

H-France Forum
Volume 17, Issue 7 #4

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 Karen Sullivan, Bard College

With *Villainy in France (1463-1610): A Transcultural Study of Law and Literature*, Jonathan Patterson has written a disturbing book. At a time of demands from both the left and the right for “moral clarity,”[1] he asks us to consider the villain, a person whose role in late medieval and early modern society and literature is anything but morally clear. When Patterson’s readers consider the villain, they are most likely to think of characters from English Renaissance plays like William Shakespeare’s Iago, who stands out, as Samuel Taylor Coleridge memorably put it, for his “motiveless malignity.”[2] Yet the literary and historical context out of which such a dramatic villain emerges, *Villainy in France* shows, is far more ethically complicated than Iago’s blank malice might suggest. The problem is not only that, with the Wars of Religion raging in France, someone who might appear to be a villain from the Catholic perspective might seem to be a hero for the Protestants. It is also that the character who is condemned as a villain in the history of this time period may be celebrated as a renegade in its literature. In the book Patterson writes, there are villains, but there are no saints, either sacred or secular, and, in the absence of such a binary opposition, we are not sure whom to champion. The moral uncertainty this book creates is its greatest virtue.

The term “villainy,” as Patterson defines it, had once defined a low social class, but now defined low behavior. In the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries, a *vilain* was a peasant legally attached to a manorial estate (or *villa*). In the songs, lays, and romances from these years, he is characterized as someone who was “low born,” “coarsely behaved,” and “churlish,” in opposition to a nobleman with his “courtly” manners.[3] Renart, the wily fox of the *Roman de Renart* (c. 1174-1250), displays almost all of the traits Patterson will identify with a villain—he is said to be a trickster, a traitor, and a heretic—but, because he is baron, we are told, “Renas de senbla pas vilein.”[4] By the Late Middle Ages, the word *vilain* was no longer understood simply as a peasant, Patterson argues, not least because members of this class had obtained some degree of control over their labor, and some of them had moved into town and acquired wealth and prestige. The word *vilain* continued to designate someone of the lowest registers of society, whether rural or urban, who resorts to petty crime in order to preserve his precarious existence, but it could also signify anyone who indulges the wanton, disreputable, and disordered lifestyle associated with paupers and vagabonds. It was said, “Ceulx sont villains, qui font les villonnies” (p. 69).

And if someone who committed villainies was a villain, Patterson shows, then a nobleman who committed a villainy could fall into that category. The nobleman could be charged with *crimes énormes*, that is, with “crimes of extraordinary baseness and those of momentous political significance” (p. 1). As Patterson explains, these crimes could entail compounded violations, often in a family context, such as serial rape, incest, sodomy, and parricide. They could entail religious

and political outrages, like perjury, sorcery, heresy, tyranny, and treason, which affected the whole community. A nobleman who committed *lèse-majesté* might be stripped of the privileges of his class and his children be treated “comme vilains, et nais d’un pere infame” (p. 69). Whereas villainy had once been a clearly-defined concept, set in opposition to courtliness, it is now, as Patterson describes it, one of a fuzzy set of terms, including *méchanceté*, *infamie*, and *bassesse*, and not always an essential component of that set.

Villainous deeds had a certain attraction for people in the long sixteenth century, as they do today. François Villon, though he seldom used the words *vilanie*, *vilain*, or *vil* in his writings, still counts for Patterson as the *poète vilain* par excellence. Though a graduate of the University of Paris, he was repeatedly charged with crimes, including involvement in the killing of a priest and participation in a burglary of the Collège de Navarre. Patterson writes, “Villon qualifies...as a villain in the modern English sense of a troublesome man of violence, with a history of robbery and homicide” (p. 83). Clément Marot, who edited Villon’s works, was closely connected to King François I and his sister Marguerite de Navarre, but he too repeatedly fell afoul of the law and saw the inside of a prison, in his case, it was said, for “various excesses, offenses, and crimes, even heresies” (p. 99). Scholars have long admired characters like Villon and Marot who work to overthrow social, political, and religious hierarchies. Mikhail Bakhtin, in *Rabelais and His World*, famously celebrated the carnivalesque spirit of the sixteenth century, which ritually inverted the high and the low, the sacred and the profane, and the elite and the popular.[5] Natalie Zemon Davis extended Bakhtin’s argument in her similarly influential “Women on Top” (1975), arguing that the image of the disorderly woman at this time expanded the behavioral options for both sexes and, as she put it, “sanction[ed] riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest.”[6] Insofar as the villain is a figure of rebellion, he (or she) has often been perceived as subversive and, hence, as worthy of being championed.

