

Jonathan Patterson. *Villainy in France, 1463-1610: A Transcultural Study of Law & Literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021. viii + 326 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$90.00 U.S./£70.00 U.K. (hb). ISBN 9780198840015.

Review Essay by Juliette Cherbuliez, University of Minnesota

Jonathan Patterson's *Villainy in France*, read during the spring months of 2022, became part of the news ecology surrounding me. Amid the judicial and literary *villains cas* of the sixteenth century, I also read about evidence presented by Russian security of an assassination plot by Ukraine-funded neo-Nazis; the plot was a "poorly staged false flag" whose faked evidence was laughable.[1] I followed the report of an eighteen-year-old white man who livestreamed his massacre of thirteen shoppers in a historically African-American grocery store in Buffalo, New York.[2] I read about the release of documentation pertaining to a strategy, by a major American church, to protect pastors and other officials from allegations of sexual abuse for nearly twenty years.[3] It was the day after nineteen children and two adults were massacred by an eighteen-year-old that I finished *Villainy in France*, amid waves and waves of media commentary lamenting the American crisis in mental health, the lack of fathers for young men, and a persistent decrying of this country's "turn away from God."[4]

Prior to these events, I had already started to imagine a book on villainy for our times. It was to include chapters on "World Leaders;" "Filmic Renditions of Comic-Book Evil-Doers;" "Those Who Make Billions Peddling Nothing;" and "Climate Change Deniers." Under the chapter entitled "Fake News Makers," I considered sections on "Promulgators of Any Version of the Great Replacement Theory," as well as "Ideologues of Meritocracy." Now I see clearly that none of those categories addresses the heinous events which have dominated recent news in my part of the world. I suspect I differ from many or at least some readers of this review in not thinking that the perpetrators of these acts, or those who believe any of the statements justifying them, are villainous. I think they are dangerous, wrong, deluded, myopic, and arguably brainwashed. They are protected by, but also sheltered from, the effects of structures of systemic violence and inequity, and so they are fearful, but not evil or even villainous. After finishing *Villainy in France*, I wonder if it is possible—or salutary—to agree on who the villains are. Should we even attempt to identify them? Are villains, or villainy, even the problem?

Patterson's study won't help us answer these questions, or at least not in an obvious way. It self-consciously struggles to offer a definition of villainy, anchoring the *vil* through an inquiry into its constitution, its effects, and its personifications, as well as its deep association to possibilities for redress or retribution. That is, villainy in sixteenth-century France is the expression and performance of malevolence's material and self-conscious manifestation, encompassing the "overflowing of the human heart, its inner malice on show" (p. 1), or as most clearly stated in the jacket's back matter, the "outward manifestation of inner malice." Patterson traces the shifting acceptation of an amorphous concept through historical archives, legal discourse, poetry, theater, and print images. This elucidation of the intimate relationship among legal and literary discourses

in the shaping of the forms by which inward vice finds its outward expression may offer a reason to reach back to the turmoil and possibility of sixteenth-century France's political and confessional chaos to understand our own conceptions of "evil doers."^[5] More generative might be its invitation to think more attentively about the importance of language and media ecologies in the creation, address and redress of intractable social evil.

Indicative of the tenticular structure of the book's argument, Patterson begins with a number of opening gambits. The one that stuck with me the most throughout my reading, and to which I returned for consultation numerous times, was his account of the naturalization of the villainous through opposition to an equally historicized and constructed notion of "nobility" (pp. 42-54), which led to its association with not just the evil, but also the base, the inept, the low, and the imperfect body. This is fascinating stuff and should be useful to historians of culture, war, religion, literature, and sociology alike. The book then follows villainy's transcultural "flow" over the course of the sixteenth century, from the bad-boy poet Villon to the assassin Ravaillac, from juridical texts through literary ones. It is at its strongest when it bucks the naturalized, accretive or causal metaphor of flow in favor of exploring how truly uncertain the societal project of containing the bad proved to be, and how embroiled in social change and tension this project was.

