

Chapter 1

Villon: a dying man

A dying man can speak his mind.

– Villon, *Testament*, line 728

French literature of the Middle Ages is enormously rich and varied. It comprises, among other genres, heroic epics, courtly romances, verse narratives, religious drama, fables and lyric poetry. In recent years study of medieval French literature has been revitalized by innovative critical approaches that encourage the reading of relevant texts in terms of a literary culture built on sophisticated (and often playful) rewriting of traditional stories. Such approaches imply a fluid notion of literary creation untrammelled by restrictive notions of ‘author’ and ‘text’: ‘Medieval writers acknowledge that texts do not derive exclusively from or belong to their authors, that they have multiple origins, that they are indeed “a tissue of quotations” and, above all, that they go on developing and evolving as they are read, reread and rewritten in transmission.’¹ The lyric poet François Villon (c. 1431 – after 1463) recasts the courtly ideals and conventional pieties of medieval literary tradition, subverting his models by writing in a predominantly ironic mode. Lyric poetry and first-person narratives before Villon are strongly allegorical, and rarely the expression of individualized sentiment; lacking a clear historical dimension, they deal in stock character types (such as the knight-errant, despairing lover, repentant sinner, etc.) and are written in highly stylized poetic language. The greatest impact of Villon’s work, as David Georgi argues, is its contribution to the emergence of the intimate first-person voice in European poetry.² Villon also created, in his life and work, the figure of the *poète maudit* (the accursed poet, or poet with endless bad luck), who would become a familiar feature of the French poetic tradition.³ The poetic persona he developed evokes the experience of a marginal man living in a recognizable social reality: he engages imaginatively with the great themes of the literature and art of his age – death, the vagaries of fate, the ravages of time – in conjunction with poverty and the fragility of existence in fifteenth-century Paris.

2 Villon: a dying man

A fictional will

The main elements of what we know about Villon's life are as follows: he attended the University of Paris in the 1450s, obtaining his bachelor's degree in 1449 and a master of arts in 1452; he killed a priest, apparently in self-defence, in 1455, and fled Paris; he petitioned the King for a pardon, which was granted in January 1456; back in Paris at Christmas 1456, he was involved in a burglary of the Collège de Navarre (a rich residential college for students at the Sorbonne) and again fled Paris; his whereabouts during the next few years are unclear, but he seems to have visited the court of Charles (the Duke) of Orléans and was imprisoned for several months at Meung-sur-Loire by the Bishop of Orléans; he was released in a general amnesty in July 1461 when the new king, Louis XI, passed through Meung; he returned to Paris, but in November 1462 was implicated in a serious riot and, given his record, was sentenced to hang; on appeal, in January 1463, the sentence was commuted to ten years' exile from Paris. Nothing further is known of Villon.

Villon's reputation is based on *The Legacy* or *Bequests* (*Le Lais*, 1456), a work of 320 lines; his masterpiece, the *Testament* (1461), consisting of about 2000 lines; and sixteen miscellaneous poems. *The Legacy* is cast in the form of a series of burlesque bequests to friends and acquaintances, in which he gives away a comic collection of items. To the woman who has treated him badly he leaves his heart; to his barber he leaves some hair-clippings; to his cobbler he leaves his worn-out old boots. The *Testament*, similarly, is a mock will, purportedly dictated on his deathbed by a poor, lovelorn scholar named François Villon. It is interspersed with *ballades* and *rondeaux*, of which the most famous are the 'Ballad of Olde-Time Ladies' (*Ballade des dames du temps jadis*), the 'Ballad of Olde-Time Lords' (*Ballade des seigneurs du temps jadis*), and the 'Ballad of Fat Margot' (*Ballade de la Grosse Margot*). Villon takes as his subject matter the familiar *topoi* of his time (the tribulations of love, the brevity of youth, the fact of ageing, the pervasiveness of death), but there is nothing chivalric or idealized about his treatment of them. The tone of the *Testament* is often irreverent and decidedly unromantic. When he speaks directly of poverty, his vision is frankly materialist:

I have had my loves, it's true enough,
 and I would love to have some more,
 but a sad heart and a stomach
 that's barely ever one-third full
 knock me out of the lovers' race.
 So let another take my place,

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88708-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature

Brian Nelson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*A fictional will* 3

One whose keg stands full on his pins;
The feet only dance as the belly allows.

