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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 Virginia Krause, Brown University

Jonathan Patterson's *Villainy in France (1463-1610)* is an engaging and erudite work of cultural history spanning a period extending from Villon's *Testament* to the assassination of Henri IV. The keyword guiding this itinerary is *Vilenie* (and its associated adjectives, *vilain* and *vil*), a notion with no direct English equivalent. *Villainy in France* thus begins with careful conceptual adjustments of a range of terms, starting with the English word villainy appearing in the title, which in French has meanings ranging from *méchanceté* to *infâmie* and *bassess*e. Historically determined meanings of the French term *vilenie* are wide-ranging and shifting. In Old French, for instance, *vilain* designated a peasant or commoner, the moral meaning mingling indistinguishably with social standing, but at the end of the seventeenth century, the *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (1694) declared *vilain* to be an "obsolete" word for a peasant (n. 19, p. 6). Finally, in modern French, *vilain* is an adjective more easily applied to a mischievous child than to a horrific crime.

Patterson's study thus begins by tracking the hesitations surrounding this term, infinitely more protean (potentially tragic or playful) than its English cousin villainy. But *Villainy in France* is, equally, a study of satire through three figures—the testator (Villon), the *conteur* (Du Fail), and the memorialist (L'Estoile)—a trajectory that Patterson places under the auspices of the premodern rather than seeking to establish any firm lines between the medieval and the early modern. This is a book that draws the reader in and that will be, I imagine, as interesting for a broader readership as well as for specialists given its vocation to offer what Foucault once called a "vies des hommes infâmes."[1] Master Pathelin, Panurge, but also Villon, Marot, Jacques Clément, Henri de Guise, and François Ravaillac, the villains in this study are neither clearly historical nor solely literary figures, but rather hover indeterminately somewhere in between: they are in many cases animated *personae*, as Patterson observes in dialogue with Samuel Fallon. With such a compelling cast of villains, it is, however, Pierre de L'Estoile who steals the show. Of all the figures studied, Pierre de L'Estoile "understood villainy's uncontainable flow better than any other writer" (p. 19), chronicling its many masks and ruses through his voluminous *Journaux*. Insofar as Patterson is himself a latter-day observer of villainy, L'Estoile is a predecessor when it comes to cultural history chronicling the lives of *hommes infâmes* and perhaps even a kindred spirit. The position of chronicler or observer is, however, far from straightforward, and Patterson's conclusion offers insightful analyses of the complexities of being villainy's witness. As Patterson argues, to witness villainy is never an act of disinterested observation, insofar as one potentially finds oneself interpellated to laugh at or condemn the villain, to feel disgust for the act, or to experience pity for the victim, sometimes all at once (p. 181). Witnessing villainy is always ambiguously participatory rather than neutral and descriptive.

What are the methods employed in this work of cultural history? Patterson pushes aside traditional character-based analyses of canonical works (e.g., Shakespeare's villains), seeking instead to draw on anthropological insights and to position his intervention as part of the Law and Literature movement (p. 7). Most of the figures that appear in his study were either jurists or lawyers themselves or had a brush with the law, and so this dual lens is ideally suited to the matter at hand. Patterson is a very good close reader of the jurists' treatises (Antoine Loisel's *Institutes coustumieres*, for instance) and proposes illuminating analyses of the culture of farce amongst the *basoches* (legal guilds).

Although he situates his project within the Law and Literature movement, Patterson's methodology is perhaps best crystallized in the self-conscious metaphorical play he employs throughout this book rather than in a given theoretical apparatus. He does not seek to enlist villainy in the construction of an elaborate conceptual edifice, but rather to "offer a method for navigating moral, criminal, and social notions of villainy, that remained palpably fluid" (p. 22). Throughout *Villainy in France*, the author acknowledges that the best way to apprehend this notion is by "going with villainy's flow," from beginning (Introduction: "Going with Villainy's Flow") to end (Afterword: "Still Going with Villainy's Flow"). Given its centrality and the conceptual work it is being called on to perform, I would therefore like to reserve the majority of my response for interrogating this running metaphorical register. What does it mean for villainy to be "fluid," "palpable," and "mobile" and for the critic to be caught up in its flow?