The presentation of this far-ranging research thus soared when it shows how pervasive but multivalent and ambiguous villainy continued to be, and faltered, for this reader, when it endeavored to make a whole out of it. Centering France, it also uses some English sources with ties either to French writing, as in the case of English engagements with Rabelais by Marston and Jonson (pp. 157-167) or with the Huguenot cause in the poetry of Anne Dowriche (pp. 184-192). While Patterson goes to some lengths to explaining the presence of these sources, I hope that cross-Channel citations are no longer a controversial move requiring justification. I also don't think the English sources added anything particularly cultural to the history of villainy; Patterson's evocation of English sources didn't really further question the national character of villainy, despite the divergent connotations of *villain* and *villain*. Yet I appreciate the refusal to silo the French case from obvious engagements with its politics, moral quandaries, and aesthetic examples.

One of the aspects I found the most interesting is one conclusion we might draw, that villainy was in sixteenth-century France many things, but not what we now call a "keyword," following Raymond Williams.^[6] For Williams, keywords are significant because their meanings are contested but crucial to society's debates about values, meaning, order, and change. Yet Patterson has shown instead that the villain or "*meschant*" belongs to a category of concepts that are nearly inverse in their constitution. The ones that are too unsettled to have multiple meanings, which have multiple synonyms—*Meschant*, *vil*, *mauvais*, and so on—but which, like pornography, seem to constitute a category that is undefinable and whose parameters cannot be articulated. Is a word invented when we need the concept, or does the concept emerge from the word?^[7] In a certain way Patterson seems to suggest that the English word villainy, for which there was and is no easy translation in French (other than *méchant* or *mauvais*), is the best word to describe a complex of characteristics and expressions that were articulated around the outward manifestation of inward malice, and which entailed what Patterson articulates as "offence and redress" (p. 7), the impetus to remedy, punish, or expel the bad from society. It is therefore not that villainy was a contested word, but that how the notion villainy was deployed, toward diverse and varied socio-political ends, is indicative of how contested were sixteenth-century notions of justice.

While Patterson considers his research to work within the field of law and literature, the far-ranging and somewhat *décousu* structure (five sections and eighteen chapters) allows him to offer readings not just of jurists' commentaries and mainstays of literature (Rabelais, Jonson, Marot, Navarre), but to see analogous debates in less formal printed milieux: broadside commentaries, poetry, ribald prose, tragedy, and archival documentation. Finally, we might lay to rest the idea that premodern literature was ever constituted as a kind of writing separate from rhetoric, and accept that law, and legal discourse, emerged alongside other cultural arenas in which justice, right, and testimony were performed. Occasionally the drive to show that these categories were mutually informative gets lost amid a paradoxical need to reify them as distinct in order to, again, point out their imbrication or mutual constitution. Perhaps related is the occasional slippage among terms means that the force of language can be confused with act. Thus it took me a while to understand that by "villainous language," Patterson means something closer to what I would call more precisely "villainizing language": discourse that seeks to reveal its subject's internal malevolence or baseness, and which can develop into what Patterson also calls an "arts of vilification" (p. 20).

This particular turn, which is made several times in the book, offers astonishing insight in the ways in which rhetoric was adapted to a moralizing turn which had no definitive structure or sectarian end, different from but covering the same broad affective and ideological ground as satire.[8] As Patterson emphasizes repeatedly in later sections of the book, the arts of vilification were particularly interesting in the tragedies he explores, which were without clear end or definite efficacy; the move to vilify never achieves a thorough expunging of the malevolence from the social. In this regard especially, *Villainy in France* contributes to a current of scholarship examining sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century engagements with the aftermath of the Wars of Religion; that the struggle to master the bad never goes away, whether in the impossibility of "oubliance" as Andrea Frisch explores or in the theatrical afterlife of resistance theory, as Anna Rosensweig has shown.[9] Patterson's insistence that theater addresses questions of redress on a same par as legal discourse adds to this turn in the field toward a better understanding of how theater and performance were forms of political experiment and even intervened as legal discourse. In that regard, Patterson's exploration of the figure of the "villainous counsellor" (p. 202) both within theater and without has much to offer historians of political theory, in particular in relation to the doctrine of the lesser magistrate.[10]

Villainy in France opens or reopens myriad avenues of research for us to consider. One question that Patterson never fully raises but which seems to inform so much of the book is the question of sin. The vile, whether characterological or based in deeds, is sin, and the villain is even represented by the devil in Mathieu's *La Guisade* (pp. 194-204). Wisely, Patterson might have chosen not to open up this can of worms in the era of Reformation and Counter-Reformation theological debates, as well as the wars that informed these debates. So hopefully historians of religion will take this opportunity to reconsider how the question of sin and retribution were topics not just in theological treatises, but explored, debated, and theorized through imagery, poems and tragedies.

