FRANÇOIS VILLON—A BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE.

By E. F. CHANEY, M.A.

THAT a Professor of French in an industrial city gave, in the year 1937, a series of lectures on Villon, a fifteenth-century French poet, to a class of extra-mural students is a remarkable fact. So remarkable that it may be well worth while to consider briefly the vicissitudes of his reputation and to note the increasing interest in his work during the last fifty years.

François was born in Paris about 1431 at a time when the city was occupied by the English. His early years were years of hardship, famine, plague and general ruin. Life and property were of little account. We are told by the anonymous "Bourgeois de Paris" that hundreds of houses were untenanted and falling into ruin and that in 1438 over 40,000 people died of famine and epidemic disease. The activities of the Burgundians, Armagnacs, and numerous brigands added to the general confusion.

His parents were poor and obscure. He seems never to have seen his father. Before he was ten he was accepted as a pupil by Guillaume de Villon, a canon of St. Benoît, and according to the custom of the times, went to live in the Cloître St. Benoît with his benefactor. The canon probably taught him his rudiments and later sent him to the University where he graduated as maître-ès-arts in 1452. It was probably during his university course that he assumed the name of Villon which he made so famous. We know but little of his life except that he was concerned with a murder and a robbery and had to absent himself from Paris for several lengthy periods, one of
which extended to nearly five years (1456-61). We know next to nothing of him during these absences. He travelled about parts of France in great penury and almost certainly eked out a meagre livelihood by all kinds of dishonesty. It was almost certain that he was associated in some capacity with a notorious band of swindlers, robbers and murderers known as "Coquillards." At any rate he certainly wrote several ballads in their jargon whilst two of his intimates, Régnier de Montigny and Colin de Cayeux, did belong to it.

He probably began to write verses during his student days because he seems to have acquired something of a reputation as a versifier of conventional and especially of satiric ballads. The main part of his work was written between 1456 and 1464 or 1465, although from 1464 onward we hear nothing of him. His known work consists of the "Lais" (or Petit Testament) containing 320 octosyllabic lines written on the eve of one of his sudden departures from Paris in 1456; "Le Grand Testament" of 2023 lines, commenced in 1461 and probably revised and added to during the following two or three years. In this were incorporated some of his earlier ballads. In addition we have sixteen separate poems besides the ballads in jargon. Thus his total known output was just over 3000 lines.

He was already famous in Paris of the fifteenth century but suffered almost total eclipse for the three hundred years after Clément Marot's edition of 1533. Interest in him began to grow in the nineteenth century and has continued to grow at an accelerated rate during the last forty years.

There is no known original manuscript of his. It is even unlikely that he ever attempted to bring together all his poems into one 'Corpus.' But there are several MSS. assigned to dates between 1470 and 1500, mostly to be seen in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. Nowadays the student need not go to Paris or Stockholm but can consult phototype facsimiles of the more important. The earliest facsimile in point of date is that printed by H. Champion in 1905 of the Stockholm MS. known as "F," because it once belonged to Fauchet, Président de la Cour des Monnaies. This reproduction was edited by Marcel Schwob.
The second is: "Deux manuscrits de François Villon," edited by Jeanroy and Droz, 1932. This contains the MS. known as "B," No. 1661, and that known as "C" (from Coislin, one of its owners in the eighteenth century), No. 20041, both in the Bibliothèque Nationale.

The first printed edition, that of Pierre Levet, Paris, 1489, known as "I" (Imprimé) is also available in facsimile: "La plus ancienne édition de François Villon," edited by Pierre Champion, 1924 (Edition des quatre chemins).

Sources B, C, F, I, J, are available in many English libraries and can be bought for a pound or two each. I have not described "J" (Jardin de Plaisance) as it is less important than the other sources, which are sufficient for most students.

Thirty-three extant editions between 1489 and 1542 are a sufficient proof of Villon’s popularity at the time. Of these thirty-three the next in importance to Levet’s is Clement Marot’s edition, 1533. This was prepared at the request of François I, who is reputed to have had a very high opinion of his namesake’s verses. Although Marot prepared his edition within seventy years of Villon’s death he found many of the allusions quite incomprehensible. Nevertheless many of his notes are valuable.

