

15th Century
French Poetry:
Francois Villon

Dr. Alan Haffa

- Paris, 1431
- Mother, poor and illiterate
- Father—not much is known
- Adopted the last name of a priest who mentored him
- Studied at Paris University
- Problems with the law
- In and out of prison and exile



First Great French Poet

- “the only poet to have expressed the spirit of his time with what seems to be a **completely personal voice.**” (Brereton 1)
- He is important for two poetic themes: The **fleetingness of Youth** and **Horror of Old Age and Death**
- He writes from the **depth of his personal despair and sorrow** with a philosophical questing to understand the world.

Ballade

- 14th and 15th centuries
- 28 lines of verse
- Three 8 line Stanzas followed by a 4 line envoi
- Rhyme: ababbcbC;
- Last line, C, is a refrain
- Envoi: bcbC
- Envoi often begins with “Prince,”; historic context as address to Literary Judge

Ballade of the Ladies of Bygone Times:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6rFgcx84-c&NR=1&feature=fvwp>

- Tell me where, or in what country
- Is Flora, the lovely Roman,
- Archipiades or Thais,
- Who was her nearest cousin,
- Echo answering, at clap of hand,
- Over the river, and the meadow,
- Whose beauty was more than human?
- Oh, where is last year's snow?

- Where is that wise girl Eloise,
 - For whom was gelded, to his great shame,
 - Peter Abelard, at Saint Denis,
 - For love of her enduring pain,
 - And where now is that queen again,
 - Who commanded them to throw
 - Buridan in a sack, in the Seine?
 - Oh, where is last year's snow?
- (omitted one stanza)
- Prince, don't ask of me again
 - Where they are, this year or no,
 - I have only this last refrain:
 - Oh, where is last year's snow?

Comments on Ladies of Bygone Times

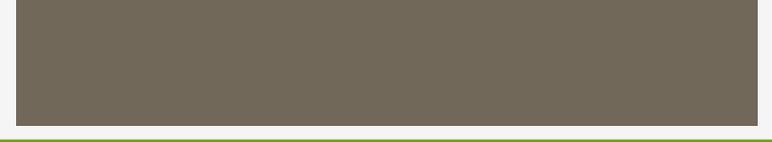
- Refrain: Last year's snow is long gone; melted
- It is impossible to keep time frozen
- The first stanza recalls women whose love was not returned
- The second stanza recalls women who directly or indirectly hurt their lovers
- The third stanza recalls famous Maidens like Joan of Arc
- All have passed—and the implication is that we should love and be loved

Comments on Epitaph

- Refrain: “But pray God that He Absolves us all.”
- The poet is praying to his reader/viewer and asking them to pray on his behalf
- He establishes a correspondence between the viewer/judge and the condemned
- By emphasizing our Body and its corruptibility he calls attention both to the death that awaits us all, and to our common experience as vulnerable bodies
- Nature both destroys and cleanses our Body
- God, the Virgin, Jesus as Merciful

Le Testament: Les Regrets de la Belle Heaulmiere

- Mistress of a powerful Cleric
- He was involved in a plot on King; after his imprisonment, she became a prostitute
- Heaulmiere is in her 80s in the poem
- The description of her body is characteristic of Villon's realism
- Contrasts with the idealism of Troubadours
- Stress upon the common human condition and the wisdom of enjoying youth while we can



- Now my forehead's wrinkled, my hair gray,
My eyebrows drooping, my eyes clouded—
Those eyes whose glance and laughter
Was to many their undoing;
My nose is hooked—its beauty gone,
My ears hang down like moss,
My face is pale, dead, and faded,
My chin puckered, my lips withered.

So this is human beauty's end!

...

Ballad of Small Talk

- I know horses and mules,
I know the load they carry,
I know Beatrice and Belle,
I know counting and adding,
I know visions and sleep,
I know the heresies of Hussites,
I know the power of Rome,
I know all, except myself.

Comments on “Small talk”

- Reminiscent of Socratic moral: Know Thyself
- The poet knows everything, except himself
- He know the natural world (stanza 1)
- He knows the social hierarchy (stanza 2)
- He knows opposites (stanza 3)
- He knows Life and Death even (envoi)
- But the refrain emphasizes that he does not know himself

Ballade de bonne doctrine

- Now whether you peddle indulgences,
Or learn to use loaded dice,
Or counterfeit coins and get burned
Like those traitors without any faith
Who are boiled in hot oil, or if
You're a crook who's always out fliching,
Where goes the money you make?
All to the girls and the taverns.

Epitaphe Villon: Ballade des Pendus

- On the occasion of being condemned to hang
- The Brotherhood of Man; We are all flesh and blood
- Pity your fellow man so that God will pity you
- Pray for us to the Virgin Mary, so that they will be saved from Hell
- Natural forces purify: Rain, Sun, Birds, Wind
- This is the Human Condition
- Final appeal to Jesus as Prince and Judge and a reminder that we should pray for God to absolve us All rather than mock the dead

Summary

- Villon is the first French poet of the modern era
- Individualism
- Realism
- Carpe Diem
- Brotherhood of Human Existence—noble or commoner, religious or lay, thief or honest man, we are all the same.