

Villon

A Play by Murray Mednick

Scene: A forest hut in France in the fifteenth century. Minimalist. A stage, table and chairs. Stools. Seats along the sides are for the actors. There is no Offstage. **NO DOORS.** Should easily transform into a rustic low-end tavern or a dingy Parisian bar.

Author's Note: Dialogue in **bold** is aimed directly or indirectly at the audience. Stage directions in italics and bold (as are much of Clotilde's and Isabeau's) are also spoken.

Characters

FRANÇOIS VILLON, great bandit/poet of 15th Century France. In his early thirties.

CLOTILDE, a woman in her forties, a hunchbacked, wizened old friend of Villon's, and a member of his gang.

ISABEAU, a beautiful young prostitute and a loyal member of Villon's "crew."

BORGES, an itinerant priest, also a member. Killed eventually by Villon.

GUY TABARIE, twenties, formerly a soldier, of aristocratic origin, a sometime member of the gang.

OLD GUILLAUME VILLON, foster father of Villon, an Ecclesiastic at the University of Paris.

PHILIPPE CHERMOYE, an itinerant priest, murdered by Villon.

THE LANDLORD, a phony aristocrat working for the King.

THE KING OF FRANCE

On the run in this play, the Villon group often masqueraded as a troupe of actors and troubadours. Now they enter and take seats along the stage, right and left, while VILLON remains upstage left in the semi-dark.

Villon *(Upstage left, barely lit)* **Mesdames & Messieurs, please sit down—fart as much as you want—especially you old guys with heart problems, like me—but now it’s getting dark, and, speaking from the grave and the obscurity of the past, I must tell you what I think, and not lie, which is not so easy, as you know, though you may not be aware of the difference—after all, it’s the same old tragic/comic story of jealousy and revenge, lust and rejection, youth and age, beauty and ugliness, and so on—but we must have night and day, darkness and light; we must have these contraries, I don’t know why, and we must have darkness, above all, and I can’t explain that, either.**

Clotilde **Please turn off your little cell phones and other electronic devices. Anyone caught with one of these things on during the performance of this play will be removed by the French National Guard.**

Villon **I celebrate you—Monsieur François Villon, a hero in my youth, and a hero even in his own time (the fifteenth century), who understood well the power and ecstasy of language itself. They say you invented the villanelle, and the ballade, true or not, and concluded your career as a brawler, a thief and a murderer. And you had no doubts about the**

ambiguities and privileges and obligations of neither art, nor class, nor religion, which remained ambiguous, and who, like me (the Author), in my fantasy of myself, was a master of poetry and a class-jumper in my own youth, that is to say, to jump from poverty to scholar to thief and drug addict, to poet/playwright, and so on.

Clotilde *Or so he says. Maybe it's true and maybe it's not. At the moment, Villon is an actor hiding in the dark—you can see him there, just offstage. Pause. (LIGHTS UP) Enter François Villon, about thirty, our Hero—he is short, not handsome, wears a dagger in a holster on his chest and carries a cane, which is actually a war club. (He crosses downstage in front of the audience.)*

Villon **Yes, as you can see, I travel well armed. The cudgel's handle represents the figure of Christ on the cross. It expresses an inner truth. I was trying to say to you, you and to all of your relatives, who believe like you, who are, in fact, believers like you, who would eat cows, and fight for gold, and worship a clay idol, maybe some fucker like me, dressed like a God—some carney or circus barker—excuse me? My apologies. You Americans are easily offended. Don't be offended, not by a poor little fucker like me, I could never be a God, or act like a God, especially one like my Master—it's out of the question, and I was as good a scholar as my namesake, my mentor, Guillaume Villon, with his beautiful hair and excellent advice! (CLOTILDE approaches him onstage.)**

Clotilde *(A truly hunchbacked hag of indeterminate age)* What's with the beautiful hair and the excellent advice? That old man wore a wig and said little.

François **This is Clotilde. She is a member of my company. No further explanation needed.**

Clotilde **How do you do?** *(Curtseys)* **François Villon was adopted from the lower dregs of Parisian society and raised up to master the language of Latin and the niceties of the Church, whereupon he took on the name of his master, Villon, who was one of the foremost Catholic scholars of his day. Through him, François met the true nobility of the times, like Charles, the Duke of Orleans, who admired his poems.** Could they follow that, François?

François I don't know. **The Duke was a self-appointed connoisseur of Poetry, that most excellent of Ancient Arts. Myself, I invented various new forms, like the villanelle, and the ballade, still in use today.**

Clotilde **François was short and ugly, wore a dagger, carried a stick, and liked a good brawl. And he looks crooked at the moment, like me, wouldn't you say?**

François Of course, Clotilde, it's a result of wounds inflicted by my dear mother.

Clotilde Stop that, François!

François Why? My mother liked to hit people!

Clotilde You're attacking your mother!

François Especially me!

Clotilde You're doing it again!

François What?

Clotilde *(Of the audience)* You're alienating them.

François No, I'm not. I'm telling the truth.

Clotilde The truth be damned.

François **No, wait, I apologize. This is a true story, full of romance, fighting, religion, murder, jokes, and even dancing. Here is a woodcut of the old fart** (*Show the woodcut of VILLON*), **and you see, yes, he has a weird stance. The dagger is prominent. He was of the poorest of the poor, but he became a well educated fellow, as the Lady said, having acquired a bachelor's degree and a Masters at the University of Paris. He had a brilliant mind, as you can hear for yourself in his work, though he came to a bad end, despite all the help he got from the high born, in exile at various safe houses in France.**

Clotilde **His fate is unknown. Some say he became an immortal vampire.**

François **An old wife's tale, of course, as nobody knows, you see, following his last adventure, what happened to the poor fellow.**

Clotilde **No doubt he's in an unmarked grave somewhere.**

François So are you, Clotilde.

Clotilde No doubt. Save for the magic of Theatre. Here I am.
Voila.

François Most people would be dead by now at your age, Clotilde.

Clotilde Most people are, François.

François *C'est vrai.*

Clotilde I know. We'll boil each other in oil, François, and achieve immortality.

François Good, Clotilde. Go ahead and boil. You'll need a fire and lots of water, so go ahead. Find the water.

Clotilde **First he beats up his own mother, and then he insults me.**

François They didn't see me beat up my mother yet, Clotilde.

Clotilde Oh. Right.

François They will soon. They're looking forward to it. **Now we must introduce the young maiden of our little Commedia—her name is Isabeau, so the old men in the audience can look at her without feeling that they have to make any moves, or do anything but sit back and admire and imagine.** (*ISABEAU steps onstage. A sigh from the audience*)

Isabeau How do you do, François?

François Ah, Isabeau, so good to see you. Very well, thank you.

Isabeau What are we about to perform?

Villon We are about to show the story of my adoption. My parents fought like angry beasts, until my father died, covered with purple pustules all over his body. **So, now, this is the story of my adoption.** You two play my mother and my sister, and here comes my mentor, Old Villon. Since I'm only a kid at this point, I'll hide over here behind the fireplace. (*A knock on the "DOOR"*) That's him. Let him in.

Isabeau Come in, Doctor. (*Enter the Elderly Doctor of Religion, OLD VILLON*)

Old Villon Good day.

Isabeau Good day, Father.

Old Villon You don't need to call me "Father." (*Sniffs*) What do you people eat? Worms and trash?

Isabeau Yes, Father.

Old Villon It stinks in here.

Isabeau It sure does, though I can't smell it anymore.

Old Villon You know, I'm a church chaplain and a famous scholar of Ecclesiastical Law.

Isabeau Yes, Father.

Clotilde What's that?

Old Villon What?

Clotilde "Ecclesiastical."

Old Villon It's the church, dear. Where is the master of the house?

Clotilde Dead, sir, these many years.

Villon (*Off*) You knew all that already, sir.

Old Villon Someone is behind the fireplace.

Isabeau It's my brother. He's hiding.

Old Villon From me?

Isabeau I believe so.

Old Villon Come on out of there, Son.

Villon (*Reappearing*) Here I am, sir.

Old Villon No point in hiding. We all know what's going to happen, and your father's dead.

Clotilde Yes, but you never know where they go, the dead, do you, sir?

Villon We were just talking about that, sir. Hopefully they're not eating each other, sir.

Old Villon (*Startled*) Hopefully not, boy. No point in that, is there?

Villon They go back into the ground, Father, from whence they came?

Old Villon Yes. How did he die, may I ask?

Clotilde He boiled over, sir.

Isabeau He erupted in sores, turned blue, and gave up the ghost, sir.

Clotilde He was a common laborer, sir.

Old Villon And how old is your brother?

Isabeau He is eleven, sir.

Old Villon I heard your brother was smart for his age, though short, and built a little crooked.

Isabeau He is, sir. Just look at him.

Old Villon Can you offer tea?

Clotilde No.

Villon Yes! (*A basket of tea flies from behind the "fireplace."*)

Old Villon Oh, I see you have supernatural aid. That's nice.

Isabeau He stole it, sir.

Old Villon Oh. Water?

Clotilde No water.

Old Villon So this is useless.

Isabeau I'm afraid so, Father.

Old Villon It's absurd, tea without water.

Isabeau He stole the tea off a cart in the village.

Old Villon You may as well admit it, boy.

Isabeau It's not his fault.

Villon They won't let us access to the spring, Father.

Old Villon Who is "they?"

Isabeau The townspeople, sir.

Old Villon Why not?

Villon They say we are degenerate animals.

Clotilde Shut up.

Old Villon What do you do, Mother, beat your children every day? Discipline?

Clotilde (*As VILLON's mother*) Yes.

Old Villon That's nice. I mean, that's good. And your boy, too?

Clotilde Yes. That's what I was taught by my own mother, sir, beat the crap out of the kids.

Old Villon Where? In the poorhouse?

Clotilde No, sir, I lived in this shithole of a hut in Paris all my life.

Isabeau Who did you say your name was, sir?

Old Villon My name is Villon. Guillaume Villon.

Isabeau And she hits my brother over the head, once in a while, with a pot, Monsieur Villon.

Old Villon How unfortunate.

Isabeau But true, sir. That's why he's a little crooked.

Villon From getting hit over the head.

Isabeau And I think he's growing a sore head, like his mother.

Villon From being hit over the head with a pot, like I said.

Old Villon Is that why you were hiding behind the fireplace?

Villon Yes, sir.

Clotilde Liar.

Villon No, sir. I have no wish to be a student, or a doctor, and learn useless things.

Isabeau He only wants to beg and steal and kick the shit out of the younger kids.

Old Villon **Wonderful country, France, civilized centuries ago by the Romans.**

Clotilde The poor live like pigs, sir.

Isabeau The poor live *with* pigs, sir.

Old Villon What if I took him off your hands?

Clotilde Why should you?

Old Villon I've heard he's very bright, and that he can read.

Clotilde He can read posters.

Isabeau He can read the bible.

Clotilde He memorizes songs and figures.

Isabeau He has a welt on his back.

Old Villon From being beaten and humiliated, I suppose.

Clotilde He needs discipline. He needs control.

Old Villon But I've been told that the boy's a genius.

Clotilde Maybe he is. As long as he helps his mother.

Old Villon What does he do to help?

Clotilde Mainly, he collects garbage.

Isabeau And he fights. He's good with knives.

Clotilde They should know.

