Introduction

Every age creates its own Villon. The Renaissance was much taken with the bon folâtre, a cheerfully tatterdemalion strolling player with a Rabelaisian appetite for buckshee tripé freeloading across France, and yet by 1873, Huysmans was painting a lingering portrait of a Villon ‘famélique, hagard, grelotant, en arrêt devant les marchands de beuverie, caressant, de convoiteux regards, la panse monacale des bouteilles’. Louis Ménard in 1857, Robert Louis Stevenson in 1877, wanted to see Villon as an avatar of Baudelaire or Rimbaud, the ‘gallows-bird’, the great outsider. Early twentieth-century sensibilities, no doubt for partly political reasons, wanted Villon to represent the very essence of France: for De Vere Stacpoole in 1916, Villon’s was the voice of a suffering Paris, of its ‘people fantastic as their city and a city fantastic as a dream’, and for Wyndham Lewis and Hilaire Belloc in 1943, he emblematised a nation’s ‘bitterness’ and ‘grandeur’. Quite unconsciously no doubt, each age selects for particular attention, from Villon’s not particularly abundant œuvre, the poems which paint the preferred portrait; our own, perceiving pleasing homologies between itself and what we think of as Villon’s discomfort in living at a time of mingled gloom and exhilaration, prefers its Villon ironic and carnivalesque: the iconoclast, the voice of authenticity in the face of cliché and hypocrisy.

Now, there is nothing wrong with an ironic Villon, just as there is nothing wrong with Villon-the-housebreaker, or Villon-the-voice-of-Paris; after all, Villon is the father of his own legend, and he is the one who insists we remember him as a bon folâtre (T, 1882–3), who hints at criminal connections, who celebrates, like Rabelais, the pleasures of wine and women, who parodies the technicalities of the last will and testament and juggles the lachrymose clichés of his contemporaries. But we construct our particular Villons, of course, by reading very selectively: just as Théophile Gautier sidled with...
delicious disgust towards the *Ballade de la Grosse Margot*, so modern critics swarm around the more promisingly metatextual and indeterminate of Villon’s fixed-form poems – the *Ballade de conclusion*, the *Ballade en vieil langage français*, the *Contredictz de Franck Contier* – to the virtual exclusion, say, of the *Ballade pour Robert d’Estouteville*, or the *Belle Heudmille aux filles de joie*, and to the total exclusion of the little rondels like the *Lay* and the *Bergeronnette*. We construct, in other words, a canon and as knowing, twenty-first-century readers, rightly suspicious of canon-construction, we ought perhaps to question our concentration on one so very narrow; we know, after all, how ingeniously we can pick a nicely coherent narrative out of the available evidence so as to weave a poet in our own preferred image. To construct a single, monolithic poetic voice has meant selecting and ignoring; we have frozen or blocked Villon’s relativising, unstable discourse in order to create a fixity which can be reconstituted and used to represent a fully realised subjectivity, isolating a single thread among those successively offered and arguing that that thread denotes Villon.

It would be dangerously hubristic to claim that I escape from the same trap, but on the other hand, I do not pretend to be ‘comprehensive’: rather than present a ‘complete’ reading of Villon’s works, I design each chapter to stand alone as an exploration of his poetics in a particular and specific context. This is not because I think that the *Testament* is a jigsaw made up of already-existing poems; on the contrary, that it is a coherent, many-faceted whole is a viewpoint which this book will, I hope, endorse. My intention, however, is to celebrate a Villon whose voice is studiously multiple and shifting and protean, and to do so from critical perspectives which are, deliberately, eclectic. I do not say ‘voice’ because I see poems as merely words, bound in an endless, hermetic round of other words and divorced from anything outside the word; on the contrary indeed, I am prepared to believe that within the economy of the *Testament* we could, if we had the key, find a personality, perhaps even a biography. But since we cannot possess the key, I am suspicious of any monolithic, singular Villon whom we are, I think, misled into finding by the fact that his vehicle is an individual speaking subject. This seems to promise the plenitude of a coherent, consistent and above all individual voice; it will be my argument that, on the contrary, the *Testament*, like the *Lais*, should be read as an unwitting tribute to social constructions of identity which emerge as required from
Introduction

Villon's deep engagement in the participatory, social poetics – a poetics of dialectic and debate – which constituted the energy and drive of fifteenth-century literary life. It is of the nature of debate that it is not a matter of personality; Villon's nomadic subjectivity is, I shall suggest, prescribed by the pleasure of the intellectual engagement which is for him, as it is for many – most – of his contemporaries, the motor of his verse.

