Son say thou that I am His,  
And to me graceless make Him gracious.  
Sad Mary of Egypt lacked not of that bliss,  
Nor yet the sorrowful clerk Theophilus,  
Whose bitter sins were set aside even thus  
Though to the Fiend his bounden service was.  
Oh help me, lest in vain for me should pass  
(Sweet Virgin that shalt have no loss thereby!)  
The blessed Host and sacring of the Mass.  
Even in this faith I choose to live and die.

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

O excellent Virgin Princess; thou didst bear  
King Jesus, the most excellent comforter,  
Who even of this our weakness craved a share  
And for our sake stooped to us from on high,  
Offering to death His young life sweet and fair.  
Such as He is, Our Lord, I Him declare,  
And in this faith I choose to live and die.

Villon lived a studious and secluded life for two or three months. By day he worked long and hard on his *magnum opus* and then at night, if he went out for a glass of wine and a little talk with a chance stranger in a cafe, it was only to return home early — before the tavern guests grew too rowdy and before his tongue was loosed by too much wine. But he grew less cautious, stayed out later, drank more. And then one night he was taken, being an innocent bystander in a street brawl, and was thrown into prison. When he was examined the whole sad business of the College of Navarre was reopened, and it was not long before the attorneys of the University had secured a sentence against him that he be “hanged and strangled.” It was here in a Paris prison that Villon wrote his last poems. The thousand tragedies of his life had ruined his health and broken completely his all too rebellious spirit. The poet, who six years before had heaped ridicule upon every social institution in some

of the most satiric and sardonic poems that have ever been written, now saw only too clearly that he and not society was largely to blame. Yes, he deserved to be hanged, and now that he was to get what was coming to him he wasn't the coward to lay the blame elsewhere. He had seen many a hanging in his day — had laughed at the hideous expressions on the faces and the naked bodies of the criminals as they dangled in the breeze. And now he was himself to hang and be laughed at by a similar scoffing and insensitive crowd. Thus was formulated in his mind the thoughts of a great poem — the greatest that he, François Villon, had written. This poem he wrote as his own epitaph, and he left it as the final essence of his poetic spirit — a monument to all eternity that François Villon, the murderer and thief, had experienced the pity of human life as had few others.

## L'EPITAPHE EN FORME DE BALLADE

Que fait Villon pour luy & ses compagnons,  
s'attendant estre pendu avec eux.

Freres humains, qui après nous vivez,  
N'ayez les cuers contre nous endurcis,  
Car, se pitié de nous povres avez,  
Dieu en aura plus tost de vous mercis.  
Vous nous voiez cy atachez cinq, six:  
Quant de la chair, que trop avons nourrie,  
Elle est pieça devorée & pourrie,  
Et nous, les os, devenons cendre & pouldre,  
De nostre mal personne ne s'en rie,  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

Se freres vous clamons, pas n'en devez  
Avoir desdaing, quoy que fusmes occis  
Par iustice. Toutesfois, vous sçavez  
Que tous hommes n'ont pas bon sens assis;  
Excusez nous — puis que sommes transsis —  
Envers le filz de la Vierge Marie,  
Que sa grace ne soit pour nous tarie  
Nous preservant de l'infemale fouldre.  
Nous sommes mors, ame ne nous harie;  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

La pluye nous a buez & lavez,  
Et el soleil desechez & noircis;  
Pies, corbeaulx, nous ont les yeux cavez,  
Et arraché la barbe & les sourcilz.  
Iamais, nul temps, nous ne sommes assis;  
Puis çà, puis là, comme le vent varie,  
A son plaisir sans cesser nous charie,  
Plus becquetez d'oiseaulx que dez à coudre.  
Ne soiez donc de nostre confrairie,  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

### Envoi

Prince Ihesus, qui sur tous a maistrie,  
Garde qu'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie:  
A luy n'ayons que faire ne que souldre.  
Hommes, ici n'a point de mocquerie,  
Mais priez Dieu que tous nous vueille absouldre!

## THE EPITAPH OF VILLON

(translated by Austin E. Fife)

Mortal brothers, who after us shall live,  
    May you not your hearts against us harden,  
If charity to our poor souls you give  
    The sooner God your many sins will pardon.  
You see us, six, upon the gallows thrust,  
    As for the flesh, which we have too well fed,  
    Since long ago it is devoured and dead,  
And we, the bones, become as ash and dust.  
    Of our sad plight, may no one gail,  
    But pray to God that he forgive us all.

