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THE POVRE VILLON AND OTHER MARTYRED LOVERS OF THE « TESTAMENT »

Venez a son enterrement,
Quant vous orez le carrillon,
Vestuz rouge com vermeillon,
Car en amours mourut martir [1].

In his « posthumous » elevation to martyrdom Villon leaves us one of the most memorable and vaguely disquieting self-portrayals of the *Testament.* The power of the image to impress itself into the reader's memory may be partially explained by the fact that *martir* is used here for the first and only time in the work, and is associated with a shade of red which immediately evokes the sight of blood and the accompanying emotional response. By the sacrificial character of Villon's fictive death, and by his inclusion in the saintly ranks of all those who died in the ultimate state of grace, the poet projects a Christlike image of himself in his final moments. David Kuhn argues that the alleged death of Villon, « le Christ burlesque » is necessary in order that his poem become a testament, just as the death of Christ was required before the New Testament could be written [2]. What Kuhn does not elucidate is how the vision of the poet as *martir en amours* culminates a series of references to love, all of which are tinged with varying degrees of violent overtones. I intend to isolate these allusions, focusing attention particularly on their prefigurative function, the way in which they build towards the mock-tragic moment of Villon's martyrdom which we are invited to celebrate at the end of the poem.

The topos of the martyred lover, as Italo Siciliano points out, is one of the oldest courtly traditions in French lyric poetry [3]. From

[1] *Le Testament Villon,* ed. Jean Rychner and Albert Henry (Geneva, Droz, 1974), vv. 1998-2001. Subsequent parenthetical quotations are from this edition.

[2] *La Poétique de François Villon* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1967), p. 458.

[3] *François Villon et les thèmes poétiques du Moyen Age* (Paris, Armand Colin, 1934).

the earliest songs of the troubadours, the notions of love and suffering are inextricably meshed. In addition to the many examples of *l'amant martir* cited by the Italian scholar, one might add these verses of Charles d'Orléans:

> De balader j'ay beau loisir,
> Autres deduis me sont cassez;
> Prisonnier suis, d'Amour martir [4].

The fact that Villon is again playing with a stock rhetorical device lifted from courtly tradition is incontestable. It is precisely the way in which he reworks the poetic convention which is interesting. Both love and death as poetic concepts in courtly poetry consistently take a figurative form. The suffering of the poet is conveyed almost exclusively in metaphorical language. The emotionally charged states of loving and dying are « refined » of all their physical qualities, and kept purely in the realm of abstraction. Villon, while sometimes retaining the allegorical representation of love and death, frequently restores their concrete aspect. Love is no longer the troubadour's ethereal sentiment, disembodied of all earthly encumbrance, with mysterious powers of elevation and illumination. It becomes for Villon one of the most dangerous primal forces of human nature. Any respect he may show for *amours* derives not from its purported capacity to uplift, but from its proven power to madden, bestialize and destroy the human spirit.

It is not until the twenty-fifth stanza that the first mention of love appears:

> Bien est verté que j'é aymé
> Et aymeroie voulentiers;
> Mais triste cueur, ventre affamé,
> Qui n'est rassasïé au tiers,
> M'oste des amoureux sentiers.
> Au fort, quelc'um s'en recompence
> Qui est remply sur les chantiers,
> Car la dance vient de la pance! (193-200)

[4] *Poésies*, ed. Pierre Champion, C.F.M.A. (Paris, Champion, 1923-27), vol. 1, XL, vv. 31-33.

The opening of the stanza is strongly reminiscent of the « classical » language of the traditional love lyric. The words *triste cueur* have a particularly courtly flavor, and prepare the reader for another introspective analysis of love's anguish. This expectation is deceived by the insertion of *ventre affamé* immediately after the cesura. The juxtaposition of heart and stomach deprives the former of its full methaphorical value, reminding us of its lesser status as another bodily organ. Once punctured, the courtly illusion rapidly deflates. Abstract language gives way to more colorful popular speech (« remply sur les chantiers »), followed by the reworking of a proverbial phrase whose implication is anyhing but courly. This degeneration of stylized lierary discourse into casually worded conversation parallels the simultaneous « devaluation » of the ideal embodied in the formalized opening of the stanza. Love must be properly humbled before entering the world of the *Testament*. Villon reminds us that « the dance starts in the belly ». Having reduced love to a hunger of the heart which can only be satisfied when the hunger of the belly has been stilled, the poet will later inflate it back to its allegorical dimensions, as playfully as he has just collapsed it.