The first chapter of this study will substantiate the claim that I have just made: that the preferred mode of fifteenth-century poets was social, participatory. It is, I shall argue, no accident that some of the most notable of late-medieval writers and intellectuals involve themselves in what are variously called débats and querelles, and which engage with questions of semantics, ethics or sexual mores. Nor, I shall suggest, are the intertextualities of later writers merely signs of tired poetic imaginations recycling borrowed commonplace. On the contrary: to engage dialectically with one's predecessors is a competitive process entered into with a zest and inventiveness which readers, it seems, had the hermeneutic expertise to measure and enjoy.

In my second chapter, I turn to the Testament. I concentrate, deliberately, on some of the ballades which have been most neglected and which, not I think by accident, are most marked by commonplace: the Lay and the Bergeronnette, the Ballade à s'omye, the Verset, the Ballade finale. These undervalued lyrics, I shall suggest, are the prime locus of something fundamental to the Testament: Villon's resolutely dialectical manipulation of the 'martyred-lover' persona. What they help to engineer, however, is a poetic persona of surprising density: Villon's insistence on defining himself as 'not a 'martyred lover' defines him as present in some other, and very solid, manifestation. By an interesting paradox, in other words, our sense of Villon's self is crucially dependent on a self self-consciously literary, constructed intertextually, transtextually, intratextually.

My third chapter turns to an engagement of a rather different sort; it also moves to the mainstream of critical attention, with the three Ubi sunt ballades. Here, I shall argue, Villon engages with what it is difficult not to see as a tired topos; but, with a flamboyance which is (as we shall see) typical of his poetics, he compounds the challenge by addressing the commonplace through three different prisms. His expert and acrobatic zest had allowed him to engage triumphantly with a trite opening line set by Charles d'Orléans in the ballade that begins 'Je meurs de seuf auprès de la fontaine'; in
The poetry of François Villon

the Testament, Villon engages with another melancholy cliché, borrowing urgency and drive through duplication, exploiting a self-imposed dialectic, and capitalising on the dialogic possibilities inherent in the ballade. In a sense, he invents a reader who is, tacitly, invited to be complicit in the mise en question not so much of poetic commonplace as of comfortable certainties and idées reçues.

That is, perhaps, also the question addressed in my fourth chapter, with the Belle Heaulmiere and the Double ballade. I said a moment ago that Villon ‘invents’ and incorporates his audience: here, I shall suggest, Villon invents his interlocutors and invests his fictional speaker and audience with substance. I begin with the Belle Heaulmiere herself and with Villon’s debt to – unsurprisingly – the Roman de la Rose. But the word ‘debt’ is misleading: with his usual sophistication, Villon engages with the Vieille of the Rose, making his dialogue with the Rose a participant in the production of meaning, incorporating La Vieille into a complex discussion of sexual responsibility which slides into self-pity. The Belle Heaulmiere is merged with the poet, drawn into the orbit of yet another of those fragmentary subjectivities that are his speciality. Villon, as it were, explores his own attitudes via the detours of other sensibilities: the Belle Heaulmiere’s, of course, but also those of those avowedly imaginary avocats whom he invents for the purposes of dialogue.