Like villainous deeds, villainous words have also been seen to have their appeal. Patterson writes of the “villainous style” with which an author purposefully offends the reader. The villainous author may vilify others, as Clément Marot did when he engaged in a fierce literary debate with François de Sagon or as Pierre de L’Estoile did when he exposed sexual misconduct at the Valois court. Patterson writes, “These kinds of malicious speech-acts are more than casual insults; they are not easily brushed aside” (p. 6). With their offensive words, authors of the villainous style aspire to provoke a reaction, perhaps outrage on the part of those being vilified or perhaps glee on the part of those witnessing the vilification. François Rabelais stands out even among his contemporaries for what Patterson calls “his capacity to provoke offense—his villainous style” (p. 122). Rabelais mocked Catholic priests, monks, and scholastic theologians to the point where his works were condemned by the Sorbonne, but his caustic approach toward religion also troubled Protestant reformers like John Calvin, who censured his “ordures et villenies” (p. 124). Villainous though Rabelais’s style may be, it is also joyfully exuberant. As readers today, we are unlikely to be offended by much of his raillery, which extends across social and religious groups that have often ceased to exist. We want “to get the joke” being told by this great writer and to find a place for ourselves inside the charmed circle of his “beuveurs tres illustres,”[7] in contrast to the indignant audience whose condemnations he anticipates and mocks. As I attempted to show in *Truth and the Heretic: Crises of Knowledge in Medieval French Literature* (2005), literary texts always rejoice in indeterminacy of meaning and, hence, can never be confined by a single,

orthodox approach to the truth.[8] The late medieval and early modern *vilain*, as Patterson represents him, can be seen as a continuation of high medieval heroes like Tristan, Yseut, Renart, Richeut, and Trubert, who use guile to outwit more powerful members of their society and who, though getting away with adultery, treachery, and theft, earn our admiration for their cleverness and their triumph over superiors.

Yet villainous deeds, Patterson makes clear, are not always delightfully subversive. He tells the story of a Parisian rag merchant who was convicted of raping and sodomizing his three small daughters and attempting to murder his wife and son. The man was strangled and burned alive, but, as Patterson argues, no amount of torture was seen as capable of repairing the physical and mental scars that these daughters would bear: “Violently shredded kinship ties left irreparable, gaping holes in the wider social tissue” (p. 251). As a case of incestuous sexual assault of children seemed to jurists villainous in a way that simple rape would not be, a case of regicide seemed to them villainous beyond simple murder. Patterson explains why the jurist Pierre Ayrault defended the prosecution of Jacques Clément, the assassin of Henry III, though the man was dead by the time of his trial. He writes, “When the crime exhibits an all-surpassing malignity, when it threatens to bring down an entire nation, Ayrault insists that the judicial response must in some way exceed normal limits of human retribution” (p. 208). As Clément’s murder of the king upset the political order of the entire kingdom, plunging all of France into disarray, Patterson suggests, it was considered necessary for his punishment to have a “supernatural quality,” or, as Ayrault puts it, a “je ne sçay quoy de quasi monstreueux & prodigieux” (p. 208). The situation was even worse when François Ravailac assassinated Henry IV, who had finally succeeded in establishing peace between Catholics and Protestants and putting an end to the Wars of Religion. Even as Ravailac was being drawn and quartered, spectators felt that his punishment was not adequate to the crime he had committed. Because the horror of a *crime énorme* transcends the person who commits it, Patterson often identifies its perpetrator, not as a villain, but as villainy itself, whose flow cannot be staunched by any human methods. When we are talking about the rape of children, the murder of a cherished ruler, or the killing of the 73,000 victims of the St. Bartholomew’s Day Massacre, the overthrow of a social, political, or religious order no longer seems like something to celebrate.

