

Classic Poetry Series

**François Villon**  
**- poems -**

**Publication Date:**

2012

**Publisher:**

Poemhunter.com - The World's Poetry Archive

# François Villon(c. 1431 – after 5 January 1463)

François Villon was a French poet, thief, and vagabond. He is perhaps best known for his Testaments and his Ballade des Pendus, written while in prison. The question "Mais où sont les neiges d'antan?", taken from the Ballade des dames du temps jadis and translated by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as "Where are the snows of yesteryear?", is one of the most famous lines of translated secular poetry in the English-speaking world.

<b>Life</b>

Villon's real surname has been a matter of dispute; he has been called François de Montcorbier and François Des Loges and other names, though in literature Villon is the sole name used. Villon was born in 1431, almost certainly in Paris. The singular poems called Testaments, which form his chief if not his only certain work, are largely autobiographical.

It appears that he was born in poverty and that his father died in his youth, but that his mother was still living when her son was thirty years old. The name "Villon" was stated by the sixteenth-century historian Claude Fauchet to be merely a common noun, signifying "cheat" or "rascal," but this seems to be a mistake. It is, however, certain that Villon was a person of loose life, and that he continued, throughout his recorded life, a reckless way of living common among the wilder youth of the University of Paris. It is possible that he derived his surname from his uncle, a close friend and benefactor named Guillaume de Villon, chaplain in the collegiate church of Saint-Benoît-le-Bestourne, and a professor of canon law, who took Villon into his house.

Villon became a student in arts, perhaps at about twelve years of age. He received a bachelor's degree in 1449 and a master's degree in 1452. Between this year and 1455, nothing is known of his activities. As the author of the 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica article writes, "Attempts have been made, in the usual fashion of conjectural biography, to fill up the gap with what a young graduate of Bohemian tendencies would, could, or might have done, but they are mainly futile."

On 5 June 1455, the first major recorded incident of his life occurred. In the company of a priest named Giles and a girl named Isabeau, he met, in the Rue Saint-Jacques, a Breton, Jean le Hardi, a master of arts, who was also with a priest, Philippe Chermoye (or Sermoise or Sermaise). A scuffle broke out, daggers were drawn and Sermaise, who is accused of having threatened and

attacked Villon and drawn the first blood, not only received a dagger-thrust in return, but a blow from a stone, which struck him down. He died of his wounds. Villon fled, and was sentenced to banishment – a sentence which was remitted in January 1456 by a pardon from King Charles VII after he received the second of two petitions which made the claim that Sermaise had forgiven Villon before he died.

Two different versions of the formal pardon exist; in one, the culprit is identified as "François des Loges, autrement dit Villon" ("François des Loges, otherwise called Villon"), in the other as "François de Montcorbier." He is also said to have named himself to the barber-surgeon who dressed his wounds as "Michel Mouton." The documents of this affair at least confirm the date of his birth, by presenting him as twenty-six years old or thereabouts. As a known murderer Villon could not continue his privileged life as a teacher at the Collège de Navarre or get reputable employment; thus, he was forced to sing in inns to survive.

By the end of 1456, he was again in trouble. In his first brawl, "la femme Isabeau" is only generally named, and it is impossible to say whether she had anything to do with the quarrel. In the second, Catherine de Vaucelles, whom he mentioned several times in his poems, was the declared cause of a scuffle in which Villon was so severely beaten that, to escape ridicule, he fled to Angers, where he had an uncle who was a monk. Before leaving Paris, he composed what is now known as the *Petit Testament*, *Lais*, or "Legacy."

Around Christmas 1456, the chapel of the Collège de Navarre was broken open and five hundred gold crowns stolen. The robbery was not discovered until March of the next year, and it was not until May that the police came on the track of a gang of student-robbers, owing to the indiscretion of one of them, Guy Tabarie. A year more passed, when Tabarie, after being arrested, turned king's evidence and accused the absent Villon of being the ringleader, and of having gone to Angers, partly at least, to arrange similar burglaries there. Villon, for either this or another crime, was sentenced to banishment; he did not attempt to return to Paris. For four years, he was a wanderer. He may have been, as his friends Regnier de Montigny and Colin des Cayeux were, a member of a wandering gang of thieves. Villon may have been homosexual. It is certain that he corresponded with Charles, duc d'Orléans at least once (in 1457) and it is likely that he resided for some period at that prince's court at Château Blois. He had also something to do with another prince of the blood, Jean of Bourbon, and there is evidence that he visited Poitou, Dauphiné, and other places.

The next date for which there are recorded whereabouts for Villon is the summer of 1461; Villon wrote that he spent that summer in the bishop's prison at Meung-

sur-Loire. His crime is not known, but is supposed to have been church-robbing; and his enemy, or at least judge, was Thibault d'Aussigny, who held the see of Orléans. Villon owed his release to a general jail-delivery at the accession of King Louis XI and became a free man again on 2 October 1461.

In 1461, he wrote his most famous work, the Grand Testament. In the autumn of 1462, he was once more living in the cloisters of Saint-Benoît and in November, he was imprisoned for theft in the fortress that stood at what is now Place du Châtelet in Paris. In default of evidence, the old charge of the college of Navarre was revived, and even a royal pardon did not bar the demand for restitution. Bail was accepted; however, Villon fell promptly into a street quarrel. He was arrested, tortured and condemned to be hanged ("pendu et étranglé"), but the sentence was commuted to banishment by the parlement on 5 January 1463.

