

Fictional will

‘I want to prepare for my end’

(de Hauteville line 23)

In late-medieval France, the fictional will and testament emerged as a popular genre used by writers to place their persona on the brink of dying and sometimes to stage death itself. It thereby contrived a very particular narrative point of view. This functioned not only as a pretext for reflection on personal life history (on the cusp between autobiography and autothanatography) or as a vehicle for social commentary (exploiting the prerogative that ‘a dying man has the right to speak freely’ (Villon line 728)),¹ but also as a locus for focalizing the relationship between death and human identity: prescribing one’s own epitaph, defining one’s life as end-orientated, and considering the nature of one’s posterity, whether immediate posthumous treatment or longer-term survival in and as memory, in a religious context or otherwise. Often referred to as ‘mock’ testaments for their parodic or satirical aspects (such as assuming the persona of an animal or burlesquing testamentary convention), these works are more than comic turns; indeed, it is often through humour that they highlight key questions of what constitutes human identity or how legacy is constructed, including the idea of a literary will – an author’s textual legacy and bibliographic genealogy. The present chapter will examine the fourteenth- and fifteenth-century vogue for this genre, building on Jacqueline Cerquiglini-Toulet’s essay, *L’Écriture testamentaire à la fin du moyen âge*. It will bring a selection of these works – by Philippe de Mézières, Pierre de Hauteville, and François Villon – into conversation with very recent examples of testamentary fiction: Sarah Dunant’s *The Birth of Venus* (2003), Vickie Gendreau’s *Testament* (2012, trans. Aimee Wall 2016),

¹ All translations from medieval and modern French are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

and Pettina Gappah's *The Book of Memory* (2015), to consider modern inflections of the earlier wills' characteristics.

In his survey of the testament as fictional form through literary history and across languages, Eber Carle Perrow proposes that this formal document has given rise to an unparalleled quantity of literature, and enumerates that literature's salient shared features: autobiographical and confessional elements; moral reflection and/or instruction (recognising, alongside a juridical model, the biblical heritage of 'testament' as covenant) (Cerquiglini-Toulet 3); the post-mortem disposition of the body and property; political or social commentary, mobilized through satire. The form's popularity in medieval literature, and especially the French late Middle Ages, has received several, partial explanations: for Philippe Ariès, the great theorist of death in the history of mentalities, the use of wills (both historical and literary) is one of the most significant elements of 'the death of the self' (Ariès 201), an increasing preoccupation with individual destiny and personal death. For Cerquiglini-Toulet, it is important to recognize 'a period which has replaced the art of loving with the art of dying' (18). Late-medieval *artes moriendi* – 'texts that offer or depict a way of dying well' (Appleford 4) – are clearly a pertinent context; Philippe de Mézières's *Testament* (1392) emerges from a preface that insists: 'it is good, then, to think about death often, to study how to prepare [...] and to desire to die well' (300).

Mézières's work also presents us with one of the methodological challenges of studying medieval testamentary fiction: the frequent absence of a title identifying it thus (Perrow 694; Swift), such that we work instead by recognisable features or function – reflection on imminent death or the enumeration of testamentary dispositions. There is diversity of form: prose, for Mézières, but more often verse, both lyric (such as Charles

d'Orléans's ballade 70) and narrative (the stanzaic verse of Pierre de Hauteville, François Villon or Jean Molinet). There is also plurality, in that one author may be associated with more than one will: 'the last will [volenté]' (Mézières 320) is not necessarily unitary. Mézières's vernacular literary text complements his earlier, Latin historical will, while Villon produces both the *Lais* (1456) and the *Testament* (1463?), which were designated in the first printed edition of 1489 *Le Petit Testament* and *Le Grand Testament*. Villon is himself a methodological challenge: his is perhaps the most famous example of a fictional will, and certainly the most notoriously irreverent within a Francophone tradition – it is, for example, a repeated cultural reference point for Gendreau. There is, therefore, the risk of mistaking example for template, or, within the late-medieval period, of treating his ironic, rhetorically spectacular text as paragon, or as the teleological culmination of previous writers' experiments. Finally, and similarly in the interests of avoiding too tidy an account of the form's use, we should consider whether the testament is serving as point or pretext in a given work: whether concerns of death, identity and legacy are its primary focus (as with Villon or de Hauteville) or function as launch-pad for another project, such as social commentary or, in the case of Jean Molinet's *Donnet baillié au roy Charles VIII* (1491?), a grammatical instruction manual.