At first glance, the idea of going with villainy's flow seems to place the critic in a rather passive role as someone going along rather than actively constructing a hypothesis supported by argument and analysis. However, Patterson is in no way pretending to be a passive observer or describer of events, notwithstanding his on-going flirtation with the chronicle mode of writing. Rather, he is suggesting that villainy in pre-modern France is something that cannot be grasped in one's hand or seized and thereby immobilized through the critical gesture. As a notion, villainy is too slippery, too elusive, and too ambiguous. It is not a solid that can be firmly grasped, but rather a liquid that is *insaisissable*, constantly slipping through the critic's clutches and resisting all attempts to contain it. Indeed, the metaphors of fluidity (mobility with liquidity) prevail throughout this study: villainy seeps out, oozes, brims over, overflows. Villainy is a "great cauldron brimming over," Patterson suggests in another passage that evokes the metaphor of *la grande marmite* from religious pamphlets (p. 2). It is striking to note the deep ties that villainy seems to maintain with liquid imagery—in English, one thinks of a cesspool, and also slime or scum—the layer of filth forming on top of a liquid—as though viscous were indistinguishable from vicious.

What is at stake in this privileging of these material attributes? Through his "cultural-materialist enquiry," Patterson understands culture to be an entity that is moving and liquid rather than firm and solid, imagery that is initially somewhat unsettling.[2] We have become accustomed to other material states being implied in the work of criticism. The scholar of early modern history and literature might be figured as a builder of theoretical edifices, an excavator of buried pasts, or simply a close reader of texts, but typically not someone who is carried along by the topic being studied. Moreover, in most instances, the critic or scholar is generally assumed to be someone who seeks mastery through the gaze (the exalted "critical gaze") rather than through the more tactile and bodily senses associated with being immersed and transported. To go with villainy's flow is thus also to suggest a particular mode of critical participation. With this topic, Patterson suggests,

one cannot remain stalwart, standing firm on solid ground while exercising one's ocular faculties with impunity; one has to jump in, to be caught in the flow, for only in this way is the topic made palpable (Patterson prefers tactile metaphors to visual ones).[3]

By the same token, by going with the flow, Patterson keeps at bay a distanced critical gesture of disapprobation whereby the scholar would disavow the villainy being studied. For instance, in his discussion of Chapter 8 of *Pantagruel*, in which Panurge subjects a Parisian lady to the most degrading form of revenge, Patterson notes that "[m]any readers will respond by disavowing Panurge's vile treatment of the woman, and some may condemn Rabelais too for his apparently celebratory narrative" (p. 281). Instead of this distanced critical stance, Patterson argues for a multiplicity of responses (disgust, condemnation, laughter, and pity), allowing all of these reactions to prevail. As a result, the critic is neither firmly situated (politically or ethically) nor un-situated and somehow purporting to be a neutral observer, but rather someone who participates, registering the responses elicited and self-consciously reflecting on them.

Finally, going with the flow allows Patterson to cross national borders (some chapters examine English appropriations of French villains) while crossing literary genres and disciplines (most notably law and literature, although these two disciplines have an ancient kinship). Crossing languages, genres and disciplines while accounting for the ambiguous responses that villainy elicits, *Villainy in France* flows widely and generously. If it is true, as the proverb would have it, that still waters run deep, Patterson has not set out to plumb the depths. Rather, *Villainy in France* is a fast-moving river that runs wide, covering a variety of terrains, giving a palpable sense of the period at every bend.

The one lingering regret for this reader is that two interlocutors are not brought into the discussion: George Hoffmann and Dominique Brancher.[4] The former appears briefly in note 6, where Patterson states that his intention is to "complement rather than overlap" with Hoffmann's *Reforming French Culture*, but this reader wished Patterson had opened a dialogue with Hoffmann's work. *Villainy in France* is in some respects very close to Hoffmann's study. They share a common corpus consisting of satire and religious polemic. Moreover, both scholars adopt anthropological frameworks. And yet their methods and conclusions diverge radically. Most notably, whereas Patterson sees satire as participatory, drawing the reader (and critic) in, Hoffmann detects the workings of alienation. As it happens, the cover of Hoffmann's book features a detail from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *Landscape with the Flight into Egypt* depicting two lonely figures who are turning their backs (and their gazes) to the large river flowing below them.