### <b>Works</b>

Villon was a great innovator in terms of the themes of poetry and, through these themes, a great renovator of the forms. He understood perfectly the medieval courtly ideal, but he often chose to write against the grain, reversing the values and celebrating the lowlifes destined for the gallows, falling happily into parody or lewd jokes, and constantly innovating in his diction and vocabulary; a few minor poems make extensive use of Parisian thieves' slang. Still Villon's verse is mostly about his own life, a record of poverty, trouble, and trial which was certainly shared by his poems' intended audience.

In 1461, at the age of thirty, Villon began to compose the works which he named Le grand testament (1461–1462). This "testament" has generally been judged Villon's greatest work, and there is evidence in the work itself that Villon felt the same.

The 2023 verses of the Grand testament are marked by the immediate prospect of death by hanging and frequently describe other forms of misery and death. It mixes reflections on the passing of time, bitter derision, invective, and religious fervor. This mixed tone of tragic sincerity stands in contrast to the other poets of the time.

In one of these poems "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" ("The Ballad of Yesterday's Belles"), each stanza and the concluding envoi asks after the fate of various celebrated women, including Héloïse and Joan of Arc, and ends with the same semi-ironic question:

<i>Dictes moy ou n'en quel pays

Est Flora le belle Romaine  
Archipiades, ne Thaïs,  
Qui fut sa cousine germaine,  
Echo parlant quant bruyt on maine  
Dessus riviere ou sus estan,  
Qui beaulté ot trop plus qu'humaine.  
Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan?" </i>

<i>Tell me where, in which country  
Is Flora, the beautiful Roman;  
Archipiada (Alcibiades?), and Thaïs  
Who was her cousin;  
Echo, speaking when one makes noise  
Over river or on pond,  
Who had a beauty too much more than human?  
Oh, where are the snows of yesteryear!</i>

This same "Ballade des dames du temps jadis" was famously translated into English in 1870 by Dante Gabriel Rossetti as "Ballade of Dead Ladies." Rossetti translated the refrain as "But where are the snows of yester-year?"

A complete English translation of Villon's surviving works, with extensive notes, was published by Anthony Bonner in 1960. A translation of "The Legacy" and "The Testament" by the American poet Galway Kinnell appeared in 1965 and was revised in 1977. A particularly lively translation into English of selected poems was made by Stephen Rodefer in 1968, under the pen name Jean Calais. Translations of three other poems by Villon, plus translations of two into rhyming cant by William Ernest Henley can be read on Anthony Weir's "Beyond-the-Pale" website .

### <b>Critical views</b>

Villon, nearly unknown in his own time and published by Antoine V&eacute;rard, was rediscovered in the 16th century when his works were published by Cl&eacute;ment Marot.

The most commonly featured motifs that can be found in Villon's poetry are "carpe diem", "ubi sunt", "memento mori" and "danse macabre".

In 1960, the Greek artist "Nonda" dedicated an entire one man art show to Fran&ccedil;ois Villon with the support of Andr&eacute; Malraux. This took place under the arches of the Pont Neuf and was dominated by a gigantic ten-meter canvas

entitled *Hommage à Villon* depicting the poet at a banquet table with his concubines.

See also <http://www.poemhunter.com/ezra-pound/> Ezra Pound's musical setting of Villon's *Le Testament* as a work of literary criticism concerning the relationship of words and music (in next category below, under Depictions).

As is typical of much contemporary scholarship about medieval authors, some commentators question whether a man by the name of François Villon actually existed. Jean-Claude Mühlethaler introduces his translation of Villon's works into modern English by questioning whether François Villon was a pseudonym for an educated jurist knowledgeable in contemporary gossip in Paris. Roger Dragonetti makes a similar claim.

### **Depictions and popular culture**

In 1901 the playwright and Irish MP Justin Huntly McCarthy wrote a play, *If I Were King*, imagining a swashbuckling Villon matching wits with Louis XI, climaxing with Villon finding love in Louis' court and saving Paris from the Duke of Burgundy when Louis makes him Constable of France for a week. Though largely fictitious (there is no evidence Villon and Louis even met), this proved to be a long-running success for the actor Sir George Alexander and a perennial on stage and screen for the next several decades.

Daniela Fischerová wrote a play in Czech that focused on Villon's trial called *Hodina mezi psem a vlkem*--translated to *Dog and Wolf* but literally translates as *The Hour Between Dog and Wolf*.

*If I Were King* was filmed as a straight drama twice, as a silent in 1920 with William Farnum as Villon and Fritz Leiber as Louis, and as a talkie in 1938 with Ronald Colman as Francis Villon and Basil Rathbone as Louis. In 1927, John Barrymore also starred as Villon in *The Beloved Rogue*, directed by Alan Crosland (of *The Jazz Singer* fame), opposite Conrad Veidt as Louis. Though not officially based on the McCarthy play, it draws on the same fictitious notions of relations between Villon and Louis.

The 1925 operetta *The Vagabond King* is also based on the McCarthy play, and it too has been filmed twice – in 1930, with Dennis King and Jeanette MacDonald, and in 1956, with Oreste Kirkop and Kathryn Grayson. In the operetta, however, Villon is appointed king for twenty-four hours, and must solve all of Louis XI's political problems in that amount of time.

Bertolt Brecht's *Baal* was written from 1918 to 1919. He based the main character Baal after François Villon. Some of the lyrics Brecht wrote for "Threepenny Opera" are translations or paraphrases of poems by Villon. John Erskine wrote "The Brief Hour of Francois Villon" in 1937, a work of historical fiction. Henry Livings' *The Quick and the Dead Quick* (1961), is an unconventional historical drama about François Villon.

A 1960 play by the Czech author Jan Werich called 'Balada z hadru' (Balade from drags) was inspired by Villon's work and adapted some of his poems as lyrics for a number of songs.

