

# FRANÇOIS VILLON, THE HEAVENLY ROBBER

*Posted on July 1, 2022 by Osip Mandelstam*



*This essay, by the Russian poet Osip Mandelstam (1891-1938) was written in 1910 (or perhaps 1912) and revised in 1927 and is a tribute not only to the medieval poet, but a meditation on exile and the quest for unadorned reality and the Divine.*

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## I

Astronomers accurately predict the return of a comet, after a long period of time. For those who know Villon, the Verlaine phenomenon appears to be just such an astronomical miracle. The resonance of both voices is strikingly similar. But apart from timbre and biography, the two poets are bound together by almost the same mission in the literature of their time. Both were destined to appear in an age of artificial, hothouse poetry, and just as Verlaine smashed the *serres chaudes* [an allusion to Maeterlinck's collection of poems *Hothouses* (1889)] of symbolism, Villon challenged the mighty rhetorical school that can rightly be considered fifteenth-century symbolism. The famous *Roman de la Rose* first built an impenetrable fence, within which the warming atmosphere necessary for the survival of the allegories created by this Romance continued to flourish. Love, Danger, Hate, and Insidiousness are not dead abstractions. They are not incorporeal. Medieval poetry gives these ghosts an astral body, as it were, and tenderly cares for the artificial air so necessary to sustain their fragile existence. The garden where these peculiar characters live is enclosed by a high wall. The lover, as the beginning of the *Roman de la Rose* tells us, wandered for a long time around this fence in a vain search for an unobtrusive entrance.

Poetry and life in the fifteenth century were two independent, hostile dimensions. It is hard to believe that Maître Allain Chartier was subjected to real persecution and endured life's troubles, arming public opinion of the time with a too-harsh sentence on the Cruel Lady, whom he drowned in a well of tears, after a brilliant trial, with all the subtleties of medieval legal procedure. Fifteenth-century poetry is autonomous; it occupies a place in the culture of the time, like a state within a state. Recall the Court of Love of Charles VI: a variety of seven hundred ranks, from the highest signoria to petty bourgeois and lower clerics. The exceptionally literary character of this institution explains the disdain for class partitions. The hypnosis of literature was so strong that members of such associations walked around the streets adorned with green wreaths, a symbol of falling in love, wishing to prolong the literary dream in reality.

François Montcorbier (de Loge) was born in Paris in 1431, during the English rule. The poverty that surrounded his cradle combined with the misery of the people and, in particular, with the misery of the capital. One might expect the literature of the time to be filled with patriotic pathos and a thirst for revenge for the offended dignity of the nation. Neither Villon nor his contemporaries, however, had such sentiments. France, enslaved by foreigners, showed herself to be a real woman. As a woman in captivity, she gave her main attention to the minutiae of her cultural and domestic toilette, looking curiously at the victors. High society, following its poets, was still carried away dreaming into the fourth dimension of the Gardens of Love and the Gardens of Joy, while for the people the tavern lights were lit in the evenings and farces and mysteries played out on holidays.

The feminine and passive era left a deep imprint on Villon's destiny and character. Throughout his dissolute life he carried the unshakable conviction that someone had to take care of him, manage his affairs and bail him out of difficulties. Even as a mature man, thrown by the Bishop of Orleans into the lower dungeon of Meung sur Loire, he cried out to his friends: "Le laisserez-vous là, le pauvre Villon" [Will you leave there, poor Villon]. François Montcorbier's social career began when he was taken into the care of Guillaume Villon, honorary canon of the monastery church of Saint Benoit le Bestourné. By Villon's own admission, the old canon was "more than a mother" to him. In 1449 he received his baccalaureate degree; in 1452 his licentiate and maître. "Oh Lord, if I had studied in the days of my reckless youth and devoted myself to good manners—I would have had a home and a soft bed. But what can I say! I ran away from school like a wicked boy; as I write these words my heart bleeds." Strange as it may seem, Maître François Villon at one time had several pupils and taught them, as best he could, the wisdom of school. But, in his characteristic honesty, he was aware that he had no right to be called Master, and he preferred to call himself a "poor little scholar" in his ballads. And it was especially difficult for Villon to study, since, as if on purpose, the student riots of 1451-1453 happened during his years of study.