In the case of the Contredictz de Franc Guiter, of course, which I deal with in chapter 5, the situation is rather different: Villon is entering into an already flourishing debate whose parameters have been set by his poetic predecessors. His engagement is therefore specific, and on predetermined ground: ground which, it seems, he expects his readers to have explored already so that they can recognise just how cheerfully he has subverted the terms of the argument. That is not the case with the lyric presented in chapter 6, the Ballade de la Grosse Margot, where Villon himself proposes the topic and invites what, in a modern context, we might call audience participation. It is partly because of this, and because of what I shall suggest are significant intratextual links between this and the Ballade pour prior Notre Dame, that I am tempted to set the former in the poetic context of the late-medieval Puy – another forum in which clashing registers and disconcerting juxtapositions were at a premium. In this chapter too, then, I shall argue that inter- and intratextual engagement are a prime constituent of meaning: that Villon acts, as it were, as meneur du jeu, orchestrating and manipulating voices.
Introduction

And so, finally, to my seventh chapter, which will look at one of the great unloved: the *Ballade pour Robert d'Estouteville*. It is, I shall suggest, and no doubt to the astonishment of most readers, central to the dynamics of the *Testament*: technically spectacular, thematically vital, not to be dismissed, as it so often is, as the product of studious self-interest. It is also (and it is for this reason that I leave it until last) the product of a profound and delicate intertextual dialectic: for this most unexpected ballad, Villon engages with the *Rose* to produce a euphoric counterpoint to the mainstream of the *Testament*, and thus adds just one more to the competing voices that he engages with and holds in suspension.

What I want to argue is that questions of originality as we currently understand them are profoundly anachronistic for our reading of fifteenth-century poetry: we need, rather, a healthy recognition of the alien-ness, the alterity of the Middle Ages. But that does not mean that medieval poets are not competitive, not – as it were – anxious. Simply, I would argue that our reading strategies, inescapably marked by our own anxieties of influence, look for poetic excellence in the wrong direction. What is required is reading strategies which recognise ‘community’ and ‘cooperation’ as guiding threads. Villon, in other words, is not in my view the sardonic, alienated outsider of legend: on the contrary, he is profoundly a participant in the poetic landscape of the later Middle Ages.
CHAPTER 1

Painted eloquence and serious games

‘La poésie devient pour toute une société un *jeu sérieux*’

When Harold Bloom coined the phrase ‘anxiety of influence’, when he pictured poets entering into a psychic struggle to create their own imaginative space, when he spoke of their agonised recognition of their own belatedness, poets all over the world surely nodded their acquiescence. Here, at last, was a critic who understood the penalties exacted by the anguish need to be original. How, without duplicating or paraphrasing, were they to address love, death, horror, euphoria? Had Baudelaire and Mallarmé and Eliot not milked every word of its impact and left language worn and impoverished? To most modern readers as to Bloom, if rather less cabalistically, it seems axiomatic that originality is the ultimate literary good, and that a poem which does not astonish is a poem that has failed.

This unexamined conviction makes the reading of medieval poetry particularly difficult. The naive reader – myself, many years ago – comes to her first *recit de* leaves budding, flowers blooming, birds twittering; she meets the second, the third, the fourth . . . She is captivated by Georges Brassens singing *La ballade des dames du temps jadis*, only to find that Villon wrote two other poems on precisely the same theme, and that every second poet of the later Middle Ages had made use of the same well-tried cliché. To be told that Villon’s is one of the most individual poetical voices of the Middle Ages casts a dismal light on the others – and sure enough, as pitiless ladies, and martyred lovers suspiciously like Villon himself, trudge across the page, even sympathetic modern readers are inclined to throw in the towel and abandon the medieval lyric. Better informed, we discover that questions of anxiety of influence are profoundly anachronistic, that medieval poets were admired for the dexterity with which they
Painted eloquence and serious games

What I want to present here, however, is a different argument. I am wary, of course, of a ‘romantic’ reading which sees sincerity and sentiment at the heart of the medieval lyric, but, like Poirion, I am also wary of ‘le vide d’une critique “purement” esthétique’ – of the contention that medieval poets and their audiences took account only of technical virtuosity and ignored the ‘intention significative’ of the poems presented to them. I want to suggest, looking at the intellectual field within which late-medieval poetry in general, and Villon’s poetry in particular, were produced, that late-medieval poetry draws its drive from what I shall call a poetics of engagement: debate, response, provocation, competition. Unfamiliar though the concept may seem in our society, in which poetry is still figured as the inward and intensely personal exploration of the self, late-medieval poetry, I shall argue, operates in a participatory culture of mutually reinforcing rhetorics, existing in a particular social and ideological milieus.