Trans. David Georgi

Bien est verté que j'è aymé
Et aymeroye volentiers,
Mais triste cueur, ventre affamé,
Qui n'est rassasié au tiers,
M'oste des amoureux sentiers.
Au fort, quelc'um s'en recompence
Qui est remply sur les chantiers,
Car la dance vient de la pance.

Lines 193–200

Despite Villon's use of a confessional first-person narrator, the *Testament* is not to be read as autobiography. Indeed, it is vital to distinguish between Villon the man and Villon the poet. The poem's appealing directness belies its artful fabrication. Critics such as Tony Hunt and Jane Taylor have persuasively argued that the narrative 'I' is, first and foremost, a literary construct, part of a rhetorical performance which, through its juxtaposition of different voices, disorients the reader and challenges him to question some of the commonplaces (about love and sexuality, morality and the sources of wisdom, etc.) of Villon's time. The narrator-testator, 'Villon', uses a variety of guises and a range of registers – vituperative, sarcastic, melancholic, tender, ribald, derisive – to meditate on life, love and death. The primary characteristic of the *Testament* is its disruptive and subversive nature, especially its subversion of poetic convention. Elevated poetic diction, associated with courtly language, is frequently undercut by everyday speech, including obscenity; parody is used to send up courtly love poems – as in the provocatively vulgar 'Ballad of Fat Margot', in which the narrator, having led the reader to expect that he will be listening to a chivalric speaker celebrating his love, presents himself self-mockingly as the pimp of a fat prostitute, well past her prime; and irony is used to undermine all forms of authority – the authority of conventional wisdom as embodied in classical and biblical tradition (the poem is brimming with learned references), figures of moral authority and, above all, the authority of a consistent authorial voice. This type of authorial inconsistency is strikingly highlighted in the final *ballade* of the *Testament*, in which 'Villon' is depicted as dead, and a new, unidentified narrator steps forward. This narrator describes the protagonist, on his deathbed, expressing not conventional regret for the past, repentance for his sins or a hankering for eternal life, but defiant delight in the pleasures of the moment.

4 *Villon: a dying man*

In sober truth it went like this:
 he died with nothing but rags to his name,
 and even as he died he felt
 Love prick him one last cruel time,
 sharper than the prong of a buckle
 on the strap of a big old baldric;
 and with that, he was astonishing
 when just about to leave this world.

My Prince, noble as a falcon,
 hear what he did as he took his leave:
 he downed a gulp of dark red wine
 when just about to leave this world.

Trans. David Georgi

Il est ainsi et tellement:
 Quant mourut, n'avoit qu'un haillon.
 Qui plus, en mourant, mallement
 L'espoignoit d'Amours l'esguillon;
 Plus agu que le ranguillon
 D'un baudrier lui faisoit sentir
 – C'est de quoy nous esmerveillon –,
 Quant de ce monde vould partir.

Prince, gent comme esmerillon,
 Saichiez qu'il fist au departir:
 Ung traict but de vin morillon,
 Quant de ce monde vould partir.

'The Ballad of the Hanged'

Villon's 'Ballad of the Hanged' (*Ballade des pendus*; also known as 'Villon's Epitaph') is a miscellaneous ballad, not written as part of the *Testament*. It is, along with the 'Ballad of Olde-Time Ladies', his most famous poem and has been described as 'one of the most moving of all lyric poems to have been written in the French language'.⁴

Oh brother humans who live after us,
 Do not towards us make your hearts so hard,
 For if you can pity us poor men,
 Upon you God will lay a winning card;
 You see here five or six of us sans lard,

'The Ballad of the Hanged' 5

The flesh we nourished when alive quite gone,
 Devoured, abandoned, rotted to the bone,
 We bones ourselves will soon be ash to fall.
 Please no one laugh at what has here been done,
 But pray to God that he'll forgive us all.