With the introduction of Paris and Helen, the first of a series of paired lovers, Villon restores love to its epic proportions. These mythological figures serve most immediately to illustrate the degrading ravages of death which even the most perfect human specimens must endure:

> Et meure Paris ou Elayne,
> Quicunques meurt, meurt a douleur
> Telle qu'il pert vent et alaine,
> Son fiel se criesve sur son cueur,
> Puis sue Dieu scet quel sueur... (313-317)

Villon could have chosen any number of archetypal lovers; it is not by accident that these two have been selected to lead the parade of unhappy lovers, Villon among them, who will wander through the *Testament*. If the first association brought to mind by these two names is beauty, the second must be violence, for their illicit relationship was the initial cause of a catastrophic war. Paris and Helen are in fact inseparable from the Troyan War, without which their

union would be prosaic and uninspired. In the context of the *Testament* Paris becomes the first of the martyrs of love. His death, provoked by an arrow wound received during the war, parallels the death of the martyred Villon, wounded by the *esguillon* of *Amours*. Equally significant is the fact that the first lovers to appear in this poem are presented not in the prime of their love, but at the moment of their death. The moribund Paris and Helen, captured in their final instants of excruciating pain, become emblematic then of the thematic cluster, love/suffering/death, which will resurface at scattered intervals throughout the work.

It is in the extraordinarily rich *Ballade des dames du temps jadis*, almost immediately following the verses quoted above, that the next victims appear, led by Pierre Abelard:

> Ou est la tres saige Esloys,
> Pour qui chastré fut et puis moyne
> Pierre Esbaillart a Saint Denys? (337-339)

In contrast to this unfortunate theologian, Buridan, the clever scholastic, managed to cheat destiny of his intended death:

> Semblablement, ou est la royne
> Qui commanda que Buridan
> Fust gecté en ung sac en Saine? (341-343)

Legend has it that Buridan arranged to have a barge filled with hay pass beneath the window at the crucial moment, and thus was saved. Having averted tragedy, he becomes a *martyr manqué*. But the sacrificial victim who dominates the ballad is one of the few bona fide martyrs of the *Testament*:

> Et Jehanne la bonne Lorraine
> Qu'Engloys brulerent a Rouen. (349-350)

Set apart from Paris and Abeland by the historical immediacy and the already sanctioned status of her immolation, Jeanne can still properly take her place in the procession of martyrs. It is, however, for a higher form of love that she gives up her life, a divinely inspired love of her country. Furthermore, the sacrifices of Abelard and Jeanne are not completely without parallel. Both are spiritually

elevated by their respective punishments: Abelard to a life of prayer and contemplation, Jeanne to martyrdom.

The greatest concentration of love's victims is found not in this ballad, but in the *Double Ballade* almost three hundred verses later. An admonition to would-be lovers opens the poem:

> Pour ce, aymez tant que vouldrez,
> Suivez assemblees et festes,
> En la fin ja mieulx n'en vauldrez
> Et n'y romperez que voz testes.
> Folles amours font les gens bestes. (625-629)

The last two verses announce a series of images connecting love with acts of violence and violation. The « cracking » of the heads is meant to be read figuratively as well as literally. Love promises either the collapse of reason or a broken skull. In either case, it will always bring out man's bestial nature. « Car la dance vient de la pance ». And now the degrading dance begins:

> Salmon en ydolatria,
> Sanson en perdit ses lunectes. (630-631)

Two acts of violation are juxtaposed here: the transgression of divine commandment in the first instance, of nature itself in the second. The blinding is spiritual in one case, physical in the other. Solomon's idolatry illustrates the power of love to disorient minds, corrupt moral judgment, to « crack heads ». The mutilation inflicted upon Samson, like the castration of Abelard, represents the crippling aspect of love, whether it is conscience, virility, or vision of which a man is deprived.

Villon now shifts from Biblical to Classical tradition, introducing the figures of Orpheus and Narcissus:

> Orpheus le doulx menestrier,
> Jouant de fluctes et musectes,
> En fut en danger de murtrier
> Chien Cerberuz a quatre testes. (633-636)

Orpheus, like Buridan, only achieves the status of a potential martyr. Although he is unsuccessful in rescuing Eurydice from the

underworld, he never suffers bodily injury from the dangers of Hades. The example of Narcissus' « descent » forms a skillfully constructed parallel:

> Et Narcisus ly beaulx honnestes
> En ung parfont puis se noya
> Pour l'amour de ses amourectes. (637-639)

Orpheus and Narcissus both voluntarily enter the realm of death in search of a loved one. Both are unsuccessful. The former is allowed to return to life, while the latter, having pursued an illusion, is not.

Following Narcissus is Sardana (an abbreviated form of Sardanapale), the legendary king of Assyria:

> Sardana le preux chevallier,
> Qui conquist le resne de Crestes,
> En voulut devenir moullier
> Et filler entre pucellectes. (641-644)

The most obvious function of Sardana in this ballad is to provide another example of reason lost to love. There is, however, another loss subtly implied in these verses. The *preux* Sardana, willing to give up his *prouesse*, the very quality which guarantees his manhood, « voulut devenir moullier ». The use of the simple past tense indicates an attempted act rather than an unfulfilled wish. The notion of a soldier trying to « became a woman », trying to make himself « soft » (the supposed latin root of *moullier* being *mollis*) brings to mind the fate of Abelard.

Next comes another series of Biblical allusions, beginning with David's illicit love for Bathsheba:

> David ly roys, saiges prophetes,
> Crainte de Dieu en oublia,
> Voyant laver cuisses bien fetes. (645-647)

The Hebrew king, attracted by the beauty of Bathsheba, promptly had her husband Uriah sent to the battlefront. The strategy worked perfectly; Uriah died a hero's death, leaving his wife conveniently widowed. In carrying out his plan, however, David overlooked a

number of commandments, and thus incurred divine displeasure. Villon, with his usual ellipsis, condenses the story into three verses. Again violation and violence are paired, and although his name is unmentioned, there is another victim. The word *cuisse* evokes another Biblical episode, more explicitly sexual in nature:

> Amon en voult deshonnorer,
> Faignant de menger tartelectes,
> Sa seur Thamar et defflorer,
> Qui fut incestes deshonnestes. (649-652)

Thamar, the only female victim of the ballad, is the object of both moral and physical violation in the dual crimes of incest and rape. The story does not end here. Absalom, brother of Thamar and half brother of Amnon, waited patiently for the moment of vengeance to arrive. When Amnon eventually let himself be lured into a helpless state of drunkeness, he was slain by Absalom's servants. Love, as portrayed in this ballad, whether incestual, self-centered or adulterous, always produces the same destructive results.

Closing the trilogy of Biblical allusions is the death of John the Baptist whom Herod ordered decapitated « Pour dances, saulx et chansonnettes » (655). At this point Villon introduces himself into the cast of legendary characters:

> De moy, povre, je veuil parler:
> J'en fuz batu comme a ru telles,
> Tout nu, ja ne le quiers celler.
> Qui mi fist macher ces grosselles
> Fors Katherine de Vauselles?
> Noel le tiers ot, qui fut la,
> Mitaines a ces nopces telles.
> Bien eureux est qui riens n'y a! (657-664)

The word *povre* is both a remark of self-pity and an apology for including within the ranks of such illustrious figures so humble a person as the *povre Villon*. The flogging inflicted upon Villon's naked body may allude, as some have speculated, to an actual instance of corporal punishment for some unknown crime. Regardless of the veracity of the poet's claim, the image he projects is clearly calculated to inspire humor as well as pity. Behind the loom-

ing figures of myth and antiquity, magnified by their cruelty or suffering, comes the poor little Villon, utterly naked, cursing and muttering threats beneath his breath. His nudity announces the stripped state in which we will find him at the end of the poem:

> Il fut rez, chief, barbe, sourcil,
> Comme ung navet c'on ret ou pelle. (1896-1897)
>
> Quant mourut, n'avait q'un haillon. (2013)

One possible fate reserved for the *povre Villon*, as we see in the final stanza of the ballad, is death at the stake:

> Mais que ce jeune bachelier
> Laissast ces jeunes bachelectes?
> Non, et le deust on vif bruler
> Comme ung chevaucheur d'escouvettes! (665-668)

The trail of violence culminates here with the projected suffering of an actual citizen of the fifteenth century, just as the *Ballade des dames du temps jadis* culminates with the death of Joan of Arc. Is the parallel completely fortuitous? Villon's anticipated death is that of a heretic, the class of criminal for which this punishment was specifically reserved by medieval law. However, his heresy involves a crime directed not against the Church, but against the Lord of Love. This is not the first time that death at the stake has been envisioned. The scene of the heretic-martyr's execution has been foreshadowed by a number of earlier referencs attaching the motif of fire to either death or love:

> Et lors qui m'eust veu condescendre
> A mal, estre ars et mis en cendre
> Jugié me feusse de ma foy. (164-166)

The rapid passing of the poet's days is compared with the burning off of stray threads on a loom-stretched cloth. Although Villon claims to have borrowed the allusion from Job, the image of fire is completely absent in the Biblical text:

> Mes jours s'en sont alez errant,
> Comme, dit Job, d'une touaille

Font les filletz, quant tixerant
En son poing tient ardente paille. (217-220)

The association of fire with sexual desire goes back to Paul's justification of marriage. The prostitutes pictured in the *Testament* were led into their trade by a different method of « quenching love's flames »:

Lors prindrent, ains qu'eussent diffames,
L'une ung clerc, ung lay, l'autre ung moyne,
Pour estaindre d'amours les flasmes. (597-599)

Villon's most adept working of the love/death/fire theme comes with the image of the old women, former *femmes honnestes*, crouched around a little hempstalk fire:

Ainsi le bon temps regretons,
Entre nous, povres vielles soctes,
Assises bas, a crouppetons,
Tout en ung tas, comme peloctes,
A petit feu de chenevoctes,
Tost alumees, tost estainctes...
Et jadiz fusmes si mignotes! (525-531)

The subject modified by *alumees* and *estainctes* may be taken to be either *chenevoctes* or *povres vielles soctes*, the latter providing a much richer reading. Eaten away by the life-consuming fire of time and passion, and martyrs to both, these women are little more than the ashes of their former selves. The *povres vielles soctes* clearly inspire the pity of the poet who at various moments sees himself too as unfortunate, old and foolish.

The *Double Ballade* from its opening warming to would-be lovers to its projected death of a has-been lover is held together by the theme of loss. And this loss is always incurred for love. Salamon and David lose their conscience, and endanger their souls. Sardana loses his reason and renounces his virility. Samson loses his vision, Thamar her virginity, Orpheus his wife, Narcissus, Amnon and John the Baptist their very lives. The price paid by the *povre Villon* is, at the very least, his dignity. But this will not be the end of his suffering.

Only five stanzas after the double ballad, the figure of the stripped and beaten lover resurfaces:

> Ainsi m'ont Amours abusé
> Et pourmené de l'uys au pesle,
> Je croy qu'omme n'est si rusé,
> Fust fin com argent de coupelle,
> Qui n'y laissast linge, drappelle,
> Mais qu'il fust ainsi manïé
> Comme moy, qui partout m'appelle
> L'aman remis et renyé. (705-712)

Amours is frequently cited in medieval lyric poetry as the cruel master who attacks his faithful servants:

> Si me rest bien, conment qu'Amours m'assaille [5].
>
> Mais quant Amors vient plus a moi lancier,
> Et mains la fui, c'est merveille trop grant [6].

The assault of Love is conventionally pictured in terms borrowed from the feudal-military vocabulary on which the *chanson d'amour* draws so heavily. The description, left intentionally vague, reflects the amorphous and mysterious nature of the attacker. In the *Testament* the personification of love extends beyond the bounds of lyric tradition. No matter how *fin* a man may be (Villon again borrows from courtly convention — the *fins amanz*), he will eventually end up like our poet, physically beaten (*manïé*) by Love, and stripped of clothes and underwear (*linge, drappelle*). The image of this assault, far more graphic than the nebolous description of the trouvères quoted above, evokes not a scene of chivalric combat, but rather a mugging in some dark back alley. The reference to forced divestment may be interpreted either as another allusion to the alleged public punishment, or as a visual representation of love's power to lead a man into financial and emotional bankruptcy. In either case we are left again with a memorable impression of the poet's vulnerability, and his cruel treatment at the hands of Love.

[5] Holger Petersen Dyggve, *Gace Brulé trouvère champenois* (Helsinki, Société Néophilologique, 1951), IX, v. 32.

[6] *Les Chansons de Thibaut de Champagne*, ed. A. Wallensköld (Paris, Champion, 1925), IV, vv. 13-14.

Now comes a long series of bequests, postponing the appearance of the martyrdom theme until the epitaph near the end of the poem:

> Cy gist et dor en ce sollier
> Qu'Amours occist de son raillon,
> Ung povre petit escollier
> Qui fut nommé Françoys Villon. (1884-1887)

This portion of the epitaph serves a variety of thematic and structural functions. At the most visible level, it represents another remodeling of the courtly tradition. The arrow of Love, however, does not not kill its victims; it only maims them emotionally. The agony of the courtly lover is caused by the ambivalent nature of his wound which will neither heal nor prove mercifully fatal. By contrast, the finality of Villon's injury sets it apart from the interminable suffering of the conventional poet-lover. In the context of the *Testament* this fatal injury is not an isolated accident, but one of a series of physical wounds intentionally inflicted by Love on his various martyrs: Paris, Abeland, Samson, not to mention the psychological wounds inflicted upon the others. With the reversal of the logical sequence, death → epitaph, the nature of the poet's death is deliberately revealed before the actual scene is witnessed. The object causing this death, the *raillon*, is not an arrow (as it is often incorrectly translated), but rather the bolt of a crossbow. The distinction is significant. The shape of the bolt, a short square-headed missle, accentuates the phallic nature of this image, thus preparing the rather explicit sexual allusions which will be found at the end of the poem.