Old Villon Who should know?

Clotilde The people of the town of Paris.

Old Villon What do you mean?

Isabeau He carries a dagger and a club. Take a look.

Old Villon Can he hunt?

Isabeau He's a city boy, sir. He hunts other boys.

Old Villon I'll take him on if he can cook.

Isabeau He can't cook. And he writes poetry, nasty poetry.

Old Villon What do you mean?

Clotilde He attacks the nobility, he attacks the church. He can be in a sour mood and do sinful things.

Old Villon He does, eh? We'll cure him of that.

Clotilde That's what you think.

Old Villon Then you'll be glad to have him off your hands.

Clotilde It'll cost you, sir.

Old Villon What, pray?

Clotilde Gold, pray.

Old Villon We Churchmen live by our wits.

Clotilde Money, sir.

Old Villon I don't have any money or gold, just a good job at the University. And no divine interference that will give me any money. Once in a while, I'll write a treatise on

something. In Latin. I'll feed him and give him a place to sleep, and teach him Latin and French grammar, and how to think.

Clotilde In exchange for what, sir?

Old Villon I need someone to guard my presence and meager possessions, build fires, cook and clean, and lead my mule if I go on a trip.

Villon I can't cook.

Isabeau He loathes cooking.

Old Villon He'll learn.

Clotilde Three gold pieces should do it.

Old Villon Make it one. (*Pause*) And I'll give him a small salary.

Villon (*Alerted*) How much?

Old Villon I don't know. A percentage.

Villon What percentage?

Old Villon The university will decide.

Clotilde You have enough of an income?

Old Villon Yes and no.

Clotilde Very clever.

Old Villon Some do and some don't.

Clotilde Very clever.

Old Villon Do we have a deal?

Villon It's a deal.

Isabeau I don't believe him.

Villon Shut up. I'm going.

Isabeau We'll call the police, sir, the gendarmes!

Old Villon They have gendarmes around here?

Villon No problem, sir. They never come this way. (*Sweetly*) Ah, dear Mother?

Clotilde Yes?

Villon You are my sweet mother, who swaddled me and suckled me and protected me and looked after my every need?

Clotilde No. Actually, I starved you and beat the hell out of you and, soon as you were old enough, I sent you out to steal. And then you slept on that bed of rocks over there that stunk of cat piss and dog shit.

Villon How sweet. Guess what I have for you now, dearest Mom?

Clotilde I could never guess, dear boy. (*Old Villon looks on as François and the others—miming—administer a vicious, thorough beating to his “mother,” Clotilde. It should be complete and elaborate. They finally finish. A long pause with heavy breathing, physical collapses, phony blood, etc.*)

Villon There! Now you’ve seen it, Clotilde—the beating of my mother.

Clotilde So that’s how you treat me, your own mother, you little bastard!

Villon That’s all you deserve, *maman*.

Clotilde Very good, Son. I’ll get you back for that.

Villon Fuck you and all the rest of the company.

Isabeau Not me, you little shit. I’ll cut your balls off. **And she’s not our real mother, remember, she’s an actress/whore from the Champs-Élysées, impersonating our mother.**

Villon **And Isabeau is a prostitute from the North, not my real sister, who can also act her ass off.**

Clotilde **And who is the Old Man? Is it the Old Man himself, or some itinerant pretending to be him for a coin or two? Is he a ghost? An actor? A vampire? A zombie?** François, I don’t think they can follow that.

Villon All right, Clotilde, just stop talking to the audience. We have to make a living. Proceed. That was your last beating, Mother, for this performance anyway. Say thanks to this old man.

Clotilde No, thanks, Old Man.

Old Villon May I speak with him privately?

Clotilde Ask him yourself.

Old Villon Boy? (*Taking VILLON aside*) Do you believe in God?

Villon I don't know. I don't think so.

Old Villon Do you wish to, Son?

Villon I don't know. I'm only a kid.

Old Villon You will learn. As payment in return, you will be my secretary, one of my servants, and my apprentice. You'll enjoy a better moral life.

Villon I doubt I will ever be of your kind, and never a good servant. Why? Because all I know is the sewer and the streets and fighting for my life. My anger is pure. And not only that, you will never understand a man of my intelligence. My intelligence is beyond your capacity. I am far more intelligent than you, almost as though I were another kind of being. All you can do is pretend to be superior. And when I follow, I carry a garrote and a dagger and a club and will kill without mercy if I have to. Agreed?

Old Villon If that is my lot, Boy. But I think, under my influence, that you will change for the better.

Villon Actually, you are a phony academic Christian prick, but I'll go along with it, because I want to get out of the hell I'm in now, and I have no other options at the moment. But don't think you will ever be able to predict my behavior, not ever, because I can cut your throat in a

minute, or in two. Or his or hers. And I might. Or,
I might not. *D'accord?*

Old Villon (*After a pause*) *Ouis.* Come and see me at the university,
and we will provide.

Villon I will, sir. Expect me at the next full moon.

Old Villon *Au revoir.*

Isabeau **The scene, through the magic of lighting, and a few
props, is now transformed into a dingy Paris bar.**

Clotilde Say, "Time passes."

Isabeau Time passes. **I should add that François got his
bachelors degree at the church of St. Benoit Le
Bentourne and his Masters at the University of
Paris, living as a roustabout student of his day. He
had dropped his parents' names and took the
name of his benefactor, François Villon. I had met
François in the Rue St. Jacques. On his way
here—you can see him approaching now—is a
Breton, Guy Tabarie, formerly a soldier, now a
bona fide Master of Arts, and a crook, and this
other creature entering stage left is the vagabond
priest, Phillipe Chermoye. Along with Chermoye is
another itinerant priest whose name is Borges.
Clotilde is now waiting on tables for all of us.**

Clotilde Put your daggers away before someone gets hurt.

Philippe Listen to her. She's as drunk as we are. (*GUY TABARIE
steps onstage.*)

Villon And who is this? Ah, Monsieur Tabarie.

Clotilde **This is Guy Tabarie, formerly a soldier, as Isabeau
has just told you.**

Villon How are you, Guy?

Guy Very well, thank you.

Villon I know you can fight.

Guy I can.

Villon But can you act? We are now actors.

Guy I think so.

Villon Well, I can act very well. And I'm also a poet, as you know.

Guy I do know.

Villon I've even invented my own forms, believe it or not. Excellent ones, I might add. I've learned from my masters.

Guy Yes, the great Poet from the gutters of Paris.

Clotilde And the University of Paris.

Guy I doubt I can act as well as you write.

Clotilde No doubt about it.

Guy Members of the nobility are my specialty.

Clotilde Just be yourself. Nothing to it.

Guy Did your master teach you to fight, too?

Villon No, he is a true Scholastic. We have Borges, the priest, for that. He does our fighting. Eh, Borges?

Borges Yes. Me and you, François.

Guy And me.

Borges Of course.

Villon I learned in the street, before I was twelve. We knock some heads around, and then the priest prays. But we do our own careful planning and depend on secrecy and trust.

Borges Are you up for that, Tabarie?

Guy I believe I am. What are you planning?

Villon Later, Borges.

Borges Of course.

Guy So. Let's hear a poem. (*OF ISABEAU*) And who is this beauty?

Clotilde Her name is Isabeau.

Villon She's from the North.

Clotilde Hands off.

Guy I see. Can she write, too?

Villon She can. She is my best student.

Guy Really? Say a poem.

Isabeau No.

Guy Why not?

Isabeau I am not a performing bear, sir.

Philippe No, a bitch is more like it.

Villon Don't insult the girl in front of my face, Philippe, if you don't mind.

Isabeau Thank you, François.

Philippe (*Sarcastic*) My hero. Student, indeed.

Villon Be careful how you speak, sir.

Philippe I speak excellent French, sir, say my prayers in Latin, and was a novice before she was born.

Isabeau You are a common bandit, Philippe, in monk's clothing.

Villon Never mind, Isabeau.

Guy Isabeau. A lovely name for a lovely wench.

Isabeau Keep your compliments to yourself, sir, if you please.

Villon Why don't you say a poem, Guy? You're a Master of Arts, after all. Say something from Virgil.

Guy That wasn't one of the Arts, as you know François. I learned sermonizing and law.

Villon Give us a sermon, then.

Guy Why not the priest? Philippe?

Philippe *Merde.*

Clotilde He's drunk.

Philippe I'll give you a poem.

Guy Go on, then.

Philippe I'll fart. (*Farts*) There's your poem.

Clotilde Bravo, maestro. **We're back in the Commedia.**

Philippe I won't give good poetry out to street urchins and whores.

Villon I asked you politely. Watch what you say, you phony child-fucker.

Philippe One doesn't merely watch, you snotnose, one listens to one's betters.

Villon How would you like a small dagger up your windpipe, you blowhard?

Clotilde François.

Philippe You wouldn't dare.

Clotilde He would, Chermoye.

Philippe My sword is a large one, Villon, made by Vikings. It could kill you with one blow.

Villon I have a smaller one at my thigh, Chermoye. I never go unarmed. It kills well, too. Quick as a fly.

Philippe You may try, you little piece of shit. Make a move.

Villon I'd kill a priest a day, if I could. You live off the fat of the land and the English.

Guy The fat English! Ha! That's a good one!

Philippe People like you have no business pretending to be men of learning.

Villon People like who?

Philippe Street dogs and thieves.

Clotilde CHERMOYE!

(A silence)

Villon Say, “Time passes slowly.”

Isabeau Time passes slowly (*Staged as described*) **During the slow time, everyone sits silently, tensely, then Philippe suddenly attacks Villon’s throat with his large sword. Villon gets out the small dagger at his thigh. A general brawl breaks out. It shouldn’t take too long. The battle is unequal, when suddenly Villon finds a rock and hits Philippe over the head with it, and the priest falls to the floor. Villon thrusts his dagger. A silence as Villon pulls out the dagger, and then hits the priest again hard on the head with the rock. Another silence.**

Clotilde François!

Villon What, Clotilde?

Clotilde Look what you’ve done!

Guy We must go to the Duke.

Villon He attacked me first. You all saw it.

Isabeau Look—he’s still alive!

Philippe I forgive you, François. It was my fault and the wine. Let it be known to all that I forgive him. (*Dies*)

Guy We’ll let it be known, Philippe. (*PHILIPPE rises and leaves the stage.*)

Clotilde Say, “time passes.”

Isabeau Time passes. **Lights change and we are in the safe house again, around the fire. It doesn’t take long.**

Guy François.

Villon What, Tabarie?

Guy Conjugate the Latin, “to be afraid.”

Villon No.

Guy Why not?

Villon I don't feel like it.

Guy Moody, aren't you?

Villon You would be too, if you understood the shithole we're in now. Starving, surrounded by the English.

Guy I do understand it.

Villon Then why do you keep smiling?

Guy It's the wine we stole from what's-his-name. The priest. Chermoye. Are you afraid?

Villon No. I'm not afraid. I'm not afraid of the English. I'm not afraid of men and I'm not afraid of women. And I'm not afraid of dead priests. And I'm not afraid of the king.

Clotilde Bravo, François!

Villon People think all kinds of shit about other people and they're wrong ninety-nine percent of the time. There's no need to be afraid.

Guy I will say that you priests have a good thing going.

Borges How so?

Guy You can live like a criminal and be a savior at the same time.