If we claim you as brothers, you must not
 Disdain us, though it's true we were destroyed
 By justice; nonetheless, you know the lot
 Of men is hardly wisdom to embroid;
 Beg pardon for us, for we have annoyed
 The Son of Heaven, and it's He we fear,
 May He give us his grace, and hold us dear,
 Preserve us from the pit's infernal pall –
 Now we are dead, no man torments us here,
 But pray to God that he'll forgive us all.

The rain has drenched us, and has washed us bare,
 The sun has dried us off and blackened us;
 Magpies and crows have fed upon our hair,
 And pecked our eyes, and drunk our milky pus;
 Not for a moment can we stop to cuss,
 First here, then there, as the capricious wind
 Desires, we're forced eternally to wind;
 By birds we've been more pitted than a thimble.
 Do not then seek to join our blighted kind,
 But pray to God that he'll forgive us all.

Prince Jesus, lord of heaven's golden shower,
 Keep us from hell's rapacious abattoir,
 That we may never to its abyss fall –
 This is no place to mock us, men, nor hour,
 But pray to God that he'll forgive us all.

Trans. Justin Clemens
 (translation slightly modified)

Frères humains, qui après nous vivez,
 N'ayez les cœurs contre nous endurcis,
 Car, si pitié de nous pauvres avez,
 Dieu en aura plus tôt de vous mercis.
 Vous nous voyez ci attachés, cinq, six:
 Quant à la chair, que trop avons nourrie,
 Elle est pièce dévorée et pourrie,
 Et nous, les os, devenons cendre et poudre.
 De notre mal personne ne s'en rie;

6 *Villon: a dying man*

Mais priez Dieu que tous nous veuille absoudre!
 Si frères vous clamons, pas n'en devez
 Avoir dédain, quoique fûmes occis
 Par justice. Toutefois, vous savez
 Que tous hommes n'ont pas bon sens rassis.
 Excusez-nous, puisque sommes transis,
 Envers le fils de la Vierge Marie,
 Que sa grâce ne soit pour nous tarie,
 Nous préservant de l'infernale foudre.
 Nous sommes morts, âme ne nous harie,
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous veuille absoudre!

La pluie nous a débués et lavés,
 Et le soleil desséchés et noircis.
 Pies, corbeaux nous ont les yeux cavés,
 Et arraché la barbe et les sourcils.
 Jamais nul temps nous ne sommes assis
 Puis çà, puis là, comme le vent varie,
 A son plaisir sans cesser nous charrie,
 Plus becquetés d'oiseaux que dés à coudre.
 Ne soyez donc de notre confrérie;
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous veuille absoudre!

Prince Jésus, qui sur tous a maistrerie,
 Garde qu'Enfer n'ait de nous seigneurie:
 A lui n'ayons que faire ne que soudre.
 Hommes, ici n'a point de moquerie;
 Mais priez Dieu que tous nous veuille absoudre!

The poem is redolent of Villon's thematic universe (a haunting preoccupation with mortality, the tension between flesh and spirit, the question of salvation and God's judgement). Its moving quality depends partly on its graphic imagery (especially in the third stanza, which evokes the stripping of the flesh) and partly on the apparent simplicity of the speaking voice; however, this simplicity belies a rhetorical structure marked by characteristic ambiguity. Who is speaking? The first person of the *Testament* has disappeared; instead of an 'I' there is a 'we' who address a plural 'you'. The voice may be singular, speaking for the hanged men on the gibbet, or choral, with the dead speaking as a group. The speaker(s) ask(s) not only that passers-by feel pity for them but that, according to contemporary convention, they (as faithful Christians) intercede with God through their prayers so that the dead men may be absolved of their sins (lines 15–18). The full rhetorical effect of the poem lies, however, in the interplay between speaker(s) and addressees and in the ambiguity inscribed