If brothers now we call you, don't complain,  
    We know full well the weight of our offense,  
And so 'tis just that we should thus be slain.  
    Yet know, all men can't have good common sense.  
    A prayer, we ask, since our life is run,  
    Before the throne of the Holy Virgin's Son.  
Lest the fountain of His grace for us be small.  
    Since we are dead and gone, mock us no one,  
But pray to God that He forgive us all.

We are scoured and beaten by the storm's harsh blows,  
    And dried and blackened by the burning sun,  
Our eyes have been plucked by magpies and crows;  
    Of eyebrows and beard there remaineth none,  
    At no time do our bodies hang at ease,  
    But here and there in the restless breeze  
They are tossed about in ruthless glee,  
    More pecked than thimble with pittings small.  
Then be not of our confraternity,  
    But pray to God that He forgive us all.

### Envoi

Prince Jesus, who o'er all men dost reign,  
Pray, leave us not to Hell's unceasing bane,  
    For we want not that Satan us enthrall,  
Who'er ye be, do not our plight profane,  
    But pray to God that He forgive us all.

One morning, just a few days before Villon was to hang, an officer of the court came and explained that through the efforts of his foster father, the sentence had been commuted to eternal banishment from Paris. He left the prison, took leave of his foster father, and with heavy footsteps passed through the gates of the city of light and out into the countryside . “Yes, banishment is better than hanging, I suppose,” he thought. Then he turned around and sat by the roadside and watched the shadows fall on the towers of the city of his life and of his dreams. And when it had become so dark that he saw no more, he picked up his frail, disease-worn body and began walking. Left, right, one, two, left, right — over the horizon and into eternity.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Since 1960 Austin E. Fife has served at Utah State University as a professor of French and head of the Department of Languages and Philosophy.

Following three years of undergraduate work at Utah State University, he transferred to Stanford University, receiving a B.A. there in 1934 and an M.A. in 1935. He completed work for a second Master's degree in Romance Philology at Harvard in 1936. He then returned to Stanford where he completed work for the Ph.D. in Romance Languages and Literature in 1939.

In most of his career Mr. Fife has been a teacher of French language and literature (Santa Monica City College, 1939-1942; Occidental College, 1946-1958; Utah State University, since 1960). He has maintained an avocational interest in the folklore of the American West in which he has co-authored with Mrs. Fife three books and many journal articles. He has also co-edited or co-authored two Utah State University Monographs.

He was a Fellow of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation in 1958-1959. Previously he had spent a year in France at the *Musée des Arts et Traditions Populaires* on the Fulbright exchange program, and translated *The Borzoi Book of French Folk Tales*. He also served with the U.S. Office of Education as program officer for research in the neglected languages under the National Defense Education Act.

Mr. Fife's doctoral dissertation and several of his published articles are in the area of Medieval literature and mythology.

*THIRTY-SEVENTH FACULTY HONOR LECTURE  
DELIVERED AT THE UNIVERSITY*

A basic objective of The Faculty Association of the Utah State University, in the words of its constitution, is:

to encourage intellectual growth and development of its members by sponsoring and arranging for the publication of two annual faculty research lectures in the fields, of (1) the biological and exact sciences, including engineering, called the Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Natural Sciences; and (2) the humanities and social sciences, including education and business administration, called the Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Humanities.

The administration of the University is sympathetic with these aims and shares, through the Scholarly Publications Committee, the costs of publishing and distributing these lectures.

Lecturers are chosen by a standing committee of the Faculty Association. Among the factors considered by the committee in choosing lecturers are, in the words of the constitution:

(1) creative activity in the field of the proposed lecture; (2) publication of research through recognized channels in the field of the proposed lecture; (3) outstanding teaching over an extended period of years; (4) personal influence in developing the character of the students.

Austin E. Fife was selected by the committee to deliver the Annual Faculty Honor Lecture in the Humanities. On behalf of the members of the Association we are happy to present Dr. Fife's paper:

*THE LIFE AND POETRY OF FRANCOIS VILLON*

*Committee on Faculty Honor Lecture*

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