Villainous words, like villainous deeds, can also have their dark side. While Pierre de L’Estoile spoke harshly of many people around him, the preachers of Catholic League spoke harshly of their contemporaries as well, including in their sermons, he observed, “des plus vilaines injures et calomnies qui se puissant excogiter” (p. 244). Poetry could inhabit what Patterson refers to as “the Apollonian realms of high culture,” but it could also be “weaponized” (p. 117) in the context of the Wars of Religion. As Rabelais offended Catholics and Protestants of his time, he continues to offend feminists of our own era. In *Pantagruel*, the hero’s sidekick Panurge (whose name recalls the Greek words *panourgein*, “to play the villain”) devotes a substantial amount of time to subjecting women to sexual humiliations. In what Rabelais terms “la plus grande villanie du monde” (pp. 21-22), he punishes a haughty young woman who has spurned his sexual advances by smearing the scent of a bitch’s sexual organs over her fine clothing, so that all of the male dogs of Paris run to her, mount her, and urinate over her. Even if we are not troubled by Rabelais’s anticlericalism or his Epicurean “atheism,” we are likely to be disturbed by what seems to be the misogyny of this scene. Whatever our intentions may be, we are likely not to get the joke of this episode or to feel ourselves to be inside the circle of his designated readers at this point. We may feel the uneasiness that theologians of the Sorbonne and earnest Christians felt at other passages

of his writings. Channeling Rabelais, Patterson suggests that “[I]t is for our good that we take offense at their texts, if we sharpen our analytical, emotional, and ethical intelligence in the process,” and that “Working through our revulsion...could be our most appropriate mode of responding to villainy, and of ultimately resisting its destructive habits of thought and feeling” (p. 281). But that working through our revulsion may involve recognizing that no one—scholastic theologian or young woman—enjoys being an object of cruel mockery.

The literature of which Patterson writes is in the real world. The theft, prostitution, and brawling we see in Villon’s criminal underworld, the legal chicanery we see in Master Pierre Pathelin’s village, and the “sexual harassment” (p. 134) we see in Rabelais’s Paris, all occurred in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century France as well as in these literary works. As history permeated literature, literature permeated history. The villainous character could be found, not only in fictional testaments, farces, and mock epics, but in factual accounts of the incestuous rag-dealer or contemporary regicides. Because the terrible effect of the historical villain’s actions extended far beyond what his typically mediocre personality seemed capable of, the cultural imaginary attributed to him the depravity that it deemed necessary to have produced this result. Patterson writes, “[V]illainy needed a combination of fact and fiction. Villainous offenses in the material world needed...portable figures, whose villainous identity outpaced what could be known of the historical individual behind them” (p. 279). As literary villains seemed more real when they recalled actual scoundrels and criminals, historical villains seemed more real when they invoked fantastical malefactors: only a diabolical inspiration seemed adequate to account for the cosmic level of social disorder observed in France during this period.

For many years, scholars have praised the jubilation in disruption that can be seen in late medieval and early modern literary and historical sources. By exposing the interpenetration of the violence people laugh at in literature and the violence they perpetrate and suffer from in reality, Patterson gives us reason to reconsider this critical tendency.

NOTES

[1] “Moral clarity” was traditionally a conservative rallying cry, in opposition to what was seen as the relativism of the left. See, for example, William J. Bennett’s *Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on Terror* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2002). But this value has been embraced by progressives in recent years. In 2020, the Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Wesley Lowery tweeted, in response to *The New York Times*’s editorial page practices, “American view-from-nowhere, ‘objectivity’-obsessed, both-sides journalism is a failed experiment. We need to fundamentally reset the norms of our field. The old way must go. We need to rebuild our industry as one that operates from a place of moral clarity,” <https://twitter.com/wesleylowery/status/1268366363359354885?lang=en> (accessed September 12, 2022). See also Masha Gessen, “Why Are Some Journalists Afraid of ‘Moral Clarity’?” *The New Yorker* (June 24, 2020), <https://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/why-are-some-journalists-afraid-of-moral-clarity> (accessed September 12, 2022).

[2] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lectures 1808-1819: On Literature*, ed. R. A. Foakes, in *The Collected Works of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, ed. Kathleen Coburn, vol. 5 (in 2 vols.) (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), vol. 2, p. 315.

[3] See, for example, Marcabru's *pastorela* "L'autrier jost' una sebissa," Chrétien de Troyes' romance *Le Conte del Graal (Perceval)*, I 366, or the fabliau *Le Prestre qui abevete* for contrasts between villainous and courtly people.

[4] *Le Roman de Renart*, ed. Jean Dufournet, 2 vols. (Paris: Flammarion, 1985), vol. 1, VI, 57.

[5] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Tvorčestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaja kul'tura srednevekov'ja i Renessansa* (Moskva: Izd. Chudož. Literatura, 1965); *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1968).

[6] Natalie Zemon Davis, "Women on Top," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France: Eight Essays* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975), p. 131.

[7] François Rabelais, *Gargantua*, ed. Ruth Calder (Geneva: Droz, 1932), p. 8.

[8] Karen Sullivan, *Truth and the Heretic: Crises of Knowledge in Medieval French Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

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