What I have just said is informed by the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu; I shall return in a moment to his contention that language, culture and social relations are internally coherent and interdependent systems. But first, let me sketch one of the ‘social and ideological milieux’ to which I am referring. In 1400, at the court of Charles VI, a group of magnates and courtiers instituted what they called *cours amoureuses* to offer a distraction from the ‘désplaisant et contraire pestilence de epidemie’ which was ravaging the kingdom. Its membership included civil servants and jurists, luxuriating visibly in regulations, procedures and elaborate hierarchies. At the regular monthly meetings (*fêtes du pay*), the twenty-four *ministres*, chosen for their ‘experte connoissance en la science de rethorique’, were to institute poetic competitions:

> Feront solennel serement... de tenir joieuse feste de pay d’amours, l’un après l’autre consequamment, a deux heures après midi... Et de baillier, chascun a son pay, refrain a sa plaisance.

No records survive, but what clearly constituted the social ‘currency’ of the *cours amoureuses* was the ballades and rondeaux, and discussion of them was what primarily mediated its group identity.

I shall come back to the *cours amoureuses* and to the *pay*, but first I turn to Pierre Bourdieu. In a series of studies, Bourdieu reacted as I am doing here against the notion, inherited very largely from
Romanticism, that literary creation is an act of self-expression; rather, he would see it as one component in a system of social relations between the intellectual field in which creation takes place, and the larger field of economic or social power. Language, he considers, is of vital importance in the creation of group identities: it includes those who can manipulate it with skill, and excludes or marginalises those unable to do so, and it thus serves to create the mechanisms of social solidarity and collective thinking which make groups cohere. To exchange artistic artifacts is to exchange what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic capital’: to operate within a particular market in which producer and consumer are in collusion to procure a particular material or symbolic profit. Poets and artists, he argues, are producers, and like producers of any other product, they are constituted in social and ideological practices and relations.

How then (to return to Charles VI’s cour amoureuse) might Bourdieu’s theories of symbolic capital illuminate our understanding of poetic creation in the fifteenth century? Well, clearly in those circles the ability to versify with ease was a prerequisite for membership of a highly prestigious and advantageous inner circle. If ballades and rondeaux were the mechanisms of social solidarity and collective thinking which made this highly exclusive little society-within-a-society cohere, then the trump card for any participant was a habitus consisting of elegance of expression. To be successful was to be able to invest one’s mastery of language in developing the refrain set, in engaging with the theme prescribed.

Now, the milieu that I have so far talked about seems at first sight far beyond Villon’s reach, and yet of course he operated on at least one occasion (to which I shall return in chapter 5) on the margins of a circle just as elevated, that of Charles d’Orléans, and participated in a similar socio-literary ritual. Nor, more important, was it only for the aristocracy that symbolic capital was the way to social solidarity. The legists who devised the statutes for the cour amoureuse call it a puy, by which they seem to mean simply a formal meeting devoted to the composition and reading of verse. But the puy of Amiens and Rouen, Arras and Paris, to which I shall return in chapter 6, operated across a larger social spectrum. Although the ostensible pretext of these occasions was devout – the composition of poems in praise of the Virgin Mary, – poets might also compete with chansons amoureuses or voutes chansons. This is presumably what provokes Bref Conseil’s complaint in Martin le Franc’s Champion des dames (1442):
Painted eloquence and serious games 9

pays, he says, have become haunts of iniquity which exclude the virtuous, ‘le puy du diable, Le puy qui au puc d’enfer tire’ (3977–8) – good only for profane ‘rondeaux, balades, lays’ (3985). Not at all, ripostes Franc Vouloir, champion of love; balades and rondeaux are the very currency of the pays, and

Trop a il coeur vil et amer
Qui sa balade n’y aporte. (4255–6)

Vil, here, retains some of the sense of social exclusion which attaches to its Low Latin cymon vils, ‘valueless’;14 social inclusion, then, depends on the expert production of verse. The poetry of the pays, in other words, is a vehicle which can, and indeed ought to, express the intrinsic relationships between power on the one hand and symbolic, literary, expression on the other: something which permits a dialogue among participants sharing an ideology of cultural and political assumptions and allegiances.