How most fruitfully might we approach these texts? Their most distinguishing feature is arguably not a matter of content, but a question of positioning and its implications: 'it is as if death offered a viewpoint, a promontory, from which to observe the world and one's own life' (Cerquiglini-Toulet 6). The testament situates its subject on the brink between life and death,² which entails urgency and, consequently, a need to assert control in this exercise of

² I consider only human cases here; for animal testaments, see, for example, Champlin.

will (over the story of one's life and death, and over what one bequeaths, materially or otherwise), and a need for witness.

A matter of life and death: writing on the brink

If the *ars moriendi* is 'essentially a bridging genre, its most urgent function to make smooth the passage between life and death' (Appleford 218), fictional wills may seek either to facilitate this transition or disrupt it.³ The testating persona looks in several directions at once, being concerned with a 360-degree view of their death: in the case of my epigraph quotation from de Hauteville's *Confession et Testament de l'amant trespasé de deuil* (1447), 'de ma fin' represents both *for* my end (preparation beforehand as well as what follows after) and *of* my end (the moment of death itself). The perspective that this thereby affords the testator on their life is a peculiar one, making the subject both author and spectator of the narrative of their demise. The enabling fiction of Villon's *Testament* is its persona's proclaimed physical degeneration through old age, pungently professed through alliterative, even onomatopoeic self-portraits:

Je congnois approucher ma seuf,
Je crache blanc comme coton
Jacoppins groz comme ung estuef. (Villon lines 729-31)

I feel my thirst approaching,
I spit cotton-white
gobs as large as a handball.

³ For the testament as a transitional moment, see Singer 417.

However, what jams the cogs and *disables* this plausible fiction is enigmatic self-contradiction:

I bear the voice and accent of an old man,
When I'm only a young fool. (Villon lines 735-36)

Interspersed amongst the poem's narrative octaves are fixed-form lyric items. The persona's purported moment of death, so heavily (and heavily ironically) anticipated, is elided at the end of the poem between two ballades in an instant of narrative hiatus: the so-called 'Ballade de merci' issues a first-person invocation for clemency in its refrain ('I beg pardon of everyone', Villon line 1975); the 'Ballade de conclusion' issues a third-person invitation to the persona's funeral ('Come to his interment', Villon line 1998) and terminates his tale:

Here ends and finishes
The testament of poor Villon. (Villon lines 1996-97)

This abrupt, linear transition between pre- and post-mortem points of view contrasts interestingly with Mézières's depiction of an elderly avatar of himself, a solider retired to the Celestine cemetery in Paris, who uses his so-called *Testament* to stage 'the hour of his death' in its most imminent sense: imagining his future self 'dying and passing over from this world' (Mézières 304); in the very moment of expiry, he projects specific scenarios for the days, hours, and minutes preceding and following his death. What his dispositions provide for – or, more accurately, implore and exhort from the Celestine fathers – is the treatment of his

body and soul. The work's eighteen chapters circle ritualistically round the instant of death, oscillating between pre- and post-mortem moments.

What distinguishes Mézières's text from those of Villon and de Hauteville is an absence of irony – not only, or even primarily, in terms of a lack of macabre or playful humour, but also and especially an absence of narratological distancing between author and testator: Mézières's textual persona is intended sincerely to represent his future self, such that his text may serve as a practical tool for the Celestines. In this respect, and also in his text's structural oscillation around death, Mézières's 'poor pilgrim' persona is akin – albeit in a very different context – to Gendreau's autofictional 'Vickie', a projection of the young female author who was diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumour in June 2012. Gendreau's text moves back and forth between the voice of the terminally ill narrator and those of her friends' and family's imagined responses to her death. A further post-mortem perspective, one unanticipated by Vickie or Gendreau, came in 2016 in the form of Aimee Wall's translation of the work into English, thereby revisiting the autofictional 'je' with a posthumous 'I'. De Hauteville, like Villon, presents an 'I' acting out the role of dying man, and one doing so paradoxically, disrupting any life/death binary or continuity, as he languishes in lovesick mourning for his deceased lady:

Lying abed grievously ill,

Stricken with grief and bitter torment. (de Hauteville lines 3-4)

He is both dead and alive, 'I die and perish whilst still alive' (line 115), and, at the same time, neither: 'I can neither die nor live' (line 117); stuck, suspended temporally and spatially in a

liminal death-bed state, he nonetheless portrays death's importunate intrusion: '[death] already gnaws away at my life' (line 10).

Writing in earnest: an urgent cause

The temporal adverb 'already' [desja] immediately raises the dramatic excitement of de Hauteville's persona's situation. The imminence of the end and the threats that it carries – interruption leaving wishes unfulfilled, erasure of identity – endow a testamentary fiction with urgency, making for an unusually compelling scenario and ensuring rapt reader attention. Gendreau's Vickie expresses the consequence of the lack of time afforded by her fatal illness: 'everything is imperative in my life now' (Gendreau, trans. Wall 15-16). Petina Gappah's *Book of Memory* stages its recollecting narrator as an imprisoned woman awaiting the result of her appeal against a murder conviction. Such a highly charged situation, which Villon faced historically in 1462 on the charge of having killed one François Ferrebouc, is exploited by the medieval author for poetic purposes in a ballade that has predictably become labelled 'L'Appel de Villon', addressing the head gaoler of the Châtelet with a refrain questioning the lodged appeal: 'Was that, then, my moment to stay silent?' (Villon, *Œuvres* pp. 229-31). Urgency for his *Testament*'s persona is provoked both by a lack of time lying ahead and by forces pressing upon him from behind: 'pain closes in' (Villon line 1966), he laments in the 'Ballade de merci'. His decrepitude risks robbing him of a voice to dictate his will to his putative scribe:

I feel my heart getting weaker

And I can no longer speak.

Frémin, sit close to my bed

So that nobody can spy on me.

Take up ink, pen, paper immediately!

Copy down quickly what I say! (Villon lines 785-90)

The testator's imperatives and temporal adverbs both evoke the time-critical nature of the enterprise and confer implied importance upon it, an effect redoubled by evoking a furtive audience. His besetting pain is, we infer, more physical than moral; irony tinges the persona's profession of his sins ('I am a sinner, I know it well' (line 105) – proclamation rather than penitent confession), whereas Mézières's persona seems to derive his urgency, albeit unexplained, from his earnest self-perception as a singularly worse sinner than others ('other Christians of his rank who have not fallen into such terrible sin' (317)), who thereby needs to work penitentially harder to make a good end. Returning to de Hauteville, we find the most ironically pressed testating persona: his posture is that of a martyr for love, a lover who perfectly fulfils his devotion by dying for love; the comedy of the poem lies in his failure to do just that. As we saw above, he is stuck. He imposes all possible constraints on his existence: 'It is time for my life to end' (line 130), reasons the logic of his appropriate demise ('It will be better for me to be dead / Than to live on in the world forever in regret' (lines 146-47)), and defines himself as being dead, or wanting to be so ('For I deem myself to be dead' (line 528)), but he cannot argue himself to death. He languishes in unfulfilment, unable to enact the role to which he aspires. His testament is a failed exercise of will.

Making disposition: an exercise of will

De Hauteville's persona's aforecited assertion, 'I want to prepare for my end [de ma fin disposer je veulx]', now reads more desperately as an effortful attempt rather than a

secure undertaking, with hyperbaton and the explicit subject personal pronoun (non-mandatory in medieval French) underscoring his earnest endeavour. Dispositions are needed to counter the dispossession threatened or already effected by death. De Hauteville's person laments the loss of his lady as a disinheritance, imprecating personified death:

You have wrongly disinherited me

And stolen my true inheritance. (de Hauteville lines 73-74)