Borges There's no more room in the churches. There they need novices and a few scribes and farmers. The rest of us need to defend ourselves and make a living.

Guy You can knock someone's brains out and say a Hail Mary and ride off into the sunset on the poor fool's horse.

Borges Alas and alack. It's either him or me. And we can give the last rites, after all.

Guy After all.

Borges Someone has to do it.

Villon There's too many gangs in these woods and each one of them has a resident priest.

Guy I agree. It can be boring, hiding and fighting all the time. That's why we took you on.

Borges Why? Because I can use a cudgel?

Guy Yes, and we like your mind for the prayers. You have a gift, apparently. But the cudgel comes in handy, too.

Villon I met a Spanish Jew. He was surprised I could speak his language.

Borges Hebrew?

Villon No, Ladino. It's part Hebrew, part Spanish.

Borges They won't last in Spain.

Villon Why not?

Borges Because of the church's Inquisition. But why do you bring it up?

Villon A matter of doctrine: he said God does not have children.

Borges He'll be among the first, then, to be expelled. Expect it sooner rather than later.

Guy Can he?

Villon Who?

Guy God. Have children?

Borges God?

Villon Why should he bother?

Borges To save us all from perdition.

Villon So he impregnates a teenager, and *voila*, we're all saved?

Borges I can see that you don't believe it.

Villon No. But I can write very fine verses for churches and priests.

Guy When you are not knocking they're heads off.
Villon It's then I write them, because of remorse. **I don't know if that's true: I feel a certain energy, and I write.** I feel bad, and then writing makes me feel better. **I don't know if that's true, either.** In any case, I'm writing one now.

Guy The king has set you free.
Villon Into exile. Villon, the murderer. I wrote this song. Shall we hear it?

Le Testament Ballade A S'amy

*False beauty that costs me so dear,
Rough indeed, a hypocrite sweetness,
Amor, like iron on the teeth and harder,
Named only to achieve my sure distress,
Charm that's murderous, poor heart's death,
O covert pride that sends men to ruin,
Implacable eyes, won't true redress
Comfort a poor man, without crushing?*

*Much better elsewhere to search for
Aid: it would have been more to my honor
Retreat I must, and fly with dishonor,
Though none else then would have cast a lure.
Help me, help me, you greater and lesser!
End then? With not even one blow landing?
Or will Pity, in line with all I ask here,
Comfort a poor man, without crushing?*

*That time will come that will surely wither
Your bright flower, it will wilt and yellow,
Then if I can grin, I'll call on laughter,
But, yet, that would be foolish though
You'll be pale and ugly: and I'll be old,
Drink deep then, while the stream's still flowing:
And don't bring trouble on all men so,
Comfort a poor man, without crushing.*

*Amorous Prince, the greatest lover,
I want no evil that's of your doing,
But, by God, all noble hearts must offer
To comfort a poor man, without crushing.*

*(During the recital, ISABEAU repeats the final stanza
couplets in French. VILLON ends with a flourish.
"Bravos" expressed)*

- Borges** It sounds perfectly natural, like confession. Good for the soul.
- Villon** Thank you, Borges. Just a love poem.
- Borges** The main thing is not to take it all literally. After all, we are born incarnate, all of us.
- Villon** Like horses and sheep.
- Borges** Very like. Can you make a fire and keep watch?
- Villon** Yes, Borges.
- Borges** I'll sleep for a few hours, and then take my turn. But first I'll say my prayers. "Dear God, we had to take this poet in because if we didn't he'd end up in a poor house, or a mad house, or in prison, as he's very bright. Ordinary

life has no future for him. This way, he has a future. What, we don't know. Hard to predict. We apologize for his earlier behavior—as well as *our* own early behavior—and hope to be forgiven.” Amen.

Villon Amen.

Borges **His foster father adopted him, presto! And now he is Villon. I am called Old Borges. I was a priest when priests were still priests and sat around with pen and paper writing up the bible.**

Guy You can't write, Borges.

Borges Never mind.

Guy Where are you going?

Borges I have to take a leak. Goodbye and good luck.
(“*DOOR*” *slams*)

Guy I'll go, also.

Villon Where to?

Guy To the Duke. To plead your cause. (*Exits*)

Villon *Merci. Au revoir.*

Clotilde The nerve of that fellow. “To the Duke.” Tabarie's not got long to live, I'll warrant. (*Exits with a bread basket*)

Villon I agree with you there, Clotilde. Bueno. Let's check outside. Isabeau?

Isabeau (*Appearing*) Yes? What's the matter?

Villon Where is Clotilde? She was here a moment ago!

Isabeau To the village, for bread.

Villon *Bon.* You go around the house and then come back to the door on some kind of pretext. Take a lantern.

Isabeau What about Borges?

Villon He may not come back. He may run away. He may trip and fall. He could hang himself, for all I know.

Isabeau What else?

Villon He could go mad.

Isabeau So why should I go out there?

Villon Use a pretext.

Isabeau Yes? What pretext?

Villon This is absurd. That old man Borges is in his dotage. You'd better go with him. Keep an eye on him. And watch for Clotilde. (*BORGES steps back on*) Oh, Borges, you're back.

Borges Have you told them that I have no faith, Villon?

Isabeau Say again?

Borges You've told them that I have no faith?

Villon No, Borges, though you haven't any that I can see.

Isabeau Yes. Good. (*Stomps her foot and spins*) There, François, I went around the house, and now I'm back. Borges, you have no faith.

Villon But you haven't moved, Isabeau.

Isabeau I say, I have moved.

Villon I say you have not.

Borges You followed me?

Isabeau I was supposed to go with you, but you didn't go anywhere.

Villon True, but never mind, we'll start over.

Isabeau No.

Villon Why?

Isabeau I'm afraid of wolves.

Villon Take Borges.

Borges No.

Villon All right, I'll go myself.

Borges Good. I've come to tell you that the toilet is blocked, and therefore there is no water.

Isabeau Can you say that again?

Borges The toilet is blocked and there is no water.

Isabeau Thank you.

Borges You're welcome.

Isabeau **Excuse me, but they didn't have toilets in those days. They had outhouses. Or they shat in the woods. Can you imagine, the stench?**

Villon Never mind.

Isabeau Excuse me, François.

Villon What now?

Isabeau I have to go to the bathroom to pee. So what shall I do?

Villon Go outside and pee.

Isabeau What did you say? (*CLOTILDE enters with a basket of bread.*)

Villon I meant to say, go outside and take a leak.

Clotilde I just came from outside.

Villon Not you.

Isabeau It's unseemly for a girl to go outside by herself and take a leak.

Villon People do it all the time. Clotilde?

Clotilde Not me, François.

Isabeau Not me.

Villon What then?

Isabeau Perhaps a pot? Do you have a pot?

Villon Perhaps a chamber pot?

Isabeau Yes, a chamber pot. I'll need to look around. I know I had one, or I used to have one.

Villon Look around, please.

Isabeau Thank you, very much. I'm looking.

Clotilde *(Staged)* **A pantomime of looking for a chamber pot. It can't last too long. Voila!**

Villon All right, I've found one.

Isabeau Very good.

Villon Thank you.

Isabeau Turn around, please.

Villon *(Hesitating)* All right.

Isabeau Turn around.

Villon Go outside, why don't you?

Isabeau No, thanks.

Villon Why not?

Isabeau Then, the whole thing is pointless, because the forest is full of wolves. Will you make that clear, Clotilde?

Clotilde The whole thing is pointless, because the forest is full of wolves.

Isabeau Thank you.

Villon Okay, then go ahead and piss, why don't you?

Isabeau Turn around, asshole. You too, François.

Villon Okay. *(He turns around but peeks)*

Isabeau Thank you. You too, Borges.

Borges *(Reluctantly)* All right.

Isabeau Thank you, very much.

Villon So, go ahead already. *(She pisses, augmented by the SOUND of pissing.)*

Isabeau *(Finishing)* Thank you, very much.

Villon Gladly. Very enjoyable. *(To CLOTILDE)* You can empty the pot outside, if you feel like it.

Clotilde What do you mean, "If I feel like it?"

Villon Never mind. Do what you want.

Clotilde Open the door.

Villon Open the door, Isabeau. (*ISABEAU opens the “door”—a pause, darkness outside—and throws out the piss. Pause. A SCREAM. Pause*)

Villon I hope nobody was standing there.

Borges I’ll retrieve my cudgel.

Villon Do. Retrieve your cudgel.

Isabeau So will I.

Clotilde So will I.

Borges Women shouldn’t carry cudgels.

Clotilde We are bandits, Borges, not maids.

Villon Let’s hope nobody was out there.

Clotilde But apparently, there was.

Villon Not a wolf or a two-legged, I hope. Let’s wait. (*A silence as they wait*)

Clotilde **A scary silence as we wait.**

Isabeau Seems all right, then, *n’est-ce pas?*

Villon Let’s hope for the best.

Clotilde Let’s hope for the best.

Villon Whatever the fuck that means.

Isabeau It means hoping for the best, as opposed to the worst.

Villon Of course, darling.

Clotilde “Darling?”

Villon May I have the pot?

Isabeau No, I think I’ll hang on to it.

Villon Very good. Hang on to it. Perhaps we should keep the pause?

Clotilde **We’ll keep the pause.** (*Pause*)

Villon Good. Do you suppose we should rinse the pot now?

Clotilde There is no water.

Villon Sorry. I forgot.

Isabeau Do you have a towel?

Villon Here.

Isabeau It's dirty.

Villon Put it in the laundry.

Clotilde **Now we observe how Clotilde wipes the pot and throws the towel away into the laundry. It doesn't take too long.**

Villon And now?

Isabeau Perhaps we should start over now?

Villon No doubt about it.

Isabeau Okay, start over.

Clotilde Are you in one of your moods?

Isabeau **What does she mean by that?**

Clotilde We can't start over!

Villon The toilet is blocked and there is no water.

Isabeau Go fuck yourself, why don't you?

Villon Thank you. What did I do to deserve that remark?

Isabeau I didn't mean to say that.

Villon Then why did you say it?

Isabeau I don't know.

Villon And I called her darling, *n'est-ce pas?* (*Taking in the scene*) **Very interesting. A beautiful private part, the taking of a piss, observation by a bunch of voyeurs. All in the same scene. Extraordinary.**

Isabeau Excuse me?

Villon I said, a beautiful moss-patch, and a group of voyeurs, who paid, the taking of an actual piss, and the accompanying sound of water flowing, to boot.

Isabeau Oh. Of course.

Clotilde A beautiful what?

Villon Moss patch. I never said that before. Onstage. Let's keep that.

Isabeau It's not that we hardly know each other.

Villon I know. I had quite noticed you, which you noticed, and then you got clever and more beautiful, and now you took an excellent leak.

Isabeau I'm Hungarian.

Villon **I see. That explains everything.**

Isabeau Say again?

Villon You're Hungarian, and an anti-Semite. (*Pause*) I can tell by your accent. (*Pause*) Did I notice you first, or you me?

Isabeau Go fuck yourself.

Villon There. You said it again. And then to come here and play the harlot, play the fool, and take a piss, and so on, in front of a paying audience.

Isabeau You poetic idiot. You changed my life.

Villon Thank you, very much.

Isabeau I meant it. But I am underpaid. And I'd not have done it—

Villon If you weren't so vain.