Ezra Pound's opera *Le Testament* takes passages from Villon's *Le Testament* for its libretto to demonstrate radical changes in the relationship of words and music under Villon's pen, changes that Pound believed profoundly influenced English poetry. The opera was first composed by the poet in London, 1920–1921, with the help of pianist Agnes Bedford. It underwent many revisions to better notate the rhythmic relationships between words and music. These included a concert version for the Salle Pleyel in Paris in 1926, a rhythmically complicated score edited by George Antheil in 1923, a hybrid version of these earlier scores for broadcast by the BBC in 1931, and a final version fully edited by Pound in 1933. The 1923 Pound/Antheil version was premiered in 1971 by the San Francisco Opera Western Opera Theater, conducted and recorded by Robert Hughes (Fantasy Records), with Phillip Booth in the role of Villon. Portions of this LP have been re-released on Other Minds audio CD "Ego scriptor cantilenae, The music of Ezra Pound." The opera was first published in March 2008.

In Truman Capote's novel, *In Cold Blood*, there is a brief introduction using the first four lines of Villon's *Ballade des Pendus*.

In a short story by Robert Louis Stevenson, *A lodging for the night*, Francis Villon (anglicized spelling), searching for shelter on a freezing winter night, knocks randomly at the door of an old nobleman. Invited in, they talk long into the night. Villon openly admits to being a thief and a scoundrel, but argues that the chivalric values upheld by the old man are no better. The story appears in the collection *New Arabian Nights* (1882).

In Ryunosuke Akutagawa's *The Life of a Stupid Man*, published in 1927 after his suicide, Akutagawa mentions being truly moved by Villon's work. He writes "He found in that poet's many works the 'beautiful male'" and states he feels like he is waiting to be hanged like Villon, unable to keep fighting in life.

In Osamu Dazai's "Villon's Wife" a young woman who is married to a dilettante comes to understand his destitute ways when she takes on the duty of paying off his debts. The ne'er-do-well is a womanizing writer who is unsuccessful. The setting is occupation period Japan.

He is a minor character in Tim Powers' *The Stress of Her Regard*, having lived into the 19th century through his association with the vampiric Lamia of the novel.

Errol Flynn played Villon in a short TV episode (part of the "Screen Directors' Playhouse"), entitled "The Sword of Villon," directed by George Waggner (1956).

Early in the film *The Petrified Forest* Bette Davis' character is reading a collection of Villon's poetry. Later she reads a few lines of "Ballad for a Bridegroom" to Leslie Howard's character, and in the final scene she again quotes "Ballad for a Bridegroom."

The Russian bard singer Bulat Okudzhava has a song called "The Prayer of François Villon" (in Russian "???????? ???????? ??????").

The German singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann wrote a ballad over Villon, "Ballade auf den Dichter François Villon" in 1968, available on the "Chauseestrasse 131" LP.

The French singer-songwriter Georges Brassens has a song called "Ballade des dames du temps jadis", where he puts Villon's poem into music.

The French singer-songwriter Léo Ferré put *Ballade des pendus* to music in his album *La Violence et l'Ennui* (1980).

French black metal band Peste Noire adapted the song into a black metal version entitled "Ballade cuntre les anemis de la France" for their album, "Ballade cuntre lo anemi Francor".

In the role-playing game, *Vampire: the Masquerade*, by White Wolf, Inc., Villon is portrayed as the vampire prince of Paris.

Villon's Inkwell is an Artifact in the Syfy show *Warehouse 13*. The ink from the inkwell creates a black hole through which items can be passed when it is poured on a solid surface, sort of like a portable hole.

During the television series *Downton Abbey's Christmas Special*, the Dowager



countess uses the line "Mais ou sont les neiges d'antan", as to refer to a thief, or villon if you may, she met in the late 60's.

In *Catch-22*, Joseph Heller's protagonist Yossarian laments the death of one of his bomber's flight crew, Snowden, with "Ou sont les Snowdens d'antan" as well as in English. It is, perhaps, the most powerful moment in the novel.

# Arbor Amoris

I have a tree, a graft of Love,  
That in my heart has taken root;  
Sad are the buds and blooms thereof,  
And bitter sorrow is its fruit;  
Yet, since it was a tender shoot,  
So greatly hath its shadow spread,  
That underneath all joy is dead,  
And all my pleasant days are flown,  
Nor can I slay it, nor instead  
Plant any tree, save this alone.

Ah, yet, for long and long enough  
My tears were rain about its root,  
And though the fruit be harsh thereof,  
I scarcely looked for better fruit  
Than this, that carefully I put  
In garner, for the bitter bread  
Whereon my weary life is fed:  
Ah, better were the soil unsown  
That bears such growths; but Love instead  
Will plant no tree, but this alone.

Ah, would that this new spring, whereof  
The leaves and flowers flush into shoot,  
I might have succour and aid of Love,  
To prune these branches at the root,  
That long have borne such bitter fruit,  
And graft a new bough, comforted  
With happy blossoms white and red;  
So pleasure should for pain atone,  
Nor Love slay this tree, nor instead  
Plant any tree, but this alone.

L'ENVOY.

Princess, by whom my hope is fed,  
My heart thee prays in lowlihead  
To prune the ill boughs overgrown,

Nor slay Love's tree, nor plant instead  
Another tree, save this alone.

François Villon

# Ballad Of The Gibbet

Brothers and men that shall after us be,  
Let not your hearts be hard to us:  
For pitying this our misery  
Ye shall find God the more piteous.  
Look on us six that are hanging thus,  
And for the flesh that so much we cherished  
How it is eaten of birds and perished,  
And ashes and dust fill our bones' place,  
Mock not at us that so feeble be,  
But pray God pardon us out of his grace.

Listen we pray you, and look not in scorn,  
Though justly, in sooth, we are cast to die;  
Ye wot no man so wise is born  
That keeps his wisdom constantly.  
Be ye then merciful, and cry  
To Mary's Son that is piteous,  
That his mercy take no stain from us,  
Saving us out of the fiery place.  
We are but dead, let no soul deny  
To pray God succor us of His grace.

The rain out of heaven has washed us clean,  
The sun has scorched us black and bare,  
Ravens and rooks have pecked at our eyne,  
And feathered their nests with our beards  
And hair.  
Round are we tossed, and here and there,  
This way and that, at the wild wind's will,  
Never a moment my body is still;  
Birds they are busy about my face.  
Live not as we, not fare as we fare;  
Pray God pardon us out of His grace.

L'envoy  
Prince Jesus, Master of all, to thee  
We pray Hell gain no mastery,  
That we come never anear that place;  
And ye men, make no mockery,

Pray God, pardon us out of His grace.

François Villon

# Ballad Of The Ladies Of Yore

Tell me where, in what country,  
Is Flora the beautiful Roman,  
Archipiada or Thais  
Who was first cousin to her once,  
Echo who speaks when there's a sound  
On a pond or a river  
Whose beauty was more than human?  
But where are the snows of yesteryear?  
Where is the leamed Heloise  
For whom they castrated Pierre Abelard  
And made him a monk at Saint-Denis,  
For his love he took this pain,  
Likewise where is the queen  
Who commanded that Buridan  
Be thrown in a sack into the Seine?  
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

The queen white as a lily  
Who sang with a siren's voice,  
Big-footed Bertha, Beatrice, Alice,  
Haremburgis who held Maine  
And Jeanne the good maid of Lorraine  
Whom the English bumt at Rouen, where,  
Where are they, sovereign Virgin?  
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

Prince, don't ask me in a week  
or in a year what place they are;  
I can only give you this refrain:  
Where are the snows of yesteryear?

François Villon

# Ballade

I know flies in milk  
I know the man by his clothes  
I know fair weather from foul  
I know the apple by the tree  
I know the tree when I see the sap  
I know when all is one  
I know who labors and who loafs  
I know everything but myself.

I know the coat by the collar  
I know the monk by the cowl  
I know the master by the servant  
I know the nun by the veil  
I know when a hustler rattles on  
I know fools raised on whipped cream  
I know the wine by the barrel  
I know everything but myself.

I know the horse and the mule  
I know their loads and their limits  
I know Beatrice and Belle  
I know the beads that count and add  
I know nightmare and sleep  
I know the Bohemians' error  
I know the power of Rome  
I know everything but myself.

Prince I know all things  
I know the rosy-cheeked and the pale  
I know death who devours all  
I know everything but myself.

Trans. by Galway Kinnell

François Villon

## Ballade [i Die Of Thirst Beside The Fountain]

I die of thirst beside the fountain  
I'm hot as fire, I'm shaking tooth on tooth  
In my own country I'm in a distant land  
Beside the blaze I'm shivering in flames  
Naked as a worm, dressed like a president  
I laugh in tears and hope in despair  
I cheer up in sad hopelessness  
I'm joyful and no pleasure's anywhere  
I'm powerful and lack all force and strength  
Warmly welcomed, always turned away.

I'm sure of nothing but what is uncertain  
Find nothing obscure but the obvious  
Doubt nothing but the certainties  
Knowledge to me is mere accident  
I keep winning and remain the loser  
At dawn I say "I bid you good night"  
Lying down I'm afraid of falling  
I'm so rich I haven't a penny  
I await an inheritance and am no one's heir  
Warmly welcomed, always turned away.

I never work and yet I labor  
To acquire goods I don't even want  
Kind words irritate me most  
He who speaks true deceives me worst  
A friend is someone who makes me think  
A white swan is a black crow  
The people who harm me think they help  
Lies and truth today I see they're one  
I remember everything, my mind's a blank  
Warmly welcomed, always turned away.

Merciful Prince may it please you to know  
I understand much and have no wit or learning  
I'm biased against all laws impartially  
What's next to do? Redeem my pawned goods again!  
Warmly welcomed, always turned away.





# Ballade [the Goat Scratches So Much It Can'T Sleep]

The goat scratches so much it can't sleep  
The pot fetches water so much it breaks  
You heat iron so much it reddens  
You hammer it so much it cracks  
A man's worth so much as he's esteemed  
He's away so much he's forgotten  
He's bad so much he's hated  
We cry good news so much it comes.

You talk so much you refute yourself  
Fame's worth so much as its perquisites  
You promise so much you renege  
You beg so much you get your wish  
A thing costs so much you want it  
You want it so much you get it  
It's around so much you want it no more  
We cry good news so much it comes.

You love a dog so much you feed it  
A song's loved so much as people hum it  
A fruit is kept so much it rots  
You strive for a place so much it's taken  
You dawdle so much you miss your chance  
You hurry so much you run into bad luck  
You grasp so hard you lose your grip  
We cry good news so much it comes.

You jeer so much nobody laughs  
You spend so much you've lost your shirt  
You're honest so much you're broke  
&quot;Take it&quot; is worth so much as a promise  
You love God so much you go to church  
You give so much you have to borrow  
The wind shifts so much it blows cold  
We cry good news so much it comes.

Prince a fool lives so much he grows wise  
He travels so much he returns home  
He's beaten so much he reverts to form

We cry good news so much it comes.

François Villon

# Ballade To Our Lady

WRITTEN FOR HIS MOTHER

Dame du ciel, regents terrienne,  
Emperiere des infemaux palus....

Lady of Heaven and earth, and therewithal  
Crowned Empress of the nether clefts of Hell, &mdash;

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.  
Said Mary of Egypt lacked not of that bliss,  
Nor yet the sorrowful clerk Theopbilus,  
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 seethe full sore:  
One bringeth fear, the other joy to me.  
That joy, great Goddess, make thou mine to be, &mdash;  
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.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, trans.

François Villon

## Ballade: Du Concours De Blois

I'm dying of thirst beside the fountain,  
Hot as fire, and with chattering teeth:  
In my own land, I'm in a far domain:  
Near the flame, I shiver beyond belief:  
Bare as a worm, dressed in a furry sheathe,  
I smile in tears, wait without expectation:  
Taking my comfort in sad desperation:  
I rejoice, without pleasures, never a one:  
Strong I am, without power or persuasion,  
Welcomed gladly, and spurned by everyone.

Nothing is sure for me but what's uncertain:  
Obscure, whatever is plainly clear to see:  
I've no doubt, except of everything certain:  
Science is what happens accidentally:  
I win it all, yet a loser I'm bound to be:  
Saying: 'God give you good even!' at dawn,  
I greatly fear I'm falling, when lying down:  
I've plenty, yet I've not one possession,  
I wait to inherit, yet I'm no heir I own,  
Welcomed gladly, and spurned by everyone.

I never take care, yet I've taken great pain  
To acquire some goods, but have none by me:  
Who's nice to me is one I hate: it's plain,  
And who speaks truth deals with me most falsely:  
He's my friend who can make me believe  
A white swan is the blackest crow I've known:  
Who thinks he's power to help me, does me harm:  
Lies, truth, to me are all one under the sun:  
I remember all, have the wisdom of a stone,  
Welcomed gladly, and spurned by everyone.

Merciful Prince, may it please you that I've shown  
There's much I know, yet without sense or reason:  
I'm partial, yet I hold with all men, in common.  
What more can I do? Redeem what I've in pawn,  
Welcomed gladly, and spurned by everyone.

François Villon

## Ballade: Epistre

Have pity now, have pity now on me,  
If you at least would, friends of mine.  
I'm in the depths, not holly or may,  
In exile, where I've been consigned  
By Fortune, as God too has designed.  
Girls, lovers, youngsters, fresh to hand,  
Dancers, tumblers that leap like lambs,  
Agile as arrows, like shots from a cannon,  
Throats tinkling, clear as bells on rams,  
Will you leave him here, your poor old Villon?

Singers, singing in lawless freedom,  
Jokers, pleasant in word and deed,  
Run free of false gold, alloy, come,  
Men of wit - somewhat deaf indeed -  
Hurry, be quick now, he's dying poor man.  
Makers of lays, motets and rondeaux,  
Will you bring him warmth when he's down below?  
No lightning or storm reach where he's gone.  
With these thick walls they've blinded him so.  
Will you leave him here, your poor old Villon?

Come see him here, in his piteous plight,  
Noblemen, free of tax and tithe,  
Holding nothing by king or emperor's right,  
But by grace of the God of Paradise.  
Sundays and Tuesdays he fasts and sighs,  
His teeth are as sharp as the rats' below,  
After dry bread, and no gateaux,  
Water for soup that floats his guts along.  
With no table or chair, he's lying low.  
Will you leave him here, your poor old Villon?

Princes of note, old, new, don't fail:  
Beg the king's pardon for me, and seal,  
And a basket to raise me, I'll sit upon:  
So pigs behave, to each other, they say,  
When one pig squeals, all rush that way.  
Will you leave him here, your poor old Villon?



François Villon

## Epitaph In The Form Of A Ballade

Freres humains qui apres nous vivez,  
N'ayez les coeurs contre nous endurcis ...  
Men, brother men, that after us yet live,  
Let not your hearts too hard against us be;  
For if some pity of us poor men ye give,  
The sooner God shall take of you pity.  
Here are we five or six strung up, you see,  
And here the flesh that all too well we fed  
Bit by bit eaten and rotten, rent and shred,  
And we the bones grow dust and ash withal;  
Let no man laugh at us discomforted,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.  
If we call on you, brothers, to forgive,

Ye should not hold our prayer in scorn, though we  
Were slain by law; ye know that all alive  
Have not wit always to walk righteously;  
Make therefore intercession heartily  
With him that of a virgin's womb was bred,  
That his grace be not as a dr-y well-head  
For us, nor let hell's thunder on us fall;  
We are dead, let no man harry or vex us dead,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

The rain has washed and laundered us all five,  
And the sun dried and blackened; yea, perdie,  
Ravens and pies with beaks that rend and rive  
Have dug our eyes out, and plucked off for fee  
Our beards and eyebrows; never we are free,  
Not once, to rest; but here and there still sped,  
Driven at its wild will by the wind's change led,  
More pecked of birds than fruits on garden-wall;  
Men, for God's love, let no gibe here be said,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.  
Prince Jesus, that of all art lord and head,  
Keep us, that hell be not our bitter bed;  
We have nought to do in such a master's hall.

Be not ye therefore of our fellowhead,  
But pray to God that he forgive us all.

Algernon Charles Swinburne, trans.

François Villon

# Le Testament: Ballade: 'item: Donne A Ma Povre Mere'

&lt;i&gt;Item&lt;/i&gt;

This I give to my poor mother  
As a prayer now, to our Mistress  
- She who bore bitter pain for me,  
God knows, and also much sadness -  
I've no other castle or fortress,  
That my body and soul can summon,  
When I'm faced with life's distress,  
Nor has my mother, poor woman:

Ballade

'Lady of Heaven, earthly queen,  
Empress of the infernal regions,  
Receive me, a humble Christian,  
To live among the chosen ones,  
Though I'm worth less than anyone.  
Your grace, my Lady and Mistress  
Is greater than my sinfulness,  
Grace without which, I tell no lie,  
None deserve their blessedness.  
In this faith let me live and die.

Say to your Son that I am His.  
Through Him all my sins are lost:  
Forgive me, as Mary Egypt was,  
Or, so they say, Theophilus,  
Who by your grace was still blameless,  
Though he vowed the Devil a guest.  
Protect me always from like excess,  
Virgin, who bore, without a cry,  
Christ whom we celebrate at Mass.  
In this faith let me live and die.

I am a woman, poor and old,  
I can neither read nor spell.

At Mass in church, here, I behold,  
A painted Heaven, with harps: a Hell,  
Where the damned are boiled, as well.  
One gives me joy: one strikes me cold,  
Grant me the joy, Great Goddess,  
On whom all sinners must rely,  
Fill me with faith and no slackness.  
In this faith let me live and die.

Virgin, you bore, O High Princess,  
Issue, whose kingdom is endless,  
Lord, who took on a littleness  
Like ours: to save us left the sky,  
Offering his lovely youth to death.  
Now, such is our Lord: such we confess:  
In this faith let me live and die.

François Villon

## Le Testament: Ballade: A S'Amyme

False beauty that costs me so dear,  
Rough indeed, a hypocrite sweetness,  
A mor, like iron on the teeth and harder,  
Named only to achieve my sure distress,  
Charm that's murderous, poor heart's death,  
O covert pride that sends men to ruin,  
Implacable eyes, won't true redress  
Succour a poor man, without crushing?

Much better elsewhere to search for  
Aid: it would have been more to my honour:  
Retreat I must, and fly with dishonour,  
Though none else then would have cast a lure.  
Help me, help me, you greater and lesser!  
End then? With not even one blow landing?  
Or will Pity, in line with all I ask here,  
Succour a poor man, without crushing?

That time will come that will surely wither  
Your bright flower, it will wilt and yellow,  
Then if I can grin, I'll call on laughter,  
But, yet, that would be foolish though:  
You'll be pale and ugly: and I'll be old,  
Drink deep then, while the stream's still flowing:  
And don't bring trouble on all men so,  
Succour a poor man, without crushing.

Amorous Prince, the greatest lover,  
I want no evil that's of your doing,  
But, by God, all noble hearts must offer  
To succour a poor man, without crushing.

François Villon

# Le Testament: Ballade: Pour Robert D'Estouteville

A t dawn of day, when falcon shakes his wing,  
M ainly from pleasure, and from noble usage,  
B lackbirds too shake theirs then as they sing,  
R eceiving their mates, mingling their plumage,  
O, as the desires it lights in me now rage,  
I 'd offer you, joyously, what befits the lover.  
S ee how Love has written this very page:  
E ven for this end are we come together.

D oubtedly, as my heart's lady you'll have being,  
E ntirely now, till death consumes my age.  
L aurel, so sweet, for my cause now fighting,  
O live, so noble, removing all bitter foliage,  
R eason does not wish me unused to owing,  
E ven as I'm to agree with this wish, forever,  
Duty to you, but rather grow used to serving:  
Even for this end are we come together.

And, what's more, when sorrow's beating  
Down on me, through Fate's incessant rage,  
Your sweet glance its malice is assuaging,  
Nor more or less than wind blows smoke away.  
As, in your field, I plant I lose no grain,  
For the harvest resembles me, and ever  
God orders me to plough, and sow again:  
Even for this end are we come together.

Princess, listen to this I now maintain:  
That my heart and yours will not dissever:  
So much I presume of you, and claim:  
Even for this end are we come together.

François Villon

# Le Testament: Epitaph Et Rondeau

&lt;i&gt;Epitaph&lt;/i&gt;

Here there lies, and sleeps in the grave,  
One whom Love killed with his scorn,  
A poor little scholar in every way,  
He was named François Villon.  
He never reaped a morsel of corn:  
Willed all away, as all men know:  
Bed, table, and basket all are gone.  
Gallants, now sing his song below:

&lt;i&gt;Rondeau&lt;/i&gt;

Oh, grant him now eternal peace,  
Lord, and everlasting light,  
He wasn't worth a candle bright,  
Nor even a sprig of parsley.  
Of eyebrows, hair, and beard he's free,  
A turnip scraped with a spade, all right:  
Oh, grant him now eternal peace.

Exiled with strict severity,  
Rapped behind with a spade, despite  
It all he cried: 'Appeal, for me!'  
- Which wasn't the height of subtlety.  
Oh, grant him now eternal peace.

François Villon



# Le Testament: Les Regrets De La Belle Heaulmière

By chance, I heard the belle complain,  
The one we called the Armouress,  
Longing to be a girl again,  
Talking like this, more or less:  
'Oh, old age, proud in wickedness,  
You've battered me so, and why?  
Who cares, who, for my distress,  
Or whether at all your blows I die?

You've stolen away that great power  
My beauty ordained for me  
Over priests and clerks, my hour,  
When never a man I'd see  
Would fail to offer his all in fee,  
Whatever remorse he'd later show,  
But what was abandoned readily,  
Beggars now scorn to know.

Many a man I then refused -  
Which wasn't wise of me, no jest -  
For love of a boy, cunning too,  
To whom I gave all my largesse.  
I feigned to him unwillingness,  
But, by my soul, I loved him bad.  
What he showed was his roughness,  
Loving me only for what I had.

He could drag me through the dirt,  
Trample me underfoot, I'd love him,  
Break my back, whatever's worse,  
If only he'd ask for a kiss again,  
I'd soon forget then every pain.  
A glutton, full of what he could win,  
He'd embrace me - with him I've lain.  
What's he left me? Shame and sin.

Now he's dead, these thirty years:  
And I live on, old, and grey.  
When I think of those times, with tears,

What I was, what I am today,  
View myself naked: turn at bay,  
Seeing what I am no longer,  
Poor, dry, meagre, worn away,  
I almost forget myself in anger.

Where's my smooth brow gone:  
My arching lashes, yellow hair,  
Wide-eyed glances, pretty ones,  
That took in the cleverest there:  
Nose not too big or small: a pair  
Of delicate little ears, the chin  
Dimpled: a face oval and fair,  
Lovely lips with crimson skin?

The fine slender shoulder-blades:  
The long arms, with tapering hands:  
My small breasts: the hips well made  
Full and firm, and sweetly planned,  
All Love's tournaments to withstand:  
The broad flanks: the nest of hair,  
With plump thighs firmly spanned,  
Inside its little garden there?

Now wrinkled forehead, hair gone grey:  
Sparse eyelashes: eyes so dim,  
That laughed and flashed once every way,  
And reeled their roaming victims in:  
Nose bent from beauty, ears thin,  
Hanging down like moss, a face,  
Pallid, dead and bleak, the chin  
Furrowed, a skinny-lipped disgrace.

This is the end of human beauty:  
Shrivelled arms, hands warped like feet:  
The shoulders hunched up utterly:  
Breasts....what? In full retreat,  
Same with the hips, as with the teats:  
Little nest, hah! See the thighs,  
Not thighs, thighbones, poor man's meat,  
Blotched like sausages, and dried.

That's how the bon temps we regret  
Among us, poor old idiots,  
Squatting on our haunches, set  
All in a heap like woollen lots  
Round a hemp fire men forgot,  
Soon kindled, and soon dust,  
Once so lovely, that cocotte...  
So it goes for all of us.

François Villon

## Le Testament: Rondeau

Death, I cry out at your harshness,  
That stole my girl away from me,  
Yet you're not satisfied I see  
Until I languish in distress.

Since then I've lost all liveliness:  
What harm alive, to you, was she?  
Death, I cry out at your harshness,  
That stole my girl away from me.

Two we were, with one heart blessed:  
If heart's dead, yes, then I foresee,  
I'll die, or I must lifeless be,  
Like those statues made of lead.

François Villon

# L'Envoy

Princess, by whom my hope is fed,  
My heart thee prays in lowlihead  
To prune the ill boughs overgrown,  
Nor slay Love's tree, nor plant instead  
Another tree, save this alone.

François Villon

# Rondel

Goodbye! the tears are in my eyes;  
Farewell, farewell, my prettiest;  
Farewell, of women born the best;  
Good-bye! the saddest of good-byes.  
Farewell! with many vows and sighs  
My sad heart leaves you to your rest;  
Farewell! the tears are in my eyes;  
Farewell! from you my miseries  
Are more than now may be confessed,  
And most by thee have I been blessed,  
Yea, and for thee have wasted sighs;  
Goodbye! the last of my goodbyes.

François Villon

# The Ballad Of The Proverbs

So rough the goat will scratch, it cannot sleep.  
So often goes the pot to the well that it breaks.  
So long you heat iron, it will glow;  
so heavily you hammer it, it shatters.  
So good is the man as his praise;  
so far he will go, and he's forgotten;  
so bad he behaves, and he's despised.  
So loud you cry Christmas, it comes.

So glib you talk, you end up in contradictions.  
So good is your credit as the favors you got.  
So much you promise that you will back out.  
So doggedly you beg that your wish is granted;  
so high climbs the price when you want a thing;  
so much you want it that you pay the price;  
so familiar it gets to you, you want it no more.  
So loud you cry Christmas, it comes.

So, you love a dog. Then feed it!  
So long a song will run that people learn it.  
So long you keep the fruit, it will rot.  
So hot the struggle for a spot that it is won;  
so cool you keep your act that your spirit freezes;  
so hurriedly you act that you run into bad luck;  
so tight you embrace that your catch slips away.  
So loud you cry Christmas, it comes.

So you scoff and laugh, and the fun is gone.  
So you crave and spend, and lose your shirt.  
So candid you are, no blow can be too low.  
So good as a gift should a promise be.  
So, if you love God, you obey the Church.  
So, when you give much, you borrow much.  
So, shifting winds turn to storm.  
So loud you cry Christmas, it comes.

Prince, so long as a fool persists, he grows wiser;  
so, round the world he goes, but return he will,  
so humbled and beaten back into servility.

So loud you cry Christmas, it is here.

François Villon



# The Ballad Of Villon And Fat Madge

'Tis no sin for a man to labour in his vocation.' -Falstaff  
'The night cometh, when no man can work.'

What though the beauty I love and serve be cheap,  
Ought you to take me for a beast or fool?  
All things a man could wish are in her keep;  
For her I turn swashbuckler in love's school.  
When folk dropp in, I take my pot and stool  
And fall to drinking with no more ado.  
I fetch them bread, fruit, cheese, and water, too;  
I say all's right so long as I'm well paid;  
'Look in again when your flesh troubles you,  
Inside this brothel where we drive our trade.'

But soon the devil's among us flesh and fell,  
When penniless to bed comes Madge my whore;  
I loathe the very sight of her like hell.  
I snatch gown, girdle, surcoat, all she wore,  
And tell her, these shall stand against her score.  
She grips her hips with both hands, cursing God,  
Swearing by Jesus' body, bones, and blood,  
That they shall not. Then I, no whit dismayed,  
Cross her cracked nose with some stray shiver of wood  
Inside this brothel where we drive our trade.

When all's made up she drops me a windy word,  
Bloat like a beetle puffed and poisonous:  
Grins, thumps my pate, and calls me dickey-bird,  
And cuffs me with a fist that's ponderous.  
We sleep like logs, being drunken both of us;  
Then when we wake her womb begins to stir;  
To save her seed she gets me under her  
Wheezing and whining, flat as planks are laid:  
And thus she spoils me for a whoremonger  
Inside this brothel where we drive our trade.

Blow, hail or freeze, I've bread here baked rent free!  
Whoring's my trade, and my whore pleases me;  
Bad cat, bad rat; we're just the same if weighed.

We that love filth, filth follows us, you see;  
Honour flies from us, as from her we flee  
    Inside this brothel where we drive our trade.

I bequeath likewise to fat Madge  
    This little song to learn and study;  
By god's head she's a sweet fat fadge,  
    Devout and soft of flesh and ruddy;  
I love her with my soul and body,  
So doth she me, sweet dainty thing.  
    If you fall in with such a lady,  
    Read it, and give it her to sing.

François Villon

# The Debate Between Villon And His Heart

Who's that I hear?&mdash;It's me&mdash;Who?&mdash;Your heart  
Hanging on by the thinnest thread  
I lose all my strength, substance, and fluid  
When I see you withdrawn this way all alone  
Like a whipped cur sulking in the corner  
Is it due to your mad hedonism?&mdash;  
What's it to you?&mdash;I have to suffer for it&mdash;  
Leave me alone&mdash;Why?&mdash;I'll think about it&mdash;  
When will you do that?&mdash;When I've grown up&mdash;  
I've nothing more to tell you&mdash;I'll survive without it&mdash;

What's your idea?&mdash;To be a good man&mdash;  
You're thirty, for a mule that's a lifetime  
You call that childhood?&mdash;No&mdash;Madness  
Must have hold of you&mdash;By what, the halter?&mdash;  
You don't know a thing&mdash;Yes I do&mdash;What?&mdash;Flies in milk  
One's white, one's black, they're opposites&mdash;  
That's all?&mdash;How can I say it better?  
If that doesn't suit you I'll start over&mdash;  
You're lost&mdash;Well I'll go down fighting&mdash;  
I've nothing more to tell you&mdash;I'll survive without it&mdash;

I get the heartache, you the injury and pain  
If you were just some poor crazy idiot  
I'd be able to make excuses for you  
You don't even care, all's one to you, foul or fair  
Either your head's harder than a rock  
Or you actually prefer misery to honor  
Now what do you say to that?&mdash;  
Once I'm dead I'll rise above it&mdash;  
God, what comfort&mdash;What wise eloquence&mdash;  
I've nothing more to tell you&mdash;I'll survive without it&mdash;

Why are you miserable?&mdash;Because of my miseries  
When Saturn packed my satchel I think  
He put in these troubles&mdash;That's mad  
You're his lord and you talk like his slave  
Look what Solomon wrote in his book  
"A wise man" he says "has authority

Over the planets and their influence"&mdash;  
I don't believe it, as they made me I'll be&mdash;  
What are you saying?&mdash;Yes that's what I think&mdash;  
I've nothing more to tell you&mdash;I'll survive without it&mdash;

Want to live?&mdash;God give me the strength&mdash;  
It's necessary...&mdash;What is?&mdash;To feel remorse  
Lots of reading&mdash;What kind?&mdash;Read for knowledge  
Leave fools alone&mdash;I'll take your advice&mdash;  
Or will you forget?&mdash;I've got it fixed in mind&mdash;  
Now act before things go from bad to worse  
I've nothing more to tell you&mdash;I'll survive without it.

Trans. Galway Kinnell

François Villon

# Villon's Epitaph (Ballade Of The Hanged Men)

O brother men who after us remain,  
Do not look coldly on the scene you view,  
For if you pity wretchedness and pain,  
God will the more incline to pity you.  
You see us hang here, half a dozen who  
Indulged the flesh in every liberty  
Till it was pecked and rotted, as you see,  
And these our bones to dust and ashes fall.  
Let no one mock our sorry company,  
But pray to God that He forgive us all.

If we have called you brothers, don't disdain  
The appellation, though alas it's true  
That not all men are equal as to brain,  
And that our crimes and blunders were not few.  
Commend us, now that we are dead, unto  
The Virgin Mary's son, in hopes that He  
Will not be sparing of His clemency,  
But save our souls, which Satan would enthrall.  
We're dead now, brothers; show your charity  
And pray to God that He forgive us all.

We have been rinsed and laundered by the rain,  
And by the sunlight dried and blackened too.  
Magpie and crow have plucked our eyeballs twain  
And cropped our eyebrows and the beards we grew.  
Nor have we any rest at all, for to  
And fro we sway at the wind's fantasy,  
Which has no object, yet would have us be  
(Pitted like thimbles) at its beck and call.  
Do not aspire to our fraternity,  
But pray to God that He forgive us all.  
Prince Jesus, we implore Your Majesty  
To spare us Hell's distress and obloquy;  
We want no part of what may there befall.  
And, mortal men, let's have no mockery,  
But pray to God that He forgive us all.

Translated by: Richard Wilbur

François Villon