

# 15<sup>th</sup> Century French Poetry: Francois Villon

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- 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

- 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 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: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eG1CpuhVsQ>

- 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

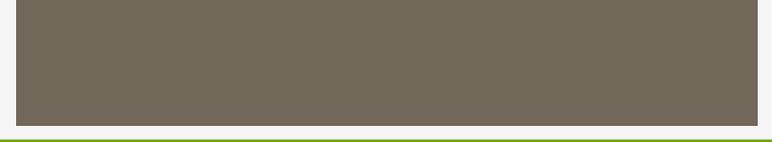
- Refrain: Last year's snow is long gone; melted
- It is impossible to keep time frozen
- The first stanza recalls women whose love was not returned
- The second stanza recalls women who directly or indirectly hurt their lovers
- The third stanza recalls famous Maidens like Joan of Arc
- All have passed—and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

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# 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 filching,
- 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