A related subject, which lies just outside of Patterson's purview but also appears obliquely in many sections, is the question of masculinity, a subject of much interesting research.[11] To what extent does the rhetoric of masculinity, predicated on concepts of honor and nobility, need to be rethought to incorporate the questions of baseness that Patterson raises? How do the arts of vilification

intersect with masculinity's rhetoric of "moderation" traced so compellingly by Todd Reeser?[12] Does the question of masculinity find its limits, perhaps in the famous dog episode in Rabelais wherein misogyny seems a backdrop for animalistic baseness (pp. 124-141)? The traditional understanding of Renaissance masculinity seems further challenged and enriched by a fascinating discussion of "the unexpected fragility of nobility" (p. 257) in the figure of Bussy d'Amboise as explored by both l'Estoile and Chapman. In any case, the relationship between masculinity and villainy would be interesting to explore further. Some of the most compelling readings of villainizing speech are directed against women, but when villainy and not masculinity become the focus of misogyny's dynamism, we begin to see some of the book's most significant epistemological questions come to light, and most acutely raised in the last third of the book.

In this regard, one of the richest concepts in *Villainy in France* might be that of "epistemic vigilance," by which Patterson means to trace a Cassandra-like rhetorical stance that decries falsities, purports to offer the truth, and promotes a belief that victory is possible through correct knowing: "don't believe everything you hear...there is yet hope" (p. 185). The question of what a villain knows, of how we can know the villainous, and how we explain its persistence, are, as Patterson shows throughout this book, epistemological questions, including of what constitutes natural and unnatural knowledge (p. 199). But the particular stance of epistemic vigilance also characterizes the readings of L'Estoile's later writings, as well as Rosset's *histoires tragiques*. Throughout *Villainy in France*, Patterson refuses to disentangle the discursive performances of texts from the historical events they recount or to which they contribute (p. 173). Especially in the last chapters, when writers recall the civil-religious troubles of the last half of the sixteenth century in a variety of literary styles and genres, their resolutions seem to imitate the ways the Wars of Religion had "rapidly turned triumphs into false dawns" (p. 219). In the case of the assassin Ravaillac, most stunningly, Patterson argues that archives of his execution must be understood to show paradoxically the impossibility of expunging villainy (p. 277). The display of villainy—its deeds as well as its punishment—is continual, and never-ending.

Herein is one of the most stunning lessons offered by reading *Villainy in France*: the chase after the *méchants* was as futile in the sixteenth century as it is today. This is not because they are so clever, elusive, or masterful. It is because we will never cease to create villains, and to locate the *vil* in others. Our attempts to identify, describe, understand, and chart a course for eliminating malice may never be effective so long as we personify it in individuals. Effective or not, however, these attempts will persist, and paradoxically such persistence is at the heart of literature and visual art's speculative capacities. *Villainy in France* compels us to consider the role of the literary as a site of experiment for adjudicating our societal ills.

It would behoove us, then, to think about our own consideration of the villainous. In what social arenas do we identify offense, seek understanding and just redress? Just as in the sixteenth century, it is not limited to courts or houses of worship. Rather it is in our diverse media that we try our villains. To consider this phenomenon, I offer one last reference to the villainy of our world in 2022. Europe's first Conservative Political Action Conference was held in Budapest just a few weeks ago as I write. In his keynote remarks opening the conference, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orbán proposed a twelve-point so-called open-source plan to defeat the world conspiracy of leftists. One of the most salient was the idea of a non-stop news cycle apt to CPAC agendas. Orbán urged the international racist, antisemitic and white supremacist movement to create a

media landscape of shows like that of the current darling of Fox News: “My friend Tucker Carlson stands alone and immovable. His show has the highest audience figures. What does this mean? It means that there should be shows like his day and night. Or as you say 24/7.” [13] What Orbán envisions, then, is a media ecology where only “epistemic vigilance” can thrive, and whose sole purpose is that the villains be described, their crimes documented, and their elimination planned. What ensured French sixteenth-century discourse around villainy as a generative and unending repository for that culture’s fears was an eclectic, diverse media landscape, where political pamphlets were not yet codified, where literature was not beholden to genre, and when determining what was the purview not just of the law, but of seemingly all media. Given Orbán’s vision, today’s media landscape is destined to coalesce around the singular truth of villains amongst us.