Isabeau Correct. **All European history dissolves into this moment.** (*Pause*) You're an alchemist. Let the imagery dissolve.

Villon I'm not an alchemist. I'm a poet.

Isabeau Let it dissolve.

Clotilde (*Staged*) **A sequence, or montage, of dissolving historical images, featuring classical imagery of beautiful women, along with the sound of water flowing—a waterfall, or rain, or a stream, etc. We**

observe and listen to the sequence. It shouldn't take too long, but long enough.

- Isabeau** As you can see and hear. It's the good old human condition.
- Villon** Murder and rape, mainly rape, and excrement, and bones, I think, and the base instinct for power and glory, is all we know of the past, present, and future.
- Clotilde** I can't believe he just said that. The Poet.
- Villon** Never mind. I heard it somewhere. Don't quote me.
- Isabeau** Why not?
- Villon** I'm not exactly sure why. Sit down.
- Isabeau** Why?
- Villon** I don't know why.
- Isabeau** It's so you can feel taller and bigger than me, that's why.
- Villon** No, Isabeau. My dagger makes us equal.
- Isabeau** Because it'll never happen, dagger or no.
- Villon** Mainly, I'm wondering why the door is still open.
- Borges** Indeed.
- Isabeau** So what's the big deal? I'll shut the door. (*BORGES steps into the "doorway."*)
- Borges** It's the protocol of the thing. I'm trying to seduce you, I think.
- Isabeau** You're too old, Borges, and weird. Step away from the door.
- Villon** Good. Take a hike, Borges.
- Isabeau** Bye, bye.
- Borges** Wait. Hear me out. I missed my chance, no doubt about it—I missed it without knowing how I missed it. How could that happen? An intelligent, sensitive, thieverish man like me, with a masculine mind and wise, and all

that, and I missed that I was missing my chance while I missed it.

Clotilde That was incomprehensible.

Villon What he meant is, he missed it, then, in the so-called Past. He missed it now, and he missed it then. (*Pause*)
Something is wrong with all of us. Why?

Isabeau Why?

Borges Don't ask. There's no answer.

Villon Nature didn't finish with us, apparently.

Clotilde I know why.

Isabeau Why?

Clotilde We don't pay attention to what's happening. We're too busy paying attention to other things.

Villon Shut the door.

Clotilde I'll shut the door. (*Shuts the "door" with a BANG*)

Villon We don't know true happiness. And we can't understand why.

Isabeau Speak for yourself.

Borges I mean, how we always miss our chances.

Isabeau Are you making up shit now? Are you bullshitting me now? Because, to tell you the truth, Clotilde, we women miss nothing.

Villon Well, I was noticing the fine shape of your butt just now. I mean, again.

Isabeau Forget it.

Villon You never know.

Isabeau Never know what?

Villon What stirs the heart, gives life and meaning, existentially.

Isabeau You mean pissing? You mean sex?

Villon Sex of course, but something more, something totally inexplicable, like a new theory of the universe, where there are dimensions of vibration, which cause things to be as they are, like now.

Isabeau You're a whoremaster and a hard-on, whose days are passing. It's sad, but true.

Villon Alas.

Isabeau I like you, Villon, don't get me wrong, but we women don't miss things. We let them go by. We're as sensitive as ripe apples, or pears.

Villon I like that imagery.

Borges So do I.

Isabeau And nothing goes by, not a breath, not a whisper, that we miss. Not a tinge.

Villon What a shame. You're all whores, after all, *n'est-ce pas?*

Isabeau Life goes on that way. Where would you be without us?

Clotilde Unborn.

Villon Rushing into the dark, the infinite dark, the dark that has no end.

Isabeau You can put it like that.

Villon That's how it ends, rushing into the dark, perhaps mindlessly, endlessly.

Isabeau You should have been a priest, François.

Villon I have a master's degree in Religion.

Isabeau Then he is a priest, technically, I suppose.

Villon I'm no priest. I'm missing a part.

Isabeau Which one?

Villon I lack a certain fundamental. Humility. I'm like the French whoremongers of old. And I have a bad temper.

Clotilde **Especially when he drinks, which is often.**

Villon That's me. François Villon. I was adopted. I could have been a somebody, a Doctor of Philosophy. I got my masters degree, but I ended up a poet who ran with thieves.

Isabeau So you identify with him?

Villon I AM him.

Isabeau How is that possible?

Villon You never know. I could have transmigrated or reincarnated.

Isabeau I see.

Clotilde That's helpful.

Villon Mainly, it's acting. You're not looking, Isabeau. You're not even looking in my direction.

Isabeau I hear you, François. One thing?

Villon Yes?

Isabeau What or who is a "somebody?"

Villon You know, regular. Someone who knows things. Normal. He shows up to dig his ditch, he goes home to his kids, he obeys his superiors, goes to church, dies in his dreams, is mourned by his relatives, and put back into the soil, where he serves the underground creatures of the earth, while the priest says some Latin mumbo-jumbo at his grave. Mainly, he is born and dies without a question.

Clotilde What's the question?

Villon What's going on with all this living and dying?

Isabeau Say, "Go back a minute."

Clotilde **Go back a minute.**

Isabeau Serves as what?

Villon As food.

Isabeau And you?

Villon Good one. Good question.

Isabeau And? Say, “Amen” again.

Clotilde **Amen.**

Borges To bed, to sleep, something Shakespearean. . .

Isabeau He wasn’t born yet. Say, “The night passes and we hear the singing of birds.”

Clotilde **The night passes and we hear the singing of birds.**

Isabeau It’s a beautiful morning.

Clotilde It’s all right.

Isabeau Just say, “it’s a beautiful morning.”

Clotilde **It’s a beautiful morning. The sun rises and birds sing.**

Villon Now we’ll have to meet up with my crew.

Isabeau Your crew?

Villon My associates.

Isabeau Who are they? I thought *we* were your crew.

Villon You are my friends.

Clotilde (*To ISABEAU*) That was nice of him.

Isabeau Who are they?

Villon Thieves, murderers, whores, priests and teenagers, and the like. They are our audience.

Isabeau Where are they?

Villon They’ll be appearing anon, out of the woods. Soon as they get a look at you.

Isabeau Oh.

Villon Say, “time and space change magically.”

Clotilde **Time and space change magically.**

Villon Time and space change magically and we’re in the woods.

Clotilde Time and space change magically and we're in the woods. A moment of paranoia. Eyes and ears in the greenery of France. (*Pause*)

Isabeau Hello, out there. This is Isabeau, and you will never get to make it with me, though I may give you the impression that you have a chance (a woman's craft, that), and if you buy me a drink, at the right time—timing is everything—I might scratch your balls. That is to say, I might, but, actually, I won't. Why? I'm a dyed-in-the-wool female on the make, totally unlike the one you think of constantly, in your dreams.

Villon Well said, that.

Isabeau Thank you, very much. (*TABARIE steps back on*)

Clotilde And you remember Monsieur Guy Tabarie.

Villon Certainly, I do. Off to see the Duke.

Guy All is well, François.

Villon Still, are his men out there?

Guy In the woods, sir. I have my rapier.

Villon Ah, a dandy—I am a dagger man myself.

Guy Typical for a thief.

Villon And can you fight with that thing, too?

Guy Try me.

Villon I believe I will, but not for the moment. How about a cudgel?

Guy A cudgel, a sword, a dagger, whatever you like.

Villon How about your mind? Can you fight with your mind, sir? As with a *bon mot*, or a rhyme?

Guy Do you mean to insult me, sir?

Villon I am not of the nobility, Guy, I am of the sewer, but I promise you, one day I will smash your face in shit.

Isabeau Not now, François.

Villon Never mind, we have things to do now.

Guy What are you doing?

Villon We are preparing to perform. We are itinerant actors for the moment.

Guy For whom?

Villon For them! (*Sweeping gesture*)

Guy I don't see anyone out there.

Villon Not yet.

Isabeau It takes time.

Borges Give it a minute.

Clotilde **Eyes and ears in the forest of France.**

Villon After all, it's only morning. Coffee, anyone? **Did they have coffee in those days? Well, no matter.**

All Yes, please!

Villon Say the coffee's made and we can all have a cup! François?

Villon **The coffee's made and we can all have a cup!**
(*They mime the drinking of coffee, along with sighs of satisfaction, burps, etc.*)

Villon Well, very good, and I think our audience has fully arrived. (*Silence. Then a RUSTLING SOUND from the woods*)

Guy Where are they?

Villon (*Pointing*) There! Clotilde? (*They all look out at the audience.*)

Villon Glad to see you again. And who are they, pray?

Isabeau Don't say, "pray," it's an illusion, taught to you by priests, and you don't believe it anymore than I do—that is your woodsy audience, François. And here is that French whore you're so crazy about, Clotilde. And over there is the beautiful and innocent and vanity-oppressed little teen-aged blonde—we used to call them birds—I mean, broads, totally in love with themselves.

Villon Like you, Isabeau.

Isabeau Actually, I meant her.

Clotilde We haven't been properly introduced.

Isabeau So what?

Clotilde How old is she, nine? Too young for you, François.

Villon I'm thirty-one now, and a Master of Arts.

Isabeau He's a child.

Villon I'm not.

Isabeau Mainly, in fact, he's sort of a Genius. Why, I don't know. He was born that way. **Their names, you remember, are Clotilde and Borges.**

Clotilde **Actually, Borges is a prematurely old man who can't get it up anymore. A false pretense, so to speak.**

Borges Let's get on with it, shall we?

Villon She understands, I'm sure. (*Winks at the "blonde" in the audience*)

Clotilde Okay, so we already have a bunch of ambiguities here, and I'm not positive that the audience has the intelligence to handle it. They are forest creatures, after all.

Isabeau Well, you could give them a chance.

Villon Give them a chance, why don't you?

Isabeau I'm sorry, I have already made a series of judgments, probably false, and I don't have the time to apologize,

we're in a theatrical presentation—for your benefit, François, after all.

Villon Mine?

Clotilde Very well, I'll give them a chance. (*OLD VILLON steps onstage.*)

Old Villon Hold on a minute—just one minute—give me a chance as well, why don't you?

Isabeau Clotilde?

Clotilde No.

Old Villon Why? Is it because I'm a horny, ugly, addled old man? Not true. I am a Gentleman from Paris, the University of Paris, with various aliases—but, I assure you, I am an intelligent person, a talented intellectual, an ordained priest, as they say—but it's true, it's true, I'm an actor, as well, and I'm playing a dead person at the moment, long dead, relatively speaking. In any event, to be honest, I don't have the old force, after all. Who could blame you or her, if you reject me on no basis but that? That's enough—lack of youth, lack of force. I suppose we'll come back to this—this is very important, it's just not what I'm trying to say right now, at least, not what I meant to say—not what I thought I was saying—I was trying to say something more important, to earn your love and respect. Mainly, I'm not him, whoever I was, I'm—Old Villon, now. Guillaume Villon, the Elder.

Isabeau We see you, old man, but the play in the woods is about to start.

Guy How naive.

Clotilde He is not the fool he appears to be, sir.

Guy Yes, he is.

Borges I think so, too.

Isabeau Shut up, Borges. You're ugly and fat and as senile as he is and you'll die in a minute or two.

Borges Who, me?

Isabeau Yes, you. Be quiet.