The abundant sexual imagery of the concluding ballad has been thoroughly studied by David Kuhn. The third stanza, deceptively simple at first reading, deserves special attention:

> Il est ainsi et tellement:
> Quant mourut, n'avait q'un haillon;
> Qui plus, en mourant, mallement
> L'espoignoit d'Amours l'esguillon;
> Plus agu que le ranguillon
> D'un baudrier lui faisoit sentir
> — C'est de quoy nous esmerveillon —,
> Quant de ce monde voult partir. (2012-2019)

Kuhn believes the stanza admits at least two readings. The obvious reference to the arrow of Love, he maintains, thinly disguises a graphic physiological description of sexual arousal at the moment of death:

> Bref, la syntaxe ambiguë de ces vers opère une confusion des deux sens de la ballade. D'une part, le Pauvre Villon, rossé partout et constamment joué en amour, est torturé « mallement » une dernière fois par le dieu malveillant qu'il avait « regnïé ». D'autre part, le Pauvre Villon, usé dans une oeuvre immense de fécondation, sent à sa mort son membre fidèle qui « mâle-ment », pointe le nez en l'air, « Plus agu... »[7].

There exists, however, another interpretation which conforms more closely to the self-image projected throughout the *Testament*. Villon consistently portrays himself as a loser, a man victimized by society, love, fate, life itself. Deserted by wealth, youth and family, he is left a broken man:

> Triste, failly, plus noir que meure,
> Qui n'ay ne cens, rente, n'avoir. (179-180)

In the *Testament* we read the bitter inventory of the poet's various misfortunes. Critical to our interpretation of the whole work is our understanding of the final verses. If, following Kuhn's suggestion, one visualizes a scene of sexual prowess in the face of death, then Villon's last act can only be taken as a moment of triumph. Tempting though this interpretation may be, it simply has no foundation beyond what can be read into the final twelve verses of the poem. On the contrary, all signs indicate a very different end for the *povre Villon*. Moreover, upon careful examination of the text, the assault of Love proves less prosaic than it appears on the surface. If we retain Kuhn's reading of « mâle-ment », but take the adverb as applying to the attack of *Amours* rather than indicative of the physiological response of the person attacked, a different picture emerges. Just when his trials appear to be over, Villon is forced to submit to a new act of humiliation. This novel form of martyrdom elicits our astonishment: « C'est de quoy nous esmerveillon ». What could be more consistent with the theme of

[7] Kuhn, *op. cit.*, p. 333.

victimization than this brutal sexual assault? The homosexual nature of the act has already been suggested in the epitaph: « Qu'Amours occist de son raillon ». The image of the tongue of a belt buckle strongly connotes phallic penetration, especially in the context of a ballad filled with sexual innuendos.

For Villon to take his proper place among the other martyrs of love, he must first die a martyr's death. But what are we to make out of this final mockery? The brutal rape of he closing scene clearly culminates a deliberate association of love and violence throughout the poem, but what is it that Villon has so carefully prepared? Summoned by the bells, we have dutifully come to the poet's funeral, dressed in the appropriate mourning garb as he requested. As we listen to the eulogy of *je* which has now detached itself from *il*, we solemnly await the re-enactment of the « martyr's » final moments. And now, as the anticipated moment arrives, we suddenly realize that we are watching a farce. For *je* is not only mocking *il*, but us as well, as we stand solemnly and properly in our vermilion, watching this unexpected and totally undignified scene. The instant of triumph (for it does in fact finally occur) comes in the last gesture of the moribund martyr:

> Sachiez qu'il fist au departir:
> Ung traict but de vin morillon. (2021-2022)

In the face of a long series of personal misfortunes, of which the rape is emblematic, the drinking of the wine is both an act of desperation, an attempt to escape the pain and shame which have just been inflicted (taking us back to the opening of the poem: « Que toutes mes hontes j'euz bues », v. 2), and a gesture of defiance, a call for celebration. The note of tragedy for which we have been so carefully prepared never rings. Instead, it is perverse humor and a stubborn will to rejoice in spite of all adversity which dominate in the end. After all the raucous noises have subsided, the last sound echoing from the world of the *Testament* is one of haunting laughter.

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