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-88708-3 - The Cambridge Introduction to French Literature

Brian Nelson

Excerpt

[More information](#)*'The Ballad of the Hanged'* 7

into the 'us' of the refrain ('But pray to God that he'll forgive us all'). And a further ambiguity comes into play: the 'poor' of the third line. 'Poor' is Villon's most-used epithet for himself throughout the *Testament* ('Poor I am, and from my youth, Born of a poor and humble stock', lines 273–74), and he speaks throughout the text of poverty that is both economic and spiritual. A link is made in the poem between criminality (and hence condemnation) and poverty, thus problematizing the concepts of judgement and morality. By the end of the poem the 'us all' ('tous nous') of the refrain embraces the hanged men, the passers-by and all mankind (the English 'us all', absorbing the 'tous', is more emphatic than the French 'nous'). In other words, the initial phrase 'brother humans' is fully realized as part of a rhetorical strategy that culminates in the suggestion that the passers-by are part of the universal brotherhood of man, in which no one may assume the right to judge criminals, for we shall all be viewed as sinners at the Last Judgement.

Chapter 2

Rabelais: the uses of laughter

... laughter is of man the very marrow.

– Rabelais, *Gargantua*, ‘To the Reader’

The comic fictions of the scholar, physician and one-time monk François Rabelais (?1494–1553), and the senses in which he may be described as ‘a Renaissance writer’, cannot be fully understood without a knowledge of the historical context in which he wrote. The Renaissance is commonly held to mark the end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the modern world. The term ‘Renaissance’, derived from the French word for rebirth, refers to a cultural movement that began in fourteenth-century Italy and lasted in Western Europe into the early seventeenth century. Invigorating both the arts and the sciences, it was marked by a revival of interest in classical Greek and Roman texts, a spirit of intellectual and physical adventure, and a belief in the high potential of human nature and of the individual human being – a belief that fundamentally challenged the theocentric view of the universe embodied in the medieval Church. Above all, the Renaissance gave birth to the idea of learning as the foundation of life. The broad system of values animating the Renaissance has been called ‘humanism’. The astonishing intellectual scope, the formal and linguistic inventiveness, and the general ebullience of Rabelais’s writings, known collectively as *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, embody Renaissance humanism in all its excitement and thirst for knowledge. As Erich Auerbach writes: ‘Rabelais’ purpose . . . is diametrically opposed to medieval ways of thinking . . . [His] entire effort is directed toward playing with things and with the multiplicity of their possible aspects; upon tempting the reader out of his customary and definite way of regarding things, by showing him phenomena in utter confusion; upon tempting him out into the great ocean of the world, in which he can swim freely, though it be at his own peril’ (*Mimesis*, pp. 275–76). Laughter, which is central to Rabelais’s work, is a sympathetic form of recognition of man’s imperfections and an expression of Rabelais’s response to the wealth and wonder of the world. However, the Renaissance was not simply a period of cultural and artistic exuberance; it was also a time of

turmoil both intellectual and religious. The Lutheran Reformation movement, with its emphasis on individual faith rather than institutional worship, challenged the traditional dogmas and practices of the Catholic Church, leading in the second half of the sixteenth century to the Wars of Religion. The Renaissance was marked also by the sense of disorientation that accompanied man's awareness of a rapidly changing world. It was an age when all phenomena were being reexamined and reinterpreted: the Bible, which led to the Reformation; celestial movements, with Copernicus's planetary revelations; geography, with the voyages of exploration; the human body, with new discoveries in medicine. When Auerbach speaks of the reader's 'peril', he is suggesting that the freedom of vision and thought associated with Rabelais's perpetual 'playing with things' reflects both excitement and apprehension. Rabelais implicitly stresses the burden of individual responsibility that follows from man's discovery of his freedom and capacity for knowledge, and the uncertainty that informs human affairs.