As a cultural history of the notion of "modesty," Dominique Brancher's *Équivoques de la pudeur: Fabrique d'une passion à la Renaissance* could also have legitimately claimed a place in Patterson's study, not only because modesty engages similar moral questions and is in some ways villainy's antithesis, but also because both scholars are offering a cultural history of a distinctly pre-modern notion. Although Patterson interfaces with law while Brancher's intertext is medico-scientific, both critics engage in cultural-materialist enquiry. In a work that has such a generous sweep as *Villainy in France*, engaging such a broad range of scholars, Brancher's book is one of the few key works conspicuously absent. In particular, one wonders if the broader cultural shift from "impiety" to "obscenity" that Brancher tracks in *Équivoques de la pudeur* colors the modes of villainy Patterson examines in *Villainy in France*. Patterson's analysis of two sample court cases

in Chapter 1 reveals accusations that span the gamut between religious frames (notions of heresy and impiety) and moral and sexual notions of villainy.

Finally, my own work on witchcraft theory and trials during the same period led me to read Patterson's study of these two sample court cases with keen interest. Analysis of court cases remains largely the purview of historians, including some of the most magisterial, including Nathalie Zemon Davis, whose work Patterson cites frequently. As a literary scholar, Patterson brings an expertise from his discipline to his analysis, which to my mind was tantalizingly brief. For instance, as Patterson notes there were for this period two kinds of *vilain cas*: those relating to words and those relating to deeds. The Amaury de Dommaigné case he examines hinges on the latter (insult) insofar as *vilain* was used as a dishonoring name. Is this a case of what we would call slander or defamation? At one point does name-calling become a punishable offense in this period and, moreover, what broader social logics might be brought into play by such name-calling brought into the courtroom? In my experience, working with one witchcraft trial from the late sixteenth century edited by a team of scholars, name-calling has very real (and tragic) consequences when brought into a trial.[5] Here, the reputation for being a witch amongst neighbors based on perceived ill will denounced by name-calling ("You witch!") was transformed into a social identity (to be one of the witches), which judges translated into their own terms, as a treasonous crime against god and king. Analyzing a court case, one is brought close to different social understandings amongst different groups: did judges and accused share the same notion of villainy? Can one glimpse different understandings of villainous behavior at work through the lines of the archival documents?

In summary, reading *Villainy in France*, I admired the breadth and fine-tuned lexicography, grappled with the methodological program, and regretted the absence of Hoffmann and Brancher in what is otherwise an extraordinarily generous dialogue with scholars. Immersed in *Villainy in France*, I also found myself thinking often of teaching, realizing that I would teach the period differently having read this work and fantasizing about offering some future course on premodern French villains that would include Villon, Rabelais, and Pierre de L'Estoile while chronicling the period's political and religious turmoil, with Patterson's book as an engaging alternative to a traditional textbook. (An invitation to Oxford University Press to consider a paperback edition for future syllabi!).

NOTES

[1] Michel Foucault, *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*, ed. Daniel Defert, François Ewald, and Jacques Lagrange, vol. 3 (Paris: Gallimard, 1994), p. 237-53. Cited by Patterson, n. 47, p. 14.

[2] "This book develops as a cultural-materialist enquiry in which I interpret 'culture' as a moving process: the distinctive ideas, beliefs, and customs that are carried in material social interactions, creating particular ways of life as groups form, split, and reform" (n. 4, p. 1). See also, Samuel Fallon, *Paper Monsters: Persona and Literary Culture in Elizabethan England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

[3]. At the beginning of his study, Patterson writes "I shall uncover more of that palpable fluidity between moral, criminal, and social notions of villainy, in Shakespeare's day and earlier" (p. 1).

[4] George Hoffmann, *Reforming French Culture: Satire, Spiritual Alienation, and Connection to Strangers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017); and, Dominique Brancher, *Équivoques de la pudeur: Fabrique d'une passion à la Renaissance* (Geneva: Droz, 2015).

[5] *Les Sorciers du carroi de Marlou: un procès de sorcellerie en Berry (1582-1583)*, ed. Nicole Jacques-Chaquin and Maxime Préaud (Grenoble: Jérôme Millon, 1996).

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