Clotilde Unless you drink some of our blood first. (*Cackles*)

Isabeau What did she say?

Villon Oh, that's all lies and you know it. Made up centuries from now. We are not vampires.

Old Villon Just a minute or two. Give me a minute or two. **How could this be happening to me?** I'm just trying to point out the general idiotic hypocrisy of human life. I think that's what I was doing.

Clotilde When was this?

Old Villon A moment ago.

Isabeau His time's up, François.

Villon He was trying to tell the truth. Isn't that right? Isn't that enough? Isn't that honorable?

Clotilde **Petulance appears.**

Isabeau I don't care if it's right or wrong, or enough, or honorable, so long as it's true. **I don't know why I said that.**

Clotilde Me, neither.

Old Villon Isn't that true? What I say? Isn't it true? All right, you don't know the first or second thing about it. You don't know anything about it, actually.

Isabeau About what?

Old Villon **The story of my life. My life and your life.** (*Pause*) So that's what it's all come to, this whole introduction, as if something important is happening, something important and moral and entertaining, and wise.

Isabeau Wise?

Old Villon I think I'll kill myself. Find me a rope.

Isabeau I don't find ropes for people who want to kill themselves.

Old Villon Who do you find them for?

Isabeau Those who want to kill others.

Old Villon My goodness! You're a cruel thing, aren't you?

Isabeau Yes. And you're a dead man walking.

Old Villon Holy shit, and I thought you liked me.

Isabeau Yes, but that's besides the point, because death is sitting on your left shoulder, and taking a shit. Right now, as we speak. (*An outcry*)

Villon Whoa!

Clotilde That was hard.

Villon That was hard.

Guy That was hard.

Old Villon You don't give a rat's ass, do you?

Isabeau I do, when your balls are up and the rest of you is down.

Old Villon Why?

Isabeau Why? You ask me, why?

Old Villon No. I didn't ask you.

Isabeau You did, old man, but, go ahead and ask me again.

Old Villon Why?

Isabeau You think I'm a barnyard cow? You think I'm a turkey or a pig?

Old Villon No more, no less. Yes.

Isabeau Well, you're honest. That's why I do like you. I do. But you are a slave to what they call Nature. The nature of killing and the nature of desire, which are the same.

Old Villon You just made that up.

Isabeau I don't think so. Why would you say that?
Old Villon I'm a classical actor, that's why. (*A sensual pause*)
Isabeau Don't give up, darling. Miracles do happen, *n'est-ce pas?*
Clotilde How awkwardly coquettish!
Old Villon I have all kinds of fantasies at the moment.
Isabeau You want to tell me a few? Or maybe just one?
Old Villon No. I mean, Yes. As an old man, I like neither men nor women. One is biology and the other is perversion.
Isabeau Go on, then.
Old Villon **Rarely has such an opportunity been presented in the great halls of literature! Even in the Far East!**
Isabeau Oh, go on. Shut up about literature.
Old Villon Fine.
Isabeau It hasn't done you or anyone else much good.
Old Villon I know—let's pretend another day goes by, so I have a little time to think it over. Clotilde?
Clotilde Sir?
Old Villon Say, "A day goes by."
Clotilde No. Do I look like a parrot to you?
Villon Say it, Clotilde.
Clotilde **A day goes by.**
Old Villon Thank you. (*Pause*)
Guy So?
Clotilde Yes?
Villon A day has passed. Have you found your solution, sir?
Old Villon No, I have not. Clotilde?
Clotilde Sir?
Old Villon Say, "Another day has passed."
Clotilde **Another day is past.**
Old Villon Thank you.

Clotilde Don't mention it. (*Pause*)

Guy Well? (*Silence*) Come up with it, yet, Doctor? (*OLD VILLON mumbles.*) Did you say something? (*Silence*)

Old Villon I think I'll leave the stage now.

Guy Good choice.

Villon Watch your mouth, Tabarie. This accomplished scholar of the Law is my benefactor. Leave it to me. Go, take a rest, old man. (*OLD VILLON steps off.*) Yes, Tabarie, I've figured it out.

Guy Pray tell.

Villon Villon. Meaning myself. He's immortal.

Guy Yes?

Villon He lives forever, because of his poetry, not because he's a vampire.

Isabeau Was that an answer to a question that was asked?

Villon A puzzle, dear, a riddle. And yet he has to hang around the earth and play different parts, depending on the circumstances.

Isabeau *Mon dieu*, is that opaque, or what?

Villon Why?

Clotilde There are teenagers in the audience, and they don't know what opaque means.

Isabeau Obscure, then. They don't know what "obscure" is either.

Clotilde It means he has to hang around, like a ghost, in the wings, as it were, and wait for his cue, and play different roles.

Isabeau That explains it. He's an actor.

Guy Sounds like Perdition to me.

Villon (*Of TABARIE*) And why must we deal with this excuse for the life of a man?

Guy I beg your pardon?

Villon I mean you, sir.

Clotilde Contain yourself, François. He has connections.

Villon Where, in jail?

Clotilde Shut up. In the church. In the nobility.

Villon I see. My lips are sealed. **Unlike his.** Now, why did this misfortune—being lost on stage—happen to my poor fellow, Old Man Villon, my benefactor? Come on out, old man. (*OLD VILLON steps back onstage.*)

Old Villon Because it is you, my adopted son, who is immortal. It is you who are the master, the Poet, François Villon. Myself, I was merely a Doctor of Philosophy, and I have a missing part, too.

Isabeau He has a missing part, too?

Old Villon You have all these broken men, like I was saying—

Clotilde You never said anything about broken men—

Old Villon —but if you look inside me, you'll see there's a part missing and that's why the Doctor of Philosophy doesn't function very well, and that's why he won't be able to rise up to Heaven.

Villon What's the missing part?

Old Villon Well, some say it's the memory, but I say it's the soul. You look inside the person, and there's a part missing, and it turns out to be the soul. And you can't put a new one in.

Villon Why not? Why not through suffering? Why not redemption? Why not confession? And so on?

Old Villon It has to be there in its youth.

Guy **This metaphor is not working.**

Old Villon All right, I'll put it another way.

Isabeau No. Let me try. Please.

Clotilde After all, Isabeau—

Isabeau I know, there are teenagers in the audience. All right, here's my two cents worth. A soul is a device in a person that gives him Confidence, Self-esteem, Self-respect. It has to be put in there almost right away, so it can be nurtured by his parents, especially Mom. And if it's missing, well, there's nothing you can do. Take a pill, maybe, only they haven't invented the pill yet. The Self-respect pill. And they don't know how to operate and put a spleen in or something, not that they know what a spleen is. But I don't think it's the soul. They'd kill the guy. So, you take Old Villon, who has a missing part, like me, who is himself missing, and he goes missing, and there you have the whole story of a missing part. *(Pause)* **I'm sorry.** *(Steps back in confusion)*

Clotilde I couldn't make heads nor tails of that.

Villon And it stays missing?

Old Villon Right. I'm going back offstage now. Excuse me. *(Exits to his place)*

Guy Strange fellow. *(A knock on the "DOOR.")*

Villon Saved.

Isabeau Who can that be?

Guy The police?

Borges The fire inspector?

Isabeau Who could it be?

Villon Say again?

Isabeau I say, there's someone at the door. (*Another knock*)
Villon Come in?
Isabeau We got distracted, someone came to the door.
Villon When?
Isabeau While I was speaking, sir.
Villon I see. Who's there?
Landlord It's me, sir—the Landlord.
Isabeau It's one of the king's men. I'm sure of it.
Villon Come in, come in. (*Enter the LANDLORD, dressed like an aristocrat, perhaps with an eye-patch.*) Shut the door.
 Someone shut the door.
Clotilde (*Shutting the "DOOR"*) And who are you, sir?
Landlord I am the Sheriff of Anger. (*Pronounced AN-JAY*)
Villon I am François Villon.
Clotilde I am Clotilde.
Landlord Which one is Villon?
Villon I am the only François Villon.
Isabeau **Of the great François Villon, nobody knows what happened to him. He disappeared. He could have been gibbeted or preserved in ice, for all we know. Killed by wayfarers. Strung up by the sheriff's posse. Eaten by mammoths. Strangled by his girlfriend. Garroted by goons. Or become a vampire. Nobody knows. And presumably he had a missing part, too, like a bull without a dick, and a bad temper when he was drunk.**
Clotilde We must all think of the mystery of that.
Guy A vagabond. Vanquished by history.
Isabeau Could have been an earthquake or a volcano that killed him. A meteorite or a tsunami.

Guy So what could the sheriff want with us now?

Landlord The rent.

Guy That's what we have to deal with, Hatred of the Old, Hatred of the Weak, a lack of Self-respect, and the Unknown.

Clotilde And the rent.

Landlord *Ouis.*

Villon And they all have their judgments and criticisms, these landlords, and whores, on top of the ones that were already there, waiting their turn, like bubbles in a beaker.

Isabeau I liked that.

Clotilde I'm not sure I followed that.

Landlord I'm not sure, either.

Isabeau Definitely, you didn't follow it at all.

Clotilde What was there to follow, eh?

Villon The history of religion and morality. On earth.

Landlord *Tres bon.* Do you have it or not?

Villon What?

Landlord The rent.

Villon Probably not.

Landlord Then I'll have to evict you, out into the dark and dangerous night. (*SOUND of wolves howling*) Where there are wolves.

Clotilde There are no wolves outside.

Isabeau How do you know?

Clotilde It's a sound cue in a performance.

Guy Yes, and, after all, so were the sacrifices in Mexico. Where they tore your hearts out and threw them down

the stairs. For an audience. So the sun would move across the sky. Isn't that so, Sheriff?

Landlord Quite so, Monsieur Tabarie. (*VILLON gives them both a look.*)

Villon Great. Very intelligent. What does the rent have to do with it?

Clotilde **Seems idiotic, doesn't it? Killing people on the basis of a belief that has nothing to do with reality?**

Guy Yes. So, what are we to do with that, that stupid version of reality, that the gods are sailing across the sky fueled by human blood, that stupid demeaning reality, that stupid motherfucking fact that no one wants to believe?

Clotilde Are you outraged, Tabarie?

Guy I am outraged. Even now, people believe all kinds of lies. Like a golden calf will be born to the Jews, and the temple rebuilt and so on. And the war between Gog and Magog. And then the evangelicans will go up to heaven hanging on to Jesus's foot.

Villon Is that how it goes?

Guy Well, I'm not sure, exactly. We had a Crusade, not long ago. Killed off half the population.

Villon I am myself outraged.

Isabeau But, more than that, I'm worried and fearful and I don't know what's going to happen next.

Clotilde About the rent?

Isabeau About anything. Actually, to tell the truth, about myself.

Villon Say on, Isabeau.

Isabeau It's because I'm so disappointed.

Clotilde Shall I tell you why?

Isabeau I have a feeling you're going to do exactly that—tell me why.

Landlord She threw piss on me as I was waiting!

Villon Say again?

Landlord She threw piss on me as I was waiting. There I was, preparing to knock on the door, when suddenly it opens and piss flies out.

Borges Are you wet?

Landlord Yes. I am wet.

Villon Holy shit, and fuck it all, that's all I'm going to say.

Guy Let's pull ourselves together.

Villon Pull yourself together, asshole.