Now there is no evidence of Villon’s ever having participated in a pays – although (as I shall suggest in chapter 6) his palindrome to the Virgin Mary, the Ballade pour prior Notre Dame, and the curious way in which it is interwoven with his soille chanson, the Ballade de la Grosse Margot, insistently echo the patterns of the pays. But even if it were the case that Villon had never set foot in a pays, this would not invalidate my point that he was a product of a poetics of engagement and debate and competition: this is something, after all, that the pays reflects rather than creates.15 Instances proliferate, and it is not always easy to distinguish fiction from reality.16 Jean le Seneschal, for instance, in about 1309, claimed to be assembling the ballades which result from a debate over the advantages, for a man in love, of loyauté and double-dealing; he has, he says, submitted them to a number of his most noble contemporaries who have composed poetic responses, and he is now presenting an anthology, the Cent ballades, to a receptive public.17 Christine de Pizan, more soberly, presents herself as participant in and recorder of a ‘debat gracieux et non haineux . . . entre solemne personeurs’;18 the distinguished intellectuals who participated (jurists, theologians, clerics) have allowed their ‘humble chambrerie’19 to anthologise their treatises and epistles for a wider public. Above all, of course, there is the most famous of fifteenth-century poetic debates,20 the one provoked by Alain Chartier’s Belle Dame sans Mercy of 1424, which was still rumbling more than two decades later, and which, even if it was no
longer inspiring new contributions, was being avidly anthologised and copied into manuscripts in Villon’s own literary lifetime – and being anthologised along with Villon’s own œuvre.

The history of this debate is now well known. If we are to believe the documents in the case, no sooner had Alain’s Belle Dame, which purports to set down a dialogue between a lachrymose Amant and an acridely sensible Dame, appeared than it excited controversy: three Dames claimed to have been shocked by Alain’s ‘desraisonnables escriptures’. Alain, contrite, responded with an Excusacion; his offence had been only literary. But if he supposed that this would be the last word, he was to be disappointed. In eighteen or more poems, the twists and turns of the debate exploit a variety of ingenious scenarios: the Belle Dame herself is arraigned in court and alternately condemned and vindicated; the disconsolate Amant retires to a hermitage, or languishes in a hospital, or dies a martyr’s death. This is not the place for a history of the Querelle; I cite it because it exemplifies so abundantly what I have called the poetics of engagement. It was not merely a question of the successive writers exploiting a topos, or of their making a name for themselves on the back of Alain Chartier’s poetic bestseller; on the contrary, the Querelle required textual precision and intellectual investment. Telling phrases are picked over with positively academic enjoyment. In Chartier’s original poem, for instance, the Amant had deftly recycled one of the more clichéd courtly metaphors. The Dame is responsible for his plight, he says, since her glance had conveyed hope:

\[
\text{Vous qui la guerre y meistes} \\
\text{Quant voz yeux escripte la leccte} \\
\text{Par quoy deflier me feistes,} \\
\text{Et que Doux Regart transmiestes,} \\
\text{Heraldt de celle effianc.} \\
\] 

(296–90)

The lady responds tartly that she can scarcely be held responsible for the message that her doleful soupirant has read into a mere look:

\[
\text{Il a grant fain de vive en dueil} \\
\text{Et faict de son cuer lasche garde,} \\
\text{Qui contre un tout seul regard d’oeil} \\
\text{Sa paix et sa joye ne garde.} \\
\text{Se moy ou aultre vous regarde,} \\
\text{Les yeux sont faiz pour regarder.} \\
\] 

(233–8)

A few years later, in 1425 or so, Baudet Herenc returned to the same phrase in Le parlament d’Amours, his (highly legalistic) response to