Villon’s reputation was quite submerged by the Pléiade and in particular by the fame and popularity of Ronsard. Rabelais, Régnier, La Fontaine and Patru knew and appreciated Villon’s work, but it is doubtful whether many of the sixteenth and seventeenth-century writers were acquainted with it. Although he devotes two lines of his "Art Poétique" to him it seems likely that Boileau knew of him rather by hearsay than from first-hand information. At any rate he fully appreciated his importance in the history of French poetry.

The eighteenth century witnessed the production of two editions, one by Coustelier, 1723, the other issued at the Hague, 1742.

After nearly three hundred years of almost total eclipse the edition produced in 1832 by the Abbé J. H. R. Prompsault brought about a considerable revival of interest. The poet, Théophile Gautier, read and appreciated Villon with a poet’s ear and eye, but lapses into those errors which were quite
unavoidable before the lengthy and very successful researches of Auguste Longnon which resulted in the production of his 'Etude biographique' in 1877, and his critical edition of the poems in 1892. Between 1832 and 1892 appeared editions by Paul Lacroix in 1854, and by Pierre Jannet in 1867. Both works ran to several editions but neither has any great value. As a later critic, L. Thuasne, showed, Lacroix's edition abounds in inaccuracies. Longnon's edition, on the other hand, was scholarly and accurate and forms the basis of all subsequent editions of which the more important are:

1. Longnon's own revision of his text, 1911. This has been amplified by Lucien Foulet in 1914, 1923, and 1932. The latter provides the most correct and up-to-date text that is available to-day.

2. The monumental edition in three volumes by Louis Thuasne, Paris, 1923. There are two big volumes of notes some of which, though interesting, are of inordinate length and beside the point. These, however, are but small flaws in a great piece of work. Any student using this work should read as a corrective, "François Villon et les thèmes poétiques du moyen âge," 1934. written in French by an Italian scholar, Italo Siciliano. In the writer's opinion the latter book is the most remarkable that has been written about Villon in recent years.

3. In 1923 there also appeared an excellent edition by another Italian, Ferdinando Neri, Turin.

4. In 1934 Jeanroy produced a valuable little edition in which he reverts to Marot's orthography. His valuable notes are perhaps too laconic. It is a good example of the printer's art as well.

There are a number of good biographies of Villon. In 1859 Campaux attempted to write one based on a study of his works. It is even now an interesting work but it caused Sainte-Beuve to make some ill-natured remarks both about Campaux and Villon. About this time Longnon began to probe the archives and succeeded in disinterreing a number of documents which threw light into some of the dark corners of Villon's life. These discoveries were incorporated in his 'Etude Biographique,'
A study of these two works will show the great progress made by Longnon. Through the efforts of Longnon, Marcel Schwob and Gaston Paris, further discoveries were made which the latter included in his excellent study of Villon (Grands Ecritains, 1901). Although this work is approaching its fortieth year there is very little of it that needs revision. A striking testimony to a very great scholar.

The next landmark was erected by Pierre Champion who became the literary executor of Marcel Schwob in 1905. To Schwob's multifarious notes he added the fruits of his own researches and produced in 1913 "François Villon: Sa Vie et Son Temps" in two well-printed and well-illustrated volumes. Every student of Villon needs to read, at any rate, parts of this valuable work. It attempts to recall the atmosphere of fifteenth-century Paris, and contains much interesting lore about Villon and his times besides a lengthy, running commentary on his poems. Other studies worth noting are those of de Vere Stacpoole, 1916; D. B. Wyndham Lewis, 1928—most interesting and a successful reconstruction of old Paris, with vivid portrayal of Villon's life there; Corti, in Spanish (Buenos Aires, 1931); Desonay, Paris, 1933, and the arresting work of Siciliano previously mentioned.

There still remains the edition prepared by Geoffroy Atkinson, and published by the Scholartis Press in 1930. In several ways it is the most useful edition of Villon for English and American readers. In addition to a useful introduction and some short notes there is the French text with a very good English translation on the opposite page. Other translations were into verse by Payne (1878); de Vere Stacpoole (1913