Medieval people liked to think of themselves as children of the city, the church, the university. But the "children of the university" exceptionally acquired a taste for mischief. A heroic hunt was organized for the most popular signs of the Paris market. The deer was to marry the Goat and the Bear, and the Parrot was supposed to be presented to the young as a gift. The students stole a boundary stone from the possessions of Mademoiselle La Bryuère, erected it on Mount St. Genevieve, calling it *La Vesse* (the fart) and, forcibly grabbing it from authorities, fastened it to the spot with iron hoops. On the round stone

they placed another, oblong one, the *Pêt au Diable*, and worshipped them at night, showering them with flowers, dancing around them to the sound of flutes and tambourines. The enraged butchers and the offended lady made a case. The Prevost of Paris declared war on the students. The two jurisdictions clashed—and the defiant sergeants had to kneel, with lighted candles in their hands, to beg the rector's forgiveness. Villon, who was undoubtedly at the center of these events, chronicled them in his novel *Pêt au Diable* [the Devil's Fart], which has not survived.

### III

Villon was a Parisian. He loved the city and idleness. He had no affection for nature and even mocked it. Already in the fifteenth century, Paris was the sea in which one could swim without being bored and forgetting about the rest of the universe. But how easy it is to stumble upon one of the countless reefs of idle existence! Villon became a murderer. The passivity of his fate is remarkable. It is as if it were waiting to be impregnated by chance, whether evil or good. In a ridiculous street fight on June 5, Villon kills the priest Chermoit with a heavy stone. Sentenced to hang, he appealed and, pardoned, went into exile. Vagrancy finally shook his morals, bringing him into the criminal gang la Coquille, of which he became a member. On his return to Paris, he participated in a major theft at the Collège de Navarre and immediately fled to Angers—because of unrequited love, he asserted, but in reality to set things up for robbing his rich uncle. Fleeing from the Parisian skyline, Villon published the *Little Testament*. Years of indiscriminate wandering followed, with stops at feudal courts and prisons. Amnestied by Louis XI on 2 October 1461, Villon went into deep creative turmoil, his thoughts and feelings became unusually acute, and he created the *Great Testament*, his monument to the ages. In November 1463 Francois Villon was an eye-witness to a quarrel and a murder in the Rue Saint Jacques. Here ends our account of his life and his dark biography.

### IV

The fifteenth century was cruel to personal fates. It turned many decent and sober people into Job, grumbling at the bottom of their stinking dungeons and accusing God of injustice. A special kind of prison poetry was created, imbued with biblical bitterness and severity, as far as it is accessible to the polite Romance soul. But out of the chorus of prisoners, Villon's voice stands out sharply. His rebellion is more like a court trial than a rebellion. He managed to combine in one person the plaintiff and the defendant. Villon's attitude never crossed the known boundaries of intimacy. He is gentle, considerate, caring to himself no more than a good lawyer is to his client. Self-pity is a parasitic feeling, detrimental

to the soul and the body. But the dry legal pity with which Villon invests himself is for him a source of vivacity and unwavering confidence in the rightness of his "case." A thoroughly immoral "amoral" man, as a true descendant of the Romans, he lives entirely in the legal world and cannot think of any relationship outside the jurisdiction and norm. The lyric poet, by nature, is a bipolar being, capable of innumerable cleavages in the name of inner dialogue. In no one is this "lyrical hermaphroditism" more pronounced than in Villon. What a diverse selection of charming duets: the grief-stricken and the comforter, mother and child, judge and defendant, proprietor and beggar.

Property, all his life, beckoned to Villon like a musical siren and made him a thief... and a poet. A miserable vagabond, he appropriated for himself the goods unavailable to him with a sharp irony.

Modern French Symbolists are in love with things, like possessive owners. Perhaps the very "soul of things" is nothing other than the sense of ownership, spiritualized and ennobled in the laboratory of successive generations. Villon was well aware of the gulf between subject and object, but understood it as the impossibility of possession. The moon and other neutral "objects" are irrevocably excluded from his poetic habitat. On the other hand, he is immediately animated when he speaks of ducks roasted with sauce or of eternal bliss, which he never loses the final hope of appropriating for himself.

Villon paints a charming *intérieur* in Dutch taste, peeking through the keyhole.

## V

Villon's sympathy for the scum of society, for everything suspicious and criminal, is by no means demonic. The shady company, which he so quickly and intimately became part of, captivated his feminine nature with a great temperament, a powerful rhythm of life that he could not find in other walks of life. One should listen with what savor Villon tells, in the [Ballade de la grosse Margot](#), about the profession of pimping, to which he was obviously no stranger: "When clients come, I grab a jug and run for wine."