NOTES

- [1] “Russia Appears to Confuse ‘The Sims’ for SIM Cards in Possible Staged Assassination Attempt,” *New York Post* (blog), April 25, 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/04/25/russia-appears-to-confuse-the-sims-for-sim-cards-in-possible-staged-assassination-attempt/> (accessed September 8, 2022).
- [2] “10 Dead in Buffalo Supermarket Attack Police Call Hate Crime,” AP NEWS, May 14, 2022, <https://apnews.com/article/buffalo-supermarket-shooting-442c6d97a073f39f99d006dbba40f64b> (accessed September 8, 2022). For the particular role of media in the Buffalo massacre, see, “Buffalo Shooting Livestream Remains Available - The Washington Post,” May 16, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/05/16/buffalo-shooting-live-stream/> (accessed September 8, 2022).
- [3] The Associated Press, “Southern Baptist Leaders Release a Previously Secret List of Accused Sexual Abusers,” *NPR*, May 27, 2022, sec. National, <https://www.npr.org/2022/05/27/1101734793/southern-baptist-sexual-abuse-list-released> (accessed September 8, 2022).
- [4] The phrase was used by various Protestant commentators. This phenomenon is part of a legacy analysed in a column by LZ Granderson in a recent op-ed, “Republicans Use ‘God’ to Turn Tragedies into Talking Points,” *Los Angeles Times*, June 1, 2022, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2022-06-01/republicans-uvalde-shooting-religion> (accessed September 8, 2022). This analysis was critiqued immediately by Gabriel Hays, “LA Times Column Compares Invoking God amid Texas School Shooting to ‘Faith That Allowed Brutal Enslavement,’” (Fox News, June 1, 2022), <https://www.foxnews.com/media/la-times-column-invoking-god-texas-school-shooting-faith-enslavement> (accessed September 8, 2022).
- [5] George W. Bush, “President: Today We Mourned, Tomorrow We Work,” Address delivered on the South Lawn, September 16, 2011. Accessed May 30, 2022, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010916-2.html> (accessed September 8, 2022).
- [6] Raymond Williams. *Keywords. A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976). New ed. Oxford University Press, 2015, esp. pp. xxxiv-xxxvi.

[7] Joan Dejean, asking a similar question about the word “obscenity,” offers an overview of the historical and philological stakes of such debates. Joan DeJean, *The Reinvention of Obscenity: Sex, Lies, and Tabloids in Early Modern France*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), p. 4.

[8] Antonia Szabari, *Less Rightly Said. Scandals and Readers in Sixteenth-Century France*. Stanford University Press, 2009.

[9] Andrea Frisch. *Forgetting Differences. Tragedy, Historiography, and the French Wars of Religion*. Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2015; and, Anna Rosensweig. *Subjects of Affection. Rights of Resistance on the Early Modern French Stage*. Northwestern University Press, 2021.

[9] Anna Rosensweig, “Whose Resistance Theory?” *Modern Language Quarterly*. Forthcoming. Vol 83:3 (September 2022), pp. 335-348.

[10] For a related discussion, see in particular the epilogue to my *In The Wake of Medea. Neoclassical Tragedy and the Arts of Destruction*. Fordham University Press, 2020, pp. 199-206.

[11] See for example the groundbreaking collection edited by Kathleen Wine, *High Anxiety. Masculinity in Crisis in Early Modern France*. Truman State University Press, 2002.

[12] Todd Reeser, *Moderating Masculinity in Early Modern Culture*. University of North Carolina Press, 2006.

[13] “Viktor Orbán’s Speech at the CPAC on 19 May 2022,” *Visegrád Post*, May 24, 2022, <https://visegradpost.com/en/2022/05/24/viktor-orbans-speech-at-the-cpac-on-19-may-2022/> (accessed September 8, 2022).

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