His testament serves, it is implied, to compensate as best it can for this lost legacy. A testamentary 'last will [volenté]' is thus an exercise of agency under the spotlight. In the autofictional context of Gendreau's *Testament*, this enables the author 'to gain back in writing some of the agency lost in the battle with terminal illness; writing her own death, she takes control of that narrative, at least for these moments, in this particular context' (Wall 37). This exercise is conveyed by the text's creation as well as within its fiction: diegetic Vickie sends to her friends USB keys enclosed in brown envelopes, whose document contents constitute part of the text of each chapter; there is, in consequence, a constantly shifting sense of narrative perspective in terms of person and tense: in the voice of her friend Mathieu she adopts a third-person point of view on her identity: 'she was going to be posthumous. The queen is dead. She was so trashy, so sparkly, so explosive, so much of her generation. François Villon in a tuxedo' (Gendreau, trans. Wall p. 120). Self-designation as specifically of her moment *and* as an avatar of Villon may seem an ironic juxtaposition; but, given that, as Jane Taylor notes, every age creates its own Villon (1), this is not an irony pushing towards contradiction.

Gendreau demonstrates how testamentary disposition occurs in two, related phases: putting one's own identity in order, and arranging what one bequeaths to others. The phases are intimately linked: the constructed self is itself a legacy (and already carrying inheritance, as in the alignment with medieval Villon), just as the most pertinent burial site of 'poor Villon', heralded in the *Testament's* final ballade, is the very text of that poem. Putting one's own identity in order relates to the historical practice of making provision in one's will for the disposition of the body, and, in medieval literary testaments, it binds together the typical three sections of the text: confession, bequests, and prescribed epitaph (Cerquiglini-Toulet 6). Confession offers a retrospective gaze on one's life as narrative, whilst the epitaph furnishes a digest of that life's key features in the deictic present: a 'here lies' that will be the here and now of future readers.⁴ Confession, and the kind of narrative it generates, fosters as much a sense of concealment as of revelation, and often privileges obfuscation or confusion. In Dunant's *The Birth of Venus*, the main text comprises 'The Testament of Sister Lucrezia', which discloses the narrator's contrived suicide. A prefatory 'Prologue' provides a third-person, posthumous account of the nuns' chance discovery of her suicide and the misunderstandings that lead to this knowledge, which is achieved by their disrobing – literal uncovering – of her corpse. The effect is to privilege perplexity, and is one sought most sedulously by Villon's testator, whose aforementioned self-contradictions and evasions render impossible any straightforward reading of seductively confessional-style statements. For example, 'I am the most imperfect of all' (Villon line 261), which might read penitentially, seems more likely self-promotion – cultivating covert prestige of superlative slyness – than self-deprecation. The order that one chooses for one's identity narrative is thus not necessarily linear or orderly in a conventional sense; deliberate disarray may be encouraged, as when Villon's testator insists that his epitaph be inscribed 'in charcoal or a

⁴ On literary epitaphs, see Kenny and Swift.

lump of coal, / Without at all marking the plaster' (lines 1880-81). He seeks to unfix his identity as evanescent and friable.⁵

A more conventional approach to putting oneself in order seems to be supplied by Mézières. His *Testament* exhorts the Celestines to prepare his body for burial, but does so with extraordinary specificity and dramaturgical precision: according to Chapter 1, for instance, his corpse should be stripped naked, chained by its neck, roped to a plank and dragged around the cloister, through the vestry and into the body of the church, where it should be deposited by the oblates, covered in black cloth, and surrounded by four candelabra. This corporeal degradation is not, however, a spectacle of self-display to preserve particular memory; on the contrary, in Chapter 18, he orders the destruction of the plank and candelabra: 'to erase the memory of any unusual singularity concerning the poor pilgrim' (Mézières 321). For pious Mézières, what matters beyond his own last will is the will of God: "'Not my will, but thy will be done'" (301). The greater disposition is divine: 'man proposes and God disposes' (320). Similar testamentary specificity is furnished in the very different, non-devotional context of de Hauteville's persona's peculiar wishes for his interment: he is avowedly eccentric in his dispositions 'that one should behave differently / from how one is accustomed' (de Hauteville 1139-40), such that, for example, mourners should wear green coats with yellow hoods. In such poems, where ironic distance separates narrating persona from implied author, the more insistent the expression of will, the more this is highlighted as a subjective, partial viewpoint, as Villon's testator demonstrates:

For I want to start testating [tester].