Neither ebbing feudalism nor the newly emerged bourgeoisie, with its pull for Flemish gravity and importance, could provide an outlet to the enormous dynamic capacity, somehow miraculously accumulated and concentrated in the Parisian cleric. Withered and black, beardless, as thin as a Chimera, with a head that resembled, by his own admission, a peeled and toasted walnut, hiding his

sword in the half-woman's garb of a student—Villon lived in Paris like a squirrel in a wheel, not knowing a moment's peace. He loved the ravenous, gaunt beast in him and treasured his battered skin: "Isn't it true, Granier, that I did well to appeal," he writes to his prosecutor, having escaped the gallows, "not every beast would have managed to wriggle out like that." If Villon had been able to give his poetic credo, he would surely have exclaimed, like Verlaine:

Du mouvement avant toute chose! [Movement above all else – Verlaine: Music above all]

A powerful visionary, he dreams of his own hanging, on the eve of his probable execution. But, strangely, with incomprehensible exasperation and rhythmic fervor, he depicts in his ballad how the wind sways the bodies of the unfortunate, back and forth, at will... And he endows death with dynamic qualities and here manages to show a love of rhythm and movement... I think it wasn't the demonism that captivated Villon, but the dynamics of the crime. I don't know if there is an inverse relationship between the moral and the dynamic of the soul? In any case, both of Villon's *Testaments*, big and little—this feast of magnificent rhythms, the kind French poetry still does not know—are incurably immoral.

The wretched vagabond writes his will twice, distributing left and right his imaginary possessions like a poet, ironically asserting his dominion over all the things he wishes to possess: if Villon's mental experiences, for all their originality, were not particularly profound, his relationships in life—a tangled web of acquaintances, connections, accounts—represented a complex of ingenious complexity. This man contrived to become a living, vital relation to a huge number of persons of the most varied rank, at all rungs of the social ladder, from the thief to the bishop, from the alewife to the prince. With what pleasure he tells their background! How precise and marked he is! Villon's *Testaments* are ever captivating because they report a lot of accurate information. The reader feels that he can make use of them, and he feels like a contemporary of the poet. The present moment can withstand the pressure of centuries and retain its integrity, remain the same "now." One has only to be able to pluck it out of the soil of time without damaging its roots—otherwise it will wither away. Villon knew how to do this. The bell of the Sorbonne that interrupted his work on the *Little Testament* still rings.

Like the troubadour princes, Villon "sang in his Latin": once, as a schoolboy, he had heard of Alcibiades—and as a result the stranger *Archipiade* joins the graceful procession of the Ladies of former times.

## VI

The Middle Ages clung tenaciously to its children and did not voluntarily yield to the Renaissance. The blood of the true Middle Ages flowed in Villon's veins. To it he owed his integrity, his temperament, his spiritual peculiarity. The physiology of the Gothic—and such it was, and the Middle Ages are precisely the physiologically-genius era—replaced Villon's worldview and rewarded him abundantly for his lack of a traditional connection to the past. Moreover, it provided him with a place of honor in the future, as nineteenth-century French poetry drew its strength from the same national treasury, the Gothic. They will say: what has the magnificent rhythmic of the *Testaments*, now trickling like a bilboquet, now slowed down like a church cantilena, to do with the mastery of Gothic architects? But isn't the Gothic the triumph of dynamism? Another question is, what is more fluid, more dynamic—the Gothic cathedral or the oceanic ripple? What, if not a sense of architectonics, explains the wondrous balance of the stanza in which Villon entrusts his soul to the Trinity through the Mother of God—the *Chambre dela Divinité*—and the nine heavenly legions. It is not an anemic flight on the wax wings of immortality, but an architecturally based ascent, corresponding to the tiers of the Gothic cathedral. He who first proclaimed in architecture the moving equilibrium of the masses and built the crossed vault gave an ingenious expression to the psychological essence of feudalism.

Medieval man considered himself in the world building as necessary and bound as any stone in the Gothic edifice, enduring with dignity the pressure of his neighbors and entering as an inevitable stake in the general game of forces. To serve was not only to be active for the common good. Unconsciously, medieval man regarded service, a kind of deed, as the unvarnished fact of his existence. Villon, an afterthought, an epigone of the feudal worldview, was immune to its ethical side, the circular bond. The stable, moral in the Gothic was quite alien to him. On the other hand, indifferent to the dynamic, he elevated it to the level of amorality. Villon twice received letters of pardon—*lettres de remission*—from kings: Charles VII and Louis XI. He was firmly convinced that he would receive the same letter from God, with forgiveness for all his sins. Perhaps, in the spirit of his dry and reasoned mysticism, he put up the ladder of feudal jurisdictions into infinity, and a wild but deeply feudal feeling roamed vaguely in his soul that there was a God above God...

"I know well that I am not the son of an angel crowned with the diadem of a star or another planet," said of himself the poor Parisian schoolboy, capable of much for a good dinner.

Such denials are tantamount to positive certainties.

1910 (1912?), 1927

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*Featured: "François Villon," woodcut from Grand Testament de Maistre François Villon, 1489.*