Guy Okay.

Clotilde Let's find some dry clothes. *(Staged)* **They pantomime finding dry clothes. It doesn't take too long.**

Isabeau Here, put these on.

Clotilde Excuse me. *He quickly puts on something dry.*

Landlord Thank you.

Guy Now, what were we talking about?

Clotilde The most important thing of all.

Landlord Which is the rent, eh?

Clotilde Of course, it's the rent. But not only the rent. Think about it, Tabarie. And don't take all day.

Guy I've thought about it.

Villon So what did you come up with?

Guy It's about humiliation, and the disintegration of the bodily functions, and bad luck.

Clotilde Okay. That's three things. Let's take those one at a time.

Guy Humiliation. *(Long silence)*

Clotilde Yes?

Guy That's what it's about.

Villon Could you give a fucking example, for the sake of St. George?

Guy Not having the rent. Okay? The rent is due because the month is up and you don't have the money. You don't have it because you've been arrested.

Villon I was betrayed.

Guy Because you've been betrayed and you have no confidence.

Villon Say, "A year ago, before a year has passed."

Clotilde That means the same thing.

Villon **A year ago.**

Isabeau **We planned a perfect crime.**

Villon **We got away with a lot of money.**

Guy **Five hundred crowns.**

Clotilde *Around Christmas.*

Villon *At the College de Navarre.*

Guy *(To ISABEAU)* You have no confidence because your mother didn't love you when you were an infant so you'll probably never have it, and your king or duke or whatever he is, is not someone who wants someone around with a missing part. Okay? And the other thing is bad luck, because you could have found a duke or a duchess who doesn't mind having someone around with a missing part, because he has a missing part himself, or he's too preoccupied with himself to notice, or you could have lost a bet on a horse or something.

Villon I see. Anything else?

Guy I can't think of anything else at the moment.

Clotilde He can't think of anything else at the moment.

Isabeau Thank You.

Villon It's all a lie. I had a brilliant plan, breaking into the chapel, and so on, everything as it was, nothing amiss, not a lock unturned, not a speck out of place, and we disappeared with five hundred golden crowns.

Clotilde And no one knew until now, three months later.

Isabeau What about bad luck?

Guy I told about the horse. I told about the chapel.

Villon Tell them what happened, Clotilde.

Clotilde **Once the robbery at Navarre was discovered, a year later, our master, François Villon, left Paris and lit out for the forests of France. But Guy Tabarie knew the hiding places, for he had been in on the job.**

Tabarie **"I know where the little shithead is," said he, to the sheriff or whatever they had as lawmen in those days, "and for a few pieces of gold, I'll take you to him."**

Clotilde Some broken down tavern in the woods.

Tabarie I recall when the sonofabitch got me up against the wall with his cudgel and nearly strangled me with it.

Villon I don't trust you, Tabarie. You're too much the fancy man. Me, I am Paris low-life, but if anything happens to us, I will get you. Do you believe me?

Tabarie I do, François.

Villon Then be warned.

Tabarie **But I betrayed him anyway. There was money for me, and no hope for Villon.**

Villon **We're in the present now.**

Isabeau **He mentioned the horse. He mentioned the brilliant robbery, the betrayal.**

Guy **There's more to it than that. Some people feel good about themselves no matter what happens. They lose on a horse, they still feel good. They do something like rob a church and get caught and go to jail and they still feel good. They feel good about themselves, no matter what happens. That's luck.**

Isabeau **Is that good?**

Clotilde **Is that normal?**

Villon Actually, it's stupid. What we have here is betrayal, pure and simple.

Landlord Let's have the rent and I'll clear it all up for you. *(Pause)*

Villon I'm not sure where the money is.

Borges We have the rent, but we're not sure where the money is. Give us a moment of looking for the money.

Clotilde *(Staged)* **They pantomime looking for the money. It doesn't take too long. They find the money.**

Guy Aha! We've found it!

Landlord Bravo! Hand it over.

Clotilde Here it is. *(A pause)*

Landlord There's nothing in there but a piece of paper.

Villon It's in the bank.

Clotilde The money is in the bank.

Landlord What's this?

Clotilde This is a check.

Isabeau That's a check.

Landlord I can't take checks.

Villon Why not?

Clotilde Why not, pray?

Guy Don't say, "pray." The check is a worthless piece of shit. Why? Because we don't believe in banks anymore. Banks

have no meaning and are worthless. In fact, banks have not been invented yet.

Clotilde I'm sure they had banks. There must have been banks.

Guy There were no banks, and there were no checks. There was barter, and IOUs. The Jews had money, but they kept it in the family. Let's say you have a ship full of wine, which you wanted to exchange in the Levant for a ship full of spices?

Isabeau And?

Guy I put up for the wine and I take an IOU from my cousin in the Levant. The ship makes it, everybody gets paid, and then they might loan money to the king so he could outfit his cavalry. And that's how we got these big financial houses, but there were no banks, per say.

Borges I don't know if I believe this guy.

Villon I don't either.

Borges Banks have no meaning and are worthless?

Landlord That's what I said. Let's have the cash.

Villon We've decided to tell the truth.

Landlord At last.

Villon We have to go somewhere and dig up the money. Say "A day is passed and we'll dig up the money."

Clotilde **A day is passed and we'll dig up the money.**

Villon No. Just say "A day is passed." We'll go to our secret spot and dig up the money.

Clotilde **A day is passed. They've dug up the money. You missed it.**

Villon Okay, here's the money.

Landlord Thanks very much. (*To ISABEAU*) You can stay another week.

Clotilde You were going to say?

Isabeau What was I going to say?

Clotilde We don't know. About luck?

Isabeau Right. I never had that. No matter what happens, I feel bad about myself. I win the lottery and I feel bad. He winks at me and I feel bad. I find a hundred pieces of gold on the street and I still feel bad. That's the missing part I was telling you about, and I think me and Villon, or me, Villon, was or is—missing the part.

Villon I make up of for it, Isabeau, with a vicious temper and a taste for brawling. And a little talent.

Clotilde And drink.

Villon And now I'll tell you something else. Ask me "What?"

Guy What?

Villon Entrances and exits. Now I'm going to prepare the plan so that we can refurbish our finances. So, Mister Guy and the Landlord—take a hike.

Guy Why me?

Villon I'll spare you for now, you treacherous fop. And you Landlord, return us our money or I'll kill you where you stand. (*Pulls his dagger*)

Guy Do as he says.

Borges Why not kill them both?

Villon Not a bad idea, but I made a deal with the king. We're on the king's hunting lands actually, not this asshole's. It is a genuine IOU. The money, Landlord. Clotilde?

Clotilde Sir?

Villon Say, "A moment passes."

Clotilde **A moment passes.**

Villon "The phony Landlord returns money."

Clotilde **The phony LANDLORD returns the money.**

Villon “*And he and Tabarie head for the door.*”

Clotilde **And he and Tabarie head for the door.**

Isabeau You’re not afraid of the wolves?

Villon There are no wolves. Only the king’s men. Go! (*TABARIE and the LANDLORD scamper off.*) I’ll see you again before long!

Clotilde Goodbye!

Isabeau What does that mean, Goodbye?

Borges It means, Go with God, originally, I think.

Isabeau Look at all those happy teenagers. All they want to do is have a fruit cup, down at the stand, and wait in line, and pay up, and have their icy fruit cup, and they are happy.

Villon The plan is this. In the Chapel of Anger, there are three hundred gold crowns. . . .

Clotilde I’m so glad I dropped in. Let’s make sure no one’s around.

Isabeau I’ll go. (*Isabeau heads for the “door” and trips, slapstick style.*)

Isabeau Hello.

Clotilde How are you?

Isabeau Not so good.

Villon What happened?

Isabeau I slipped, obviously, and nearly broke my ass.

Villon Sorry.

Isabeau Fuck that, let’s get on with it.

Borges Holy shit.

Isabeau Why do you keep saying that, priest?

Borges I don’t know.

Villon My fellow robbers—

Isabeau I know, the teenagers enjoyed that part.

Clotilde (*To ISABEAU*) I thought it was pretty funny, actually.

Isabeau Not funny, Clotilde.

Villon Borges, go outside and listen. (*The priest goes downstage and all take an attitude of listening. A moment passes. The priest returns.*)

Borges Only the audience, actually. Yes, there are teenagers.

Isabeau Let's do the play then, in the meantime, before we do our planning.

Borges What's the play?

Villon All right, this priest, Borges, wants to impregnate Isabeau, she doesn't agree, and, in the meanwhile, the Universe fails.

Isabeau That's so optimistic, I don't know if I can stand it. How can the Universe fail?

Clotilde It flies off into nothingness, and meanwhile, we suffer like worms.

Villon A comedy.

Isabeau A tragedy.

Borges Let's do the adoption of Villon, by the Doctor, Old Villon. And then do the murder of the priest, Chermoye, by our own Villon.

Clotilde We did the adoption already.

Borges Oh, right.

Clotilde We did the murder of the priest already, and François was forgiven and released.

Isabeau Then we need to do our planning.

Villon No. Let's wait a while and do the scene first. Say it's one week later or something, Clotilde.

Clotilde **It's one week later or something.**

Villon I want to have a drink. Out there, or on my horse. Don't come with me. Excuse me. I think I'll drink right here. Then I'll tell you about the plan.

Clotilde Can I have a sip?

Villon Yes.

Clotilde So what do you need with the booze?

Villon It's a love scene. Borges here will play the lover.

Borges Me?

Villon I see the way you look at her.

Borges Give me a drink to begin.

Isabeau Me, too.

Clotilde (*Staged*) **They drink. They drink again. A moment passes.**

Villon Begin. I'll start. "I can see why he likes you."

Isabeau "Oh?"

Villon "Do you want to know why?"

Isabeau "I do know why."

Villon "Why?"

Isabeau "The smoothness and youth of my skin, my shapely breasts, my long legs and perfect thighs, my almost breathing mossy bush, which serves paradise."

Villon Well said, dear Isabeau.

Borges My compliments in return, observations from the living actor.

Clotilde Well, it's only a play.

Borges So let's go back.

Clotilde Why?

Borges I enjoyed it, as did they. Let's go back. I'm at the door about the toilet.

Villon ¿*Otra vez?*

Borges *Ouis!* (*Knocking at the "DOOR"*)

Clotilde Come in!

Borges “She pissed on me, you idiot.”

Clotilde “No she didn’t. She pissed in a bowl and threw the piss out the door, where, unfortunately, you were standing there, spying.”

Borges “I was not spying.”

Clotilde “Then what were you doing?”

Borges “I was waiting for my entrance.”

Villon Very good.

Borges “Without a cue. Or a clue.”

Villon Very clever.

Borges And you will pay, sir.

Villon No doubt about that.

Borges If not with your life, then your soul, which you have spent your life cultivating.

Villon You are not God.

Borges Never mind. Now we change places. You, sir, stand at the door.

Villon I don’t think so.

Borges You don’t?

Villon No.

Borges You won’t stand by the door?

Villon No.

Borges And wait?

Villon No.

Borges Even if it opens and the heavenly light pours in?

Villon No. Piss pours out, you idiot. You think I’m some stupid, wayward youth?

Borges No.

Villon You think I’m a complete shake-in-the boots, afraid of his grandmother?

Borges I think the second part is true. In other words, you're not a complete idiot, but you are afraid of your grandmother.

Villon Go out and shut the door. (*BORGES goes out and slams the "DOOR."* *SOUND of door slamming*)

Borges (*Outside*) NOW WHAT?

Villon Nothing to it. Give it a pause. (*Pause*) Wait. (*SOUND of a knock at the "DOOR"*)

Isabeau Come in?

Borges (*Outside*) NO TRICKS!

Isabeau (*Giggling*) Okay.

Borges No shit or piss coming out the door!

Clotilde **A silence.** (*A silence*)

Isabeau I'll open the door.

Villon Open the door.

Clotilde **The "door" swings open. Nobody is there.** (*SOUND of door opening*)

Isabeau Who's there?

Borges (*Outside*) Nebuchednesser!

Isabeau Who?

Borges It's God himself, you fucking idiot!

Isabeau There's nothing coming out the door.

Borges Nothing?

Villon Absolutely nothing.

Borges All right, then.

Villon All right, what? Are you leaving?

Borges I might.

Villon Bye-bye.

Borges But I do like your woman in there.

Isabeau Too bad. Bye!

Borges No. I'll make you a trade.
Villon What for what?
Borges I'll say a prayer for a poem.
Villon All right, then, if you think that'll save you. Come back in and listen up.

(BORGES re-enters and kneels before VILLON. Pictures of hanged men appear on the upstage screens.)

Villon Men my brothers who after us live,
have your hearts against us not hardened.
For—if of poor us you take pity,
God of you sooner will show mercy.
You see us here, attached.
As for the flesh we too well have fed,
long since it's been devoured or has rotted.
And we the bones are becoming ash and dust.

Of our pain let nobody laugh,
but pray God
would us all absolve.

If you my brothers I call, do not
scoff at us in disdain, though killed
we were by justice. Yet you know
all men are not of good sound sense.
Plead our behalf since we are dead naked
with the Son of Mary the Virgin
that His grace be not for us dried up
preserving us from hell's fulminations.

We're dead after all. Let no soul revile us,
but pray God
 would us all absolve.

Rain has washed us, laundered us,
and the sun has dried us black.
Worse—ravens plucked our eyes hollow
and picked our beards and brows.
Never ever have we sat down, but
this way, and that way, at the wind's
good pleasure ceaselessly we swing 'n swivel,
more nibbled at than sewing thimbles.

Therefore, think not of joining our guild,
but pray God
 would us all absolve.

Prince Jesus, who over all has lordship,
care that hell not gain of us dominion.
With it we have no business, fast or loose.

People, here be no mocking,
but pray God
 would us all absolve.

- Villon** (*Continued*) There. From *Ballade of the Hanged Men*.
One of my most famous and important poems. What do
you think?
- Clotilde** Terrible translation. That's what I think.
- Borges** I'll say my prayer now.

- Clotilde** Make it short. Don't alienate them.
- Borges** Never mind. His poem was also a prayer. May God save François Villon, Clotilde and Isabeau, and poor old Borges.
- Clotilde** *Bon.* Let's get on to the *denouement*, and then we'll be done. We can relax and have an ice and go home. Tell them what happened to your life, François.
- Villon** As happens always in the history of Man, I went astray for whatever reason. Mainly, in my case, because I no longer believed.
- Borges** This is a sin, François.
- Villon** A street thug, I had been adopted by a priest, who taught me Religion. He taught me to stay awake, pay attention, and pray eighteen times a day. In Latin. The man was a doctor of religion and his name was Villon. I took his name for myself out of respect and admiration. Many a meeting I went to, and many a service, and many a cloister, and then I got tired of the whole thing and started drinking and whoring and stealing. Christianity seemed a poor choice as opposed to banditry, and so I became a bandit, and I did my best on that score, but you know what happens, a wrong trail, an arrow in the back, a knife in the chest, a man or woman's betrayal, pretty soon I was as dead as a door nail.
- Isabeau** And the poems?
- Villon** Evidence of real talent, and Intelligence that only comes once or twice a century. But of course, no one knows, and you don't, either. We fade into the ground and are gone eventually, like the rain. I'll tell you what happened.
Since nobody knows, I can make up anything.

I was riding like the wind, exhilarated by the speed and the fresh air, feeling companionable with my companions, equal with my equals, afraid of nothing—and I looked back and laughed with joy, and when I looked forward again, bam! Right into a tree limb. Just about knocked my head off. I was dead before I hit the ground.

Clotilde **In truth, he was pardoned by the ascension of King Louis XI, spent some time in a cloister, got into a street fight, was sentenced to be hanged, spared by the parliament, and then banished.**

Villon The robbery happened after all that happened.

Clotilde I hope they can follow this, François.

Villon So do I, or it's the dungeon for us, or worse. So, I'll say what I think, while I can, about mankind and priests and all their crap, like the study of Arts and Sciences, and the Romans and the Greeks—a history of slaughter justified by lies. Religion causes hatred and murder. Interesting to look at these lies. They are lies of the vanity of men, endless in their inventory. So, a thousand years from now, let's say five thousand years from now, guess what? They'll be doing the same thing—lying and justifying as they kill and be killed. It's a hell of a situation. The only differences will be in who's to blame, who should die, *en masse*, for the errors of crazy people? Well, no one knows, and the religions have no solution, and neither does philosophy or scholarship. The continuing massacre continues.

Isabeau So, it is hopeless.

Villon Yes, it's hopeless.

Isabeau But you mentioned a community.

Villon I meant a community to bury the dead. That's all I meant. A community to bury the dead. That's all we have to hope for.

Borges And Immortality?

Villon Everything is immortal.

Borges Everything?

Villon Everything. Who knows, Borges? Why not? You don't know and I don't know. And if nothing dies, who cares?

Borges I don't understand you.

Villon You're a priest, a believer. You think it has meaning? Objects flying through the blackness? For no apparent reason?

Borges You think it's meaningless?

Villon I think it's meaningless. I do feel badly about the whole deal. But it has nothing to do with anything personal—I could kill you now, and feel nothing but the urge to flee—and I resent all those stupid and lying ideas about me in the first place, and I don't mind for an instant that you will pay for all that.

Borges How will I pay?

Villon I think I'll kill you now.

Clotilde Wait a minute. Let's play cards.

Villon This Borges owes me money, this priest who goes around with murderers and thieves and makes a living off of whores. And I don't like the way he stares at Isabeau.

Isabeau I don't either.

Borges I want to fuck that good-looking whore, Isabeau.

Villon You can't afford her.

Borges Why not?

Villon You don't have enough money.

Borges Give me two hours and I'll have enough for two Isabeaus.

Villon No chance.

Borges I know this bitch. She's put out for me before.

Isabeau What a lie!

Borges I beg your pardon?

Isabeau I'm not in your class, not even in your dreams.

Villon Telling stories about Villon in the forest, attacking women and children, living in caves, etc. Here is Villon and he is well-armed. (*A pause. Then VILLON leaps across the table and plunges a dagger deep into the priest's chest.*)

Clotilde Villon!

Villon Don't worry about it. I've been hoping to do that for years.

Clotilde And now what?

Villon I'll cross a border. I'll get a job in a church. I'll write poems. I know some so-called nobility that owe me favors. People I've pummeled for them, people I've poisoned for them. Don't worry about me.

Clotilde You'll need a horse.

Villon I'll take yours. Do you mind?

Clotilde No. Of course not.

Villon Thank you very much, and Good-bye!

Clotilde Wait a minute, we're not done. (*VILLON stays*) Wake up, Borges. (*BORGES stands, starts off right*) Not that way, Borges. (*BORGES exits left*)

Villon Say something now about medieval France, Clotilde.

Clotilde **Right. So now we're in a tavern in medieval France, some kind of weird Paradise, where**

minstrels sang and played flutes and tambourines, somewhere, let's say between Saint Remy and Avignon, and our hero, Villon, is one of them.

(MUSIC)

Clotilde The French forest is not what you think it is, or what I think it is. For one thing, it resounds with insects. The whole of Southern France clamors for attention, as if there was a God up there, bending down, astonished and discomfited, and impatient with the idiots below. The God coughs and blows his nose. Villon sings:

BALLADE OF DEAD LADIES

Tell me now in what hidden is
 Lady Flora, the lovely Roman?
Where is Hipparchi, and where is Thais,
 Neither of them the fairer woman?
Where is Echo, beheld of no man,
 Only heard on revier and mere—
She whose beauty was more than human?
 But where are the snows of yesteryear?

Where's Heloise, the learned nun,
 For whose sake Abeillard, I ween,
Lost manhood and put priesthood on?
 (From Love such dule and teen!)

And where, I pray you, is the queen
Who willed that Buridan should steer
Sewed in a sack's mouth down the Seine?...
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

White Queen Blanche, like a queen of lilies,
With a voice like any mermaid—
Bertha Broadfoot, Beatrice, Alice,
And Ermengarde the lady of Maine—
And the good Joan, whom Englishmen
At Rouen doomed and burned her there—
Mother of God, where are they then?...
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

Nay, never ask this week, fair lord,
Where they are gone, nor yet this year,
Except with this for an overword—
But where are the snows of yesteryear?

Clotilde Very nice, François.

Villon Thank you. It's a poem everybody knows. One of my best.

Clotilde François?

Villon Yes, I know, there may be teenagers in the audience. But they ought to know, *n'est-ce pas*, where they're headed, what their beauty means, what their vanity means, what their heartbreaking means, these ball-shearers and whores.

Clotilde You sound bitter.

Villon I am bitter. But I feel all right because I've managed to fend for myself and survive. So far. With my dagger and my dick intact, and with some good planning.

After the robbery in the chapel, which made us temporarily rich, my master and foster father, Villon, my mentor and chaplain and professor, had died, naturally, but I had taken his name, in reverence. (*Just at that moment, the LANDLORD walks into the tavern and approaches VILLON.*)

Landlord And then you proceeded to get your degrees and hang around with whores and thieves.

Villon You rhymed, sir.

Landlord I am a cultivated gentleman.

Villon But your guts still stink, sir.

Landlord No doubt of it, François.

Villon I might add, my mentor never judged me sir, one way or the other, and shared my questions about religion.

Landlord What is religion?

Villon Being right all the time.

Landlord Your mentor knew his man.

Villon He did, sir.

Landlord Are you prepared to die?

Villon Of course not, sir.

Landlord Prepare.

Villon On the other hand, I don't know what death is, though I've seen a lot of it. And you?

Landlord Yes, I am helped by the comforts of religion.

Villon Yes, sir. Big help there, sir.

Landlord Say your prayers, at least.

Villon I have no prayers, sir.

Landlord Say them anyway.

Villon God help me.

Landlord The Church will want its money, and the king will want a poem or two.

Villon I want Tabarie.

Landlord He is a swordsman of some repute, Villon.

Villon I'll knock him on the head with my club, sir.

Landlord And the money?

Villon Gone.

Landlord Poems for the gentry?

Villon I'm retired, sir.

Landlord Even for the king?

Villon I'll talk with the king.

Landlord All right, we'll keep you locked up here for a while, Villon, until all is decided.

Villon Honored, sir.

Landlord There's a woman here, to see you. Actually, I don't know if she's a man or a woman.

Villon Hunchbacked?

Landlord Yes. I've seen her before.

Villon Clotilde. Bring her to me, if you don't mind.

Landlord Here she is. (*Exits. CLOTILDE stays onstage.*)

Villon *Bon, bon.* I'm glad to see you. You're actually a hunchbacked devil, *n'est-ce pas?*

Clotilde Yes. And an old friend of yours who has come to help you.

Villon Thanks a lot.

Clotilde Don't kill any more people.

Villon I have one person in mind, and then, it's into the woods.

Clotilde Why?

Villon Because people are savages and not to be trusted. One minute he is your priest and your friend, and the next he betrays you. Why? He has his own ego to protect. His own ego he cannot see, but he can see yours, which is attached to your weakness, your sulking and your pride. But I have no inhibition because of it. In other words, if you insult me, I might mourn, or I might kill you.

Clotilde Which do you prefer?

Villon You know which, Clotilde.

Clotilde To kill.

Villon *Vraiment*. And to think I could have been a scholar, supported by the state.

Clotilde I have remained your friend.

Villon True.

Clotilde What is your great doubt, Villon?

Villon I am a genius of poetry. But I don't believe that God exists. Do you?

Clotilde Why not? Call it what you want. Something endless, eternal, something indescribable, as the Muslims say, or the Jews.

Villon A poet must be more precise. Something exists, never too big to describe. And then again, some things can't be spoken of.

Clotilde (*Tapping her hunch*) I'm here now, apparently.

Villon Yes, and I was lying a moment ago. Mainly, I want to be free of myself, and without being seen by the others. Clear and blameless, without the pangs of conscience.

Clotilde I agree with that. That would be good.

Villon Yes, maybe for a minute or two. That's what I like about the forest. One roams, one takes one's life in his own hands.

Clotilde We might live on a farm somewhere, you and I, and raise goats.

Villon For one thing, I am wanted by the authorities. For another, I am a genius, which implies intelligence, which comes from the unknown, which the high-born admire. For another, I can't get over my anger, on the one hand, and I don't mind killing. Then I feel bad about it and write a poem. Sometimes. But my anger knows no bounds.

Clotilde Anger is a failing of the Teaching.

Villon How so, Clotilde?

Clotilde We are unprepared for the savagery of life, and yet expected to live as though we were. (*SOUND of horses arriving, OFF*)

Villon Sounds like the king himself, or somebody else really important.

Clotilde Shall I let him in?

Villon Why not? (*Enter the KING*) My liege.

King Villon. (*Of CLOTILDE*) What is that?

Villon My fiancée, Clotilde.

King Does she have to be here?

Villon Wait outside, Darling.

Clotilde Of course, my dearest. (*Exits*)

King I've come with your last chance, Villon.

Villon I've had many of those.

King That you have. But this is truly the last one.

Villon And what might that be, sir?

King Banishment. You must disappear. Go to some village cloister in the provinces and meditate and write. Perhaps you will learn then who you really are.

Villon I knew who I was before I was Villon.

King Oh? And who was that?

Villon The lowest of the low, the dregs on the bottom.

King You should have risen by now, had you chosen to do so.

Villon I know. I did try. I even asked God to help me. And the Old Man Villon did, too.

King And? Why did you fail?

Villon I preferred life among my peers, people of my own kind. And I have not failed. I am the best poet of my time.

King Life among bandits, among thieves?

Villon I had a knack for it, sir.

King You are a poet, with one of the finest educations one can have in France, and yet you brawled and murdered your way through life. Why?

Villon I've told you. I preferred the life. And I do have a temper. I did ask for help from that weakness.

King From whom?

Villon From the old Master, from you, even from God.

King To no avail.

Villon Maybe he's still thinking about it. God, I mean. Maybe he gave me talent instead, and a bit of brains. And the courage to charge first with my stick and strike first with my dagger.

King It's a shame, Villon.

Villon That it is, my Lord. May I ask one more dispensation from you?

King Ask.

Villon Let me stay in Paris. I'll change my name and reform.
I can become a tutor or an educated servant or a janitor
in a church.

King No. Listen to my words. I can't protect you anymore.
You need to go somewhere far and live quietly, or we'll
have to hang you. Go to a monastery or become the
village drunk somewhere and live in a hut. We can't see
you or hear of you anymore.

Villon And then we'll go a-riding over hill and dale.

King No more sarcasm from you, Villon.

Villon My apologies, your Lordship.

King Yes, no more brawling in taverns and beating up
aristocrats and killing priests. And no more robbing of
churches. Didn't your Master teach you anything about a
virtuous life?

Villon No. We were just talking about that.

King Who was?

Villon My fiancée and I.

King Indeed. What have you decided?

Villon Perhaps a monastery.

King Excellent. And you can write your poems, which are
oddly devotional at times.

Villon And other things, too. Heretical, too.

King You'll be able to concentrate on your religion.

Villon Actually, I think I'll head for the countryside. We
understand each other, the peasants and I. We know that
even Kings have to take a crap every day, for example,
though he has others to wash his ass.

King I can also kill you now with a flip of my wrist or a word
to my men.

Villon I'd be careful if I were you.

King Quite right. You charge first, and hit with your stick.

Villon Always.

King All right, enough. We've agreed. Once you've settled, send me your poems now and then. I'll try and preserve them for the future.

Villon I am in your debt.

King That you are.

Villon Thank you, sir.

King You're welcome. *Au revoir*. Oh, summon your creature. She has something for you. A parting gift. (*Exits*)

Villon Clotilde!

Clotilde (*Off*) I'm coming, François!

Villon Then hurry up! (*Enter CLOTILDE with TABARIE*)

Clotilde Look what I've brought you, François.

Villon Wonderful! A fat white worm from the pigsty, with a hat!

Guy Watch your mouth, Villon.

Villon Why should I? The King and his men are gone. And you, sir, are no threat.

Guy What do you want?

Villon Conjugate the Latin for "to die," Tabarie.

Guy I will not, sir.

Villon I'll warrant you are here to pay for your sins, Tabarie.

Guy Not what I was told, Villon.

Villon Oh, you're thinking that the king expects you to kill me?

Tabarie Yes.

Villon In front of my fiancée?

Clotilde Fat chance.

Villon What could he have been dreaming?

Clotilde To get rid of you both, most likely.

Guy You are no swordsman, Villon.

Villon Never learned, street rat that I am, but I can use a dagger.

Clotilde And he's excellent with clubs. I saw him almost knock a man's head off once. Then he had to use his dagger at the throat. Blood started running down the gutter.

Guy I've seen that horror for myself.

Villon He's been around, our Tabarie.

Clotilde I know.

Guy I'll skewer you, Villon, like a swine. Poets have no immunity from swords.

Villon Quite right, or the treachery of friends. The king has given me leave to go to the country. You will die here or spend the rest of your life in a dungeon.

Guy And you?

Villon Me, I'm heading for the woods with my paramour, like I said. (*CLOTILDE laughs*) You thought you'd get away with betraying our robbery of the church at Navarre. Now it's time to repent.

Guy You are no priest, Villon, you're a killer of priests.

Villon Repent, or I'll kill you myself.

Guy No. You repent.

Villon I have too much for which to repent. It would take all day. I don't have the time.

Guy Nor I.

Villon Oh? Going somewhere?

Guy Back to Paris.

Villon Good for you. What will you do there, join a gang and then betray them? Hell of a way to make a living.

Guy Look what you've got, Villon.

Clotilde He's got me. (*GUY scoffs*)

Villon And my club and dagger and a little talent.

Guy Go ahead, then, and use them if you can.

Villon Do you know what it's like, sir? To live on your wits day to day and beg and steal and run from your mother and want and not to be satisfied, ever? To be hungry and dirty and beaten and in rags?

Clotilde And so on?

Guy I do not.

Villon You do not.

Guy That is correct.

Villon Very well, then. Now you will have a chance to learn something. Clotilde?

Clotilde Yes?

Villon Get a message to Isabeau in the city. Tell her this two-face is coming and warn our friends. You will learn, Tabarie.

Clotilde Yes, François.

Villon Do not think of us poor as animals without minds, Tabarie.

Guy They would enslave me and then have me killed, Monsieur.

Villon Do not think we are incapable of vengeance, Tabarie.

Guy So be it. (*No one moves, SOUNDS off, of DOGS*)

Clotilde We'd better go.

Villon Say time stops, Clotilde.

Clotilde ***Time stops.*** (*VILLON pulls his dagger.*)

Guy Wait!

Villon Down on your knees, Tabarie. (*GUY falls to his knees*)
Death is the reward for the treachery of friends.

Guy Spare me, sir, and I'll serve you well.

Clotilde Time does not stop, François.

Villon It stops for this traitor now. (*SOUND of the DOGS, closer*)

Clotilde There's no time, François.

Villon Time to cut his throat, Clotilde.

Clotilde Time to ride, François. (*SOUND of DOGS ferociously barking*) We'll take him with us.

Villon All right. A pleasure to look forward to, eh? Monsieur Tabarie will come with us. Let's go.

Guy Where are we going?

Villon Over hill and dale, Tabarie.

Clotilde He only kills priests.

Villon **Well, off we went, on horses stolen from the King's manor. I took care of Tabarie eventually, around an evening fire, when he annoyed me with his braggadocio and about his phony nobility, the treacherous idiot. I knocked him on the head with my stick and daggered him. We are not so far from cavemen after all. I myself have seen pictures on cave walls superior to all the portraits of the Saints you see nowadays. No humans, only tigers and deer. Speaking of pictures, once, as we rode, just for a hundredth of a second, I saw a picture in my own mind of some young women, in the forest, ordinary, beautiful young women, not actresses or whores, just ordinary women, but beauties, living their lives, their culture, morally, beautifully, with children, with families. They were some sort of religious group, before they were cut down by the King's men, they had been upholding the honor of**

a Moral Life, under God, under the guidance of their priests—and I thought, these murderers, the King’s men, that they should go to Hell, and then I thought, there is no Hell for these killers, because there is no Christian hell, no hell for them to go to, to suffer the anguish of murderers, nothing but darkness and silence, and they had escaped, they had escaped the Terror of History. And then I thought, I will take my revenge, myself, and then I saw, there was no “I” strong enough, there was no revenge in me or in Nature, as in the story of Job, there was no recompense, no balance, no punishment of Evil, only accident and vicious blaming for the weaknesses of Man, the blaming of Others, and then I saw leaves blowing in the wind, leaves blowing in the wind, a wind which will itself die into nothingness and Silence. At that point, I was ready to die also, in solidarity with my kind, and I died. I thought.

Clotilde

Just one moment more, darlings.

Villon

(Cont’d) What am I? I have realized myself. That is to say, I am a worm like you, and it’s even possible I am like a vessel, or a retort, or a jar, in which salts are mixing, and I arise from their mixture like a chemical God, a spiritual being, an immortal, though I sometimes doubt it, given my weaknesses and fears, and shames and so on and so on and so on, afraid of this and that, misunderstood by everyone and loved by no one—perhaps Clotilde, alas—and yet I run free

now in the forest of Time, with my cohorts, my criminal friends and outcasts—free as the wind, no, more free than the wind, which is constrained by the turning of Earth—until they catch me and hang me, or stab me, and tell lies about me, and so on and so forth, because now I disappear except for my words, and you will never catch me dead, because my words are living, and they live as long as you live, you liar, they live as long as you live.

The End