

**Life Writing in the Early Modern Period:
The Case of Guillaume Colletet's *Vie de François Villon***

This article is a snapshot of an upsurge in seventeenth-century interest in one of France's slipperiest poets, François Villon. Since his mysterious disappearance in 1463, Villon has reappeared in a never-ending series of afterlives: every age creates its own Villon, pursuing the tantalizing hints about his life that emerge in his works in order to impose a definite shape on his beguilingly open-ended existence (1). My focus is one early version thereof, the *Vie de François Villon* written by the académicien Guillaume Colletet (1598-1659) around 1650. Colletet's thirty-seven-page account of Villon came at a time when enthusiasm for the late medieval poet was ostensibly ebbing – his works had not been reprinted for more a century. Colletet's account itself would not appear in print until the mid-nineteenth century, at which point it began to be appended to critical editions of the Villon corpus (2). This goes some way to explaining why it has attracted little attention until relatively recently. Nonetheless, Colletet's life of Villon, I contend, is a salient example of early modern life writing. Colletet wrote lives of multiple poets and writers, but he was not a biographer in the modern sense; his life of Villon was more a series of 'réflexions', as he called them, stimulated by engagement with the Villon corpus as he knew it. My aim, then, is twofold. Firstly, I shall assess what these reflections can tell us about the accuracy of Colletet's knowledge of Villon's life. Secondly – and more significantly – I want to suggest three ways in which the *Vie de François Villon* sheds light on the characteristics and development of life writing in the early modern period.

Firstly, then, is the notion of *vie*. The genre of famous lives had flourished in sixteenth-century France in various permutations, from editions and translations of Plutarch's lives, to more contemporary chronicles of famous individuals. By the early seventeenth century, accounts of the lives of recently deceased famous poets were starting to gain

traction: a notable example was Claude Binet's *Discours de la vie de Pierre de Ronsard* (circulating from 1585 and included in editions of Ronsard's works from 1609). Villon, nevertheless, had no such literary memory – at least not according to Colletet, who considered himself to be breaking new ground. As Emmanuelle Mortgat-Longuet has shown (3), Colletet's lives of various distinguished poets innovatively stretch the genre of life writing in two directions. Firstly Colletet operates in the traditional, metonymic sense of *discours de la vie* (a chronological narrative of the actions and character of the *homme illustre*); secondly, however, he shows how disparate literary considerations, above all pertaining to the reception of the poet's work, might be conceptualised as a complementary form of *vie* running in tandem with the poet's life story. It is this second tendency that predominately shapes the *Vie de François Villon*. Colletet opens his account not by relating the circumstances of Villon's physical birth; instead he briefly resumes the birth of the poet's *oeuvre* (pp. xvii-xviii). In the 1530s, King François I commissioned Clément Marot, the most illustrious poet of the age, to establish the first *oeuvres complètes* of Villon from a mass of disparate (and often corrupt) editions: Marot duly obliged, and published in 1533 what became the standard Renaissance Villon text. Yet despite his admiration for Villon's achievements, Marot did not attempt to record them in a further publication. Two outstanding *érudits* of the next generation (Etienne Pasquier and Claude Fauchet) superficially touched upon Villon in the course of their antiquarian research. Again, notes Colletet, neither scholar deigned to produce an extended *vie*. This, then, is the goal Colletet sets himself, fulfilling what he considers to be an obvious lacuna in scholarship on French language and literary history.

But where does he begin, given that so few records of François Villon survive from the fifteenth century? With external options so limited, the obvious source of information was Villon's own works, particularly his *Testament*, which purports to set down a record of the

poet's many colourful mishaps for posterity. The notion that Villon's poetry contains a transparent testimony of his life is likely to strike modern critics as misleadingly naïve. Villon consciously fashions, adjusts and changes his *personae* throughout his works, often ostensibly to amuse and wrong-foot his readers (4). Establishing basic facts about his birthplace and his upbringing is thus far from straightforward. Villon describes himself both as an 'enfant de Paris' (*Testament*, l. 1059) and as being born near Pontoise, some 30 km north of the capital ('Quatrain', in *Poèmes variés*, l. 2) (5). Here Colletet defers to Marot, who locates Villon's birthplace within Paris itself. Colletet initially highlights Villon's 'basse naissance' and a subsequent 'vie fort misérable' marred by poverty (p. xx). Further evidence in the *Testament* (ll. 273-7) make this one of the least controversial aspects of Villon's life, Colletet infers, since the poet repeatedly insists on the 'Povreté' that came of his being 'de peticte extrasse'. What intrigues (and horrifies) Colletet, however, is how Villon became both a poet and a criminal by profession. Here Colletet veers towards what are now regarded as the uncanonical *Repues franches*, tales which in rhyming couplets depict Villon and his fellow debauchees pulling free meal cons in Parisian taverns (6). Colletet considers Villon the author of this collection, which he disapprovingly regards as 'encore, après sa mort, les images vivantes de ses fripponneries' (p. xx). The most controversial aspect of Villon's existence was, for Colletet, the circumstances of his death. On this subject which continues to baffle scholars today, Colletet admits he is reduced to 'conjecture' and invites readers to draw their own conclusions. His best guess is that after being banished from Paris (in 1463), Villon ended his days on English soil, at the court of King Edward V: a hypothesis wholly unsubstantiated in Villon's works, but instead derives, Colletet admits, from François Rabelais (*Quart Livre*, ch. 67) (7). Intriguingly, then, as Colletet's *Vie* maps out Villon's character and deeds, life shades off into legend, with a concomitant drift away from Villon's