As Milan Kundera has remarked, '*Gargantua-Pantagruel* is a novel from before novels existed. A miraculous moment, never to return, in which an art had not yet come into being as such and therefore was not yet bound by any norms.'¹ Rabelais's narratives are protean in their play with literary forms, episodic in their plots, encyclopedic in their scholarly range. Modelled after the chivalric romances popular at the time, and, more immediately, a recently published chapbook tale of Arthurian giants, *Pantagruel* (1532) and *Gargantua* (1534) chronicle the adventures of the giant Gargantua and his son Pantagruel. Combining vast erudition with vulgar humour, they describe the birth, education and military exploits of their hero-giants. *Gargantua* concludes with a long description of the Abbey of Thélème, a kind of anti-monastery that appears to represent a Renaissance utopia. In stark contrast to the rule-bound life of traditional monasteries, men and women are able to live there in unrestrained freedom. But whether the abbey represents the values of Christian humanism is left in some doubt, for the episode ends with a riddle, which Gargantua reads as a revelation of Divine Truth, whereas Friar Jean, the amiable anti-monk for whom Gargantua has built the abbey, sees in it a coded presentation of the rules for the game of tennis. Throughout Rabelais's work ambiguities are sustained by a shifting tone and an ironic narrative voice. In the prologue to *Gargantua*, he famously presents himself both as a buffoon-like fairground entertainer and as a sage philosopher whose words must be studied intently by the reader if he or she is to discern their hidden meaning – like a dog breaking open a bone in order to suck the marrow. There followed three books: the *Tiers Livre* (Book Three) of 1546 and the *Quart Livre* (Book Four) of 1552, and the so-called *Cinquième Livre* (Book Five) of 1564 (but

10 *Rabelais: the uses of laughter*

which is generally thought to be of dubious authenticity). These works place greater emphasis on the quest for truth and meaning in life. They may be read as comedies of interpretation, subverting the idea that life may be contained by any single intellectual system or set of beliefs. In Book Three Pantagruel's companion Panurge sets out to ascertain whether, if he marries, he can be sure that he will never be cuckolded by his future wife. Unable to embrace his own free agency or to accept the inevitable disparity between our wishes and the realities of the world, he consults all manner of 'authorities'. When these authorities fail to provide him with a satisfactory answer, he embarks in Book Four, with Pantagruel and their motley companions, on a mock-epic sea voyage to Cathay to consult the Oracle of the Holy Bottle. By the end of the book, they seem to be in the middle of nowhere, no closer to their goal.

Laughter, satire and language

Laughter is Rabelais's weapon against ignorance, superstition and bigotry. Rabelais was not a 'free-thinker' or a Protestant, or indeed an atheist; but he sympathized deeply with the movement of moderate religious reform that took hold in France in the 1520s. The moderate reformers (known as 'evangelicals' because of their insistence on the supreme importance for Christian faith of Scripture) called into question the Church's attachment to ritualized outer observances such as fasting and pilgrimages, and mercantile practices like the sale of indulgences; they questioned the value of monasticism and the self-serving behaviour of priests; and they attacked the dogmatism of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Paris (the Sorbonne). These evangelical views are reflected in Rabelais's fierce satire of theologians, monks, monasticism and Papal abuses. More broadly, he mocks the pomposity and humourlessness of academics, lawyers, doctors and ideologues of all kinds – in short, all those impermeable to the joys of discovery and closed to the multiple possibilities of life.

Rabelais's satirical laughter is closely linked to questions of language. The Renaissance humanists criticized what they saw as the deliberate obscurity of the Latinate jargon used by the Establishment theologians. It is this obscure language that Rabelais satirizes in his description of Pantagruel's encounter with a student from the Sorbonne whom he induces to speak 'naturally':

'So you come from Paris?' said Pantagruel. 'And what do you young gentlemen-students do all day in Paris?'

The student replied: