

# THE DIAL



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## *Some Morals: From the French of Villon*

THE POEMS OF FRANÇOIS VILLON. Biographical and Critical Essay by Robert Louis Stevenson. Luce; \$1.75.

In literary criticism there is always considerable temptation to educe a moral; and of the many morals suggested out of hand by the terrestrial career of François Villon the most emphatic is that depravity may, in the third quarter of every other blue moon, be eminently praiseworthy. A many other notable poets have been deplorable citizens; hundreds of them have come to physical and spiritual ruin through drunkenness and debauchery; yet over these others it is possible to pull a long face, at any event in the classroom, and to assume that their verses would have been infinitely better if only the misguided writers thereof had lived a trifle more decorously. But with Villon no such genteel evasion is permissible. The "Grand Testament" is a direct result of the author's having been, plus genius, a sneak-thief, a pimp, and a cut-throat. From personal experience painfully attained in the practice of these several vocations it was that Villon wove imperishable verses, and he could not have come by this experience in any other way. So we have this Testament, this inseparable medley of sneers and beauty and grief and plain nastiness (wherein each quality bewilderingly begets the other three), as the reaction of a certain personality to certain experiences. We are heartily glad to have this Testament; and upon the whole, we are grateful to Villon for having done whatever was necessary to produce these poems. And no sane person will condemn the "Ballade au Nom de la Fortune," the "Regrets de la Belle Heaulmière," and the "Ballade des Pendus," on the score that their purchase price was severally the necessity of forcing a man of genius to occupy a jail, a brothel, and a gibbet. For our moral prejudices fail to traverse the corridors of time; and we really cannot bother at this late day to regain the point of view of the Capetian police.

Just here moreover the career of Villon affords a subsidiary moral, as to the ultimate futility of being practical. Villon stole purses and the constabulary hunted him down, through purely practical motives; and it is salutary to reflect that both these facts are today of equal unimportance with all the other coeval manifestations of common sense. Thus, for example, it was during Villon's lifetime that Jeanne Darc

drove the English out of France and Louis XI established the French monarchy in actual power—both practical and, as it seemed, really important proceedings, of the sort to which marked prominence is accorded in the history-books. Yet the French monarchy is now at one with the pomp of Nimrod; an English army garrisons the town in which the English burned the Maid of Domrémy, and today a host of Frenchmen die momentarily in their endeavor to prevent this army's eviction; but the nonsensical emotion with which a vagabond once viewed a loaf of bread in a bakery window survives unchanged. And when you reflect upon all the practical persons of Villon's acquaintance—the bishops and lords and princes, the lawyers and long-robed physicians, the merchants and grave magistrates and other citizens of unstained repute, who self-respectingly went about important duties and discharged them with credit—you cannot but marvel that of this vast and complicated polity, which took itself so seriously, nothing should have remained vital save the wail, as of a hurt child, that life should be so "horrid." For this is all that survives to us, all that stays really alive, of the France of Louis XI.

Villon, be it repeated, even when he jeers does but transmit to us the woe of an astounded and very dirty child that life should be so "horrid." He does not reason about it; for here, if anywhere, was a great poet "delivered from thought, from the base holiness of intellect," and Villon reasons about nothing; but his grief is peculiarly acute, and in the outcome contagious. It is so cruel, he laments, that youth and vigor should be but transient loans, and that even I should have become as bald as a peeled onion; so cruel that death should be waiting like a tipstaff to hale each of us, even me, into the dark prison of the grave; and so cruel that the troubling beauty of great queens, and even the prettiness of those adorable girls with whom I used to frolic, should be so soon converted into a wrinkled bag of bones. And it is very cruel, too, that because I borrowed a purseful of money when the owner was looking elsewhere, I should be locked in this uncomfortable dungeon; I had to have some money. And it is perfectly preposterous that, merely because I lost my temper and knifed a rascal, who was no conceivable loss to anybody, the sheriff should be going to hang me on a filthy gallows, where presently the beak of a bedraggled crow will be pecking at my face like the needle at my old mother's thimble. For I never really meant any harm! In short, to

Villon's finding, life, not merely as the parish authorities order it, but as the laws of nature constrain it too, is so "horrid" that the only way of rendering life endurable is to drink as much wine as one can come by; and there in little you have Villon's creed. It is not a particularly "uplifting" form of faith, save in the sense that it leads toward elevation at a rope's end, but Villon is perfectly sincere in enunciating it, and his very real terror and bewilderment at the trap in which he was born, and his delight in all life's colorful things, that are doubly endeared by his keen sense of their impermanence, are unerringly communicated. Pity and terror—dare one repeat?—was what Aristotle demanded in great poetry, and this Villon gives full measure.

Of the English translation by John Payne, whose version is reproduced in this new edition (without any mention of the translator), the best which can be said is that Payne self-evidently worked hard to make it, and so deserves praise for his industry. For the rest, Payne has not infrequently transmuted the obsolete French into a jargon that was never English, and has but too successfully avoided the malpractice of Rossetti and Swinburne, who "translated Villon" by writing upon Villon's themes some quite new verses, and sometimes rather better poems than he did. Payne certainly has done this nowhere. And yet Payne's critical introduction is of genuine interest and value, so that one wonders by what editorial logic it has been omitted from this new edition, to make room for the essay by Stevenson. Questionless, the favored paper is a bit of very picturesque and justly famous "writing"; but it is irritatingly the rhetoric of a descendant of Scotch Covenanters, of a monstrously clever young Edinburgher who cannot ever get quite free of the underthought that Villon was "nae vera weel thought of." And this attitude is intolerable when adopted toward a circumstance which Villon himself is reported to have disposed of, once for all. "When Paris had need of a singer Fate made the man. To kings' courts she lifted him; to thieves' hovels she thrust him down; and past Lutetia's palaces and abbeys and taverns and gutters and prisons and its very galleys—past each in turn the man was dragged, that he might make the Song of Paris. So the song was made; and as long as Paris endures François Villon will be remembered. Villon the singer Fate fashioned as was needful; and in this fashioning Villon the man was ruined in body and soul. And the song was worth it."

JAMES BRANCH CABELL.

## Lord Acton—Idealist

CORRESPONDENCE OF LORD ACTON. Vol. I. Longmans, Green; \$5.

Every student of history has cause to be grateful for this book. Badly edited and ill arranged as it is, it is full of wise comment and acute observation upon some of the central issues of social life. The more profoundly the nineteenth century is studied, the more does it become evident that its truest perspective will be found in the analysis of such minds as that of Acton. His philosophy bears a fruit we have still to gather. He was the first great political thinker of our time to see the comparative unimportance of any problem save that of freedom. He represents the realization that the negative liberalism of Mill and his school, valuable and instructive as it is, only casts light upon the question of liberty without in fact providing its solution. He adds the understanding that, as T. H. Green so finely saw, no statement of the meaning of freedom is adequate which does not include positive assurance not less than negative safeguard. Liberty is not less the provision of opportunity than the organization of resistance. The central defect of Mill's outlook was the fact that it depended upon an unreal classification of human dispositions. It was right where it affirmed and wrong where it denied. It was too simple to represent the complex facts it attempted to summarize. The great virtue of Acton's attitude was the splendid experience upon which it was based. It came from a man whose learning was equaled by perhaps only two men in his time. No mind has so superbly swept the whole field of organized knowledge as did Acton's. He was not satisfied with the printed books. Manuscript sources in library and archives, the *vale* of some statesman whom old age had rendered garrulous, the tradition some traveler had brought from a distant people, a half-deciphered inscription from a broken Egyptian tomb—all were swept into the service of his priceless generalizations.

Acton is the ideal cosmopolitan. He centered within himself the full intelligence of his age. He knew English political life from the inside of those half dozen salons where alone the truth can be uttered. He could pass from the drawing-room of M. Guizot to the study of the great Dollinger. He knew Favre and Newman, Manning and Strossmayer, Disraeli and Gladstone. He realized, as few have realized, that when the last word has been said upon the play of the great historic forces, the historian must