Testament to the fictional Rabelaisian afterlives of Villon that achieved a roaring success in the sixteenth century.

A second important aspect of Colletet's *Vie de François Villon* is its engagement with scholarly philology. Colletet's works reflect his status as a member of the Académie Française. In writing his life of Villon it had not escaped his attention that the poet's name had become a *cause célèbre* amongst France's leading scholars. The debate here turned on two questions: (i) whether *Villon* was merely a nickname ascribed to the poet on account of the word's ancient association with villainy; (ii) whether *Villon* had spawned neologisms signifying the sort of villainy epitomized by the life of François Villon. This second argument had been made by the Renaissance scholar Etienne Pasquier in his *Recherches de la France*, in which he recognized Villon's cultural impact in linguistic terms: 'la posterité a nommé un Villon, celui qui eshontément se mesloit du mestier de trompeur, dont aussi nous fimes Villonner et Villonnerie' (8). Colletet sees little need to elaborate beyond Pasquier on this point: 'on se sert encore du nom de ce fourbe fieffé, en disant: "C'est un *Villon*", ou "il ne fait que *villonner*"' (p. xxij). However, he refutes the notion, popularised in the early seventeenth century by Claude Fauchet, that Villon ('Vüillon') was merely a sobriquet given to the poet, whose real name was Corbueil. In Colletet's view, Fauchet was correct in asserting that the word *vuillon* has a plausible etymological link with *guiller* (signifying 'tromper'), but wholly incorrect in claiming Corbueil as the poet's true name. Herein lies a scholarly spat. Fauchet adduces as evidence a handwritten epitaph in one of his books, reading:

Je sui Francois dont ce me poise,
Nommé Corbueil en mon surnom,
Natif d'Auvers empres Pointoise,
Et du commun nommé Vuillon. (9)

Colletet, however, denies the authenticity of this epitaph, having been unable to find it in his own editions of Villon, principally those of Marot and Galiot du Pré (1532). For Colletet, the father of François was one Guillaume de Villon. Modern scholars now hold that this individual was not Villon's father (whose surname was probably Montcorbier), but instead a respectable canon who took on young François as his ward (10). The Fauchet theory, too, is now discredited, the epitaph on which it is based being but spuriously linked to Villon in the MS tradition (11). Colletet's engagement with philological matters arising from the word *Villon* may be situated in the wider context of nascent French lexicography: stretched beyond his limits, he looks forward to the matter being resolved either in the 'tant désiré Dictionnaire de l'Académie française' (which would not appear until 1694), or in the equally eagerly awaited *Ethimologies françaises* of his learned acquaintance, Gilles Ménage (which eventually appeared as *Les Origines de la langue française* in 1650). Unfortunately for Colletet, neither work would satisfy his hopes in this regard: the former said nothing and the latter sided with Fauchet.

Finally, then, we might view Colletet's *Vie de Françoise Villon* as contributing to a broader academic dialogue on literary taste. Colletet offers little detailed literary analysis of Villon's poetry, but he does allude to passages of the *Testament* which he finds pleasing. These include extracts from wistful *ubi sunt* ballades, 'ou sont les neiges d'anten', (ll. 329-56); from the witty anti-pastoral *Contredictz Franc Gontier* (ll. 473-1506); and from sly passages on the women of Paris (ll. 1515-22). These are all texts that have received critical acclaim in modern times; but Colletet's appreciation of them is somewhat cooler. He speaks of them with reserved admiration, qualifying them as 'fort naïve' and 'assez ingénieuse' (p. xxx). Overall, however, Colletet concurs with Marot's modest appreciation of Villon's writing and style: entertaining reading matter for the *honnête homme* – but only in part. Like Marot, Colletet has little time for Villon in his cruder moments, and finds the verses in