Before my clerk Frémin, who heeds me

⁵ For narrative order in Gendreau's *Testament*, see Wall 4.

– if he’s not napping – I want to protest [protester]

That I do not intend to cut off [detester] anyone. (Villon lines 778-81)

His three-fold assertion of intention ironically draws attention to the fact that he is affirming a wish to begin when already a third of the way through the poem. His *annominatio* on ‘tester’ reveals how the act of testating can function as a personal settling of scores – whether through exclusion (‘de-test’ as ‘un-will’) or through inclusion in an unflattering light (‘detest’); whilst the persona denies vigorously that he is throwing shade, his repeated imprecation of his alleged prisoner, Archbishop Thibaut d’Aucigny, argues otherwise.

A testator’s claim to recount accurately – often supported by asseverations of truth – not only relays personal rather than objective truth, but furthermore exposes the non-unitary nature of someone’s true story: their identity, and the narrative that composes it, is fundamentally plural and composite. In Gappah’s *Book of Memory*, the persona’s relationship with Lloyd, the murder victim, is uncertain: she presents him as an adoptive parent; the prison guards assume he was her lover; her memory – what constitutes the persona’s onomastic identity as Memory – is haltingly perceived, foggy, undocumented. Her life is precarious because its narrative is uncertain, unrecognised, and not sure of being legible; testamentary writing raises Judith Butler’s urgent question, ‘whose lives count as lives? And, finally, *what makes for a grievable life?*’ (20). The identity of the testating subject exposes individual human identity, not as a tale waiting to be told, but as a telling that is always in process and contested. Cerquiglini-Toulet states that ‘the ‘I’ is constitutive of what it writes’ (5), but this writing is not uniquely ‘its’, because it is also constituted by other voices – whether other manifestations of the persona (such as Vickie’s Word documents in Gendreau’s *Testament* or, in Villon’s poem, acrostics of the authorial name or its repeated use

as a rich rhyme) or first/third persons ostensibly separate from theirs (the direct discourse of a helmet seller quoted by Villon's persona or the projected interventions of Vickie's friends). A testator's corporeal decrepitude, such as de Hauteville's stricken persona –

My mouth closes up, my nose pinches,

My teeth click and tighten;

In sum, my every member collapses

And begs to be laid in the ground. (de Hauteville lines 1557-60)

– gives physical form to the way in which their identity construction is a process combining composition and decomposition: 'the testamentary form plays at one and the same time on assemblage and dispersal, of possessions as of the person' (Cerquiglini-Toulet 16). And, as we saw in Villon's pungent diegetic self-portrait, prosodic vigour in the depiction of decline paradoxically makes potent the identity it thereby projects.

Cerquiglini-Toulet casts the testamentary subject as 'an "I" which gathers itself together in the very act of bequeathing' (3): it is constituted not by expression of a pre-existing self, but by performing that self as a communication to others, a bequeathed identity. This is dramatized in the second of two sequels to de Hauteville's poem: in addition to a *Complainte de l'amant trespasé de deuil*, there survives *L'Inventaire des biens demourez du décès de l'amant trespasé de dueil*. In a pastiche of probate inventory practice, the now-deceased lover-persona's friends act as clerk and witnesses of the inventory's compilation as they move from room to room. What they compile thereby, through their observations and estimation of the value of his possessions, is his identity – or, at least, a version thereof. Judicious metatextual metaphor draws attention to the specifically literary nature of identity

as legacy when the friends come upon a splendid shirt made for the persona by his lady: ‘Oh, noble work compiled / Of all human virtues and pleasures’ (de Hauteville, *Inventaire* lines 233-34). This literary reflexive ‘work’ [ouvrage] discloses both how the lovers wove their love story and how that story is evoked by the inventory-compilers’ itemisation of its objects which constitutes *L’Inventaire*. De Hauteville flags up how the legacy’s definition is determined by its recipients, and thus how the ‘I’ it communicates is the product of elaboration by ‘you’ or ‘they’, like the nuns unwrapping Sister Lucrezia’s cadaver in *The Birth of Venus*.

