

POEMS

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Poems by François Villon & John Payne

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FRANÇOIS VILLON & JOHN PAYNE

POEMS

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P O E M S

By FRANÇOIS VILLON

TRANSLATED WITH INTRODUCTION
BY JOHN PAYNE



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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION*

THERE are few names in the history of literature over which the shadow has so long and so persistently lain as over that of the father of French poetry. Up to no more distant period than the early part of the year 1877, it was not even known what was his real name, nor were the admirers of his genius in possession of any other facts relative to his personal history than could be gleaned, by a laborious process of inference and deduction, from such works of his as have been handed down to posterity. The materials that exist for the biography of Shakespeare or Dante are scanty enough, but they present a very harvest of fact and suggestion compared with the pitiable fragments which have so long represented our sole personal knowledge of Villon. That he had been twice condemned to death for unknown offences; that his father was dead and his mother still living at the time he reached his thirtieth year; that he attended the courses of the University of Paris in the capacity of scholar and presumably attained the quality of Licentiate in Arts, entitling him to the style of Dominus or Maître; above all, that his companions and acquaintances were of the lowest and most disreputable class and, indeed, that he himself wasted his

* The following essay was written in 1878 and was first published in 1881, by way of introduction to the expurgated edition of the Poems. I have thought it best to leave it substantially unaltered, incorporating such supplementary matter as is necessary to bring it up to date in the form of additional notes, distinguished by brackets.

youth in riot and debauchery and scrupled not to resort to the meanest and most revolting expedients to furnish forth that life of alternate lewd plenty and sheer starvation which, Bohemian in grain as he was, he preferred to the decent dullness of a middle-class life; and that he owed his immunity from punishment partly to accidents, such as the succession of Louis XI to his father's throne, and partly to the intervention of influential protectors, probably attracted by his eminent literary merits, amongst whom stood prominent his namesake and supposed relative, Guillaume de Villon;—such were the main scraps and parings of information upon which, until the publication of M. Longnon's "Etude Biographique,"* we had alone to rely for our conception of the man in his habit as he lived. Even now the facts and dates, which M. Longnon has so valiantly and so ingeniously rescued for us from the vast charnelhouse of mediæval history, are in themselves scanty enough, and it is necessary to apply to their connection and elucidation no mean amount of study and labour before anything like a definite framework of biography can be constructed from them. Such as they are, however, they enable us for the first time to catch a glimpse of the strange mad life and dissolute yet attractive personality of the wild, reckless, unfortunate Parisian poet, whose splendid if erratic verse flames out like a meteor from the somewhat dim twilight of French fifteenth-century literature.

* Etude Biographique sur François Villon, d'après les documents inédits conservés aux Archives Nationales. Par Auguste Longnon. Paris, 1877.