thieves' cant (*Le Jargon et jobelin de Villon*) associated with him in early editions unintelligible (Marot deliberately excluded them). There is, however, one occasion where Colletet expressly warms to Villon: namely the poet's tongue-in-cheek dedication of his 'librarye' replete with imaginary novels such as the 'Pet au Deable' to Guillaume de Villon (*Testament*, ll. 849-864). In these few lines, Colletet – himself in possession of a formidable private library and a lover of rare books – detects a joke that he thinks will appeal to the tastes of fellow learned *bibliothécaires*, Louis Jacob de Saint Charles and Gabriel Naudé (p. xxix). Colletet is visibly stimulated by the hint that Villon was, too, a bibliophile of sorts – even if the latter's collection may have comprised only trivial works (and Colletet thinks this highly likely, given the poet's allegedly frivolous nature). Jacob and Naudé should take note, says Colletet: even works of 'honneste raillerie' are worthy of a place among their catalogues (p. xxix), since, after 'une estude sérieuse', such books can teach us how to relax in the *cabinet* without the need for dice or cards. Sound advice, doubtless, for the upright *honnête homme*...

In conclusion, where might we place Guillaume Colletet's *Vie de François Villon* in the broader spread of Villon's afterlives, the 'downstream contexts' that have comprised 'the Villon legend'? (12). Colletet, we have seen, bases his account partly on the image of Villon the *bon follastre* popularised in the sixteenth century. There is little here of Villon the gallows bird, the great outsider who so captivated the nineteenth-century Romantic imagination. Nor do we find a foretaste of Villon the twentieth-century modernist, the spirit of insolent melancholy (13). Instead, we discover unmistakable traces of Renaissance disapproval at the coarse-grained whimsicality of Villon's *oeuvre*, uncomfortably yoked with an occasional newfound willingness to detect elements that might appeal to a seventeenth-century antiquarian, lexicographer, or bibliophile. In short, the *Vie de François Villon* strives not primarily for biographical accuracy vis-à-vis the life and deeds of Villon; rather, it serves as a

conduit of lively scholarly dialogue on diverse points of philological and literary discussion. Further study would now be required to gauge how typically this tendency manifests itself across other early modern life writings.

1. See Jane H. M. Taylor's fine study, *The Poetry of François Villon: Text and Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 1.
2. I use the following edition: François Villon, *Oeuvres complètes de François Villon*, ed. by P. L. Jacob (Paris: P. Jannet, 1854). Colletet's *Vie de François Villon* (pp. xvii-xxxvii) precedes the Villon text.
3. Mortgat-Longuet, 'L'Emploi du mot *vie* chez Guillaume Colletet: de l'éloge de l'"illustre" à la critique du poète français', in *Le Lexique métalittéraire français (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)*, ed. by Michel Jourde and Jean-Charles Monferran (Geneva: Droz, 2006), pp. 89-106; Mortgat-Longuet, *Clio au Parnasse: naissance de 'l'histoire littéraire' française aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris: Champion, 2006), ch. 4.
4. Nevertheless, modern scholars, notably Michael Freeman, have shown that a notionally biographical approach to the Villon corpus is not a non-starter: we should not, then, dismiss Colletet out of hand for attempting to glean historical information about François Villon from his poetry. See Freeman, *François Villon in His Works: The Villain's Tale* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000).
5. References are taken from the Rychner-Henry editions of the *Testament* (Geneva: Droz, 1974) and *Poèmes variés* (Geneva: Droz, 1977).
6. See the excellent modern critical edition by Jelle Koopmans and Paul Verhuyck, *Le Recueil des repues franches de Maistre François Villon et de ses compagnons* (Geneva: Droz, 1995).
7. Interestingly, however, the Rabelaisian anecdote interpolates the abovementioned Villon quatrain (*Poèmes variés* XIV). See Louis Thuasne, *Villon et Rabelais* (Paris: Fischbacher, 1911).
8. Pasquier, *Les Recherches de la France*, ed. by Marie-Luce Demonet and others, 3 vols. (Paris: Champion, 1996), III, pp. 1698-9. Previously, the celebrated philologist Guillaume Budé had made a similar association (*Annotationes in quatuor et viginti pandectarum libros*, Paris: M. Vascosan, R. Estienne and J. de Roigny, 1542, p.340).
9. Fauchet, *Origines des Chevaliers, Armoiries, et Heraux* (Paris: J. Perier, 1600), fol. 8r.
10. See Freeman, *François Villon in His Works*, ch. 1.
11. For an overview, see David Mus, *La Poétique de François Villon* (Seyssel: Editions Champ Vallon, 1992), pp. 21-2.

12. The term 'downstream contexts' was coined by Terence Cave, and deployed tellingly in his *Mignon's Afterlives: Crossing Cultures from Goethe to the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). See also Anna Holland and Richard Scholar, *Pre-Histories and Afterlives: Studies in Critical Method for Terence Cave* (London: MHRA, 2009).
13. For an overview of these avatars of Villon, see Freeman's introduction in *François Villon in His Works*; see also Taylor, *The Poetry of François Villon*.