Testis: a need for witness

De Hauteville and Dunant indicate the important role of future witnesses, those who posthumously attest to the deceased and enable their legacy: the same is true of the projected audience to whom Villon’s testator plays in the ‘Ballade de merci’, or of Vickie’s friends, of whom Gendreau remarked in an interview: ‘in my book, I make people react to my death [...] because I want them to react’ (Guy). However, especially in a medieval context, *present* witness is also key: the person who received the dying person’s last confession would also transcribe their will, like the priest in de Hauteville’s *Confession*. Villon’s persona dictates to a scribe, whose transmission of the text is unreliable, as the above quotations evoking Frémin’s drowsiness suggest – though better a flawed witness, and the risk of misrepresentation, than no witness at all and erasure. But a single witness does not suffice to validate testimony – Villon alludes parodically in the ‘Ballade de conclusion’ to the legal adage *testis unus, testis nullus* (‘one witness is no witness’), when its third-person voice recounts the testator’s final act: ‘this he swore on his testicle’ (Villon line 2002 [emphasis

mine])). What in fact this scabrous wordplay ironically indicates is the *proliferation* of witness perspectives in the poem, none of which is trustworthy, the testator's included.

Mézières's *Testament* provides an interesting combination of present and future witnesses, projecting forward as it does to Mézières's future self and the different possible scenarios of his eventual demise. He makes provision in Chapters 5 and 6 for his confession, reception of the Blessed Sacrament, and Extreme Unction, and requests continuous death-bed attendance by one of the Celestine brothers. The narrative voice oscillates between different persons; in this, Mézières anticipates the text's meditations being put into practice by being spoken aloud – whether *to* him or *by* him – at the moment for which it prepares. For example, in the second person of the Preface's apostrophes and imperatives – 'O, aged pilgrim, worthless and worn out, [...] acknowledge now the graces that God gives you' (306) – there is a double temporal referent for 'now' [a present]: the moment of composition in anticipation of his demise, and the hour of death itself. He also furnishes in first-person direct discourse a prayer of supplication for his dying self to recite: 'My Lord and my God, by your holy grace ...' (ibid.). The collective first person features in repeated reference to the persona as 'our poor pilgrim': this could be seen as a rhetorical technique for the future persona to cultivate a sense of community, should he be employing the text for his deathbed meditation, or, indeed, for the actual Celestine community in their care and intercessory prayer for him.

Bearing witness to one's death does not necessarily require a third party; as discussed above, 'I' is not a unitary entity and can spectate its own death. Vickie is both observer and observed; all the more so Gendreau herself (Wall 6), who was still alive when *Testament* was published,⁶ but died some time before its appearance in English. Wall speaks of the

⁶ On its reception, see Wall, 'Autofiction', pp. 3-4, 15.

challenges of translating this work, and how she consulted in particular Gendreau's close friend Mathieu who features as a character, with imagined speech, in *Testament*. The complex ontology, temporality and interlace of voice in this case in fact serves as a very specific illustration of a more generally true phenomenon in literary testamentary writing: its most salient defining feature is a particular positioning of its narrative subject, giving an account of itself on the brink, urgently, with everything at stake, striving to take charge of its story and of its audience. It offers a scenario of high dramatic tension and narrative intrigue for reflecting on human identity. Far from being, in any straightforward sense, 'the most personal and immediate poems of their age' (Ariès 198), late-medieval fictional wills display the process and the precarities of identity construction. One may apply to them, and to the twenty-first-century literary testaments discussed above, the figure of speech used by Derrida to speak about writing more generally: 'every grapheme is essentially testamentary' (100) – their constitution of the subject's self represents conscientious composition rather than transparent revelation. When de Hauteville's persona comments 'I want to prepare for my end', he signals the beginning of an elaborate undertaking: anticipating death, it accommodates a posthumous perspective on life, recounting the process of constituting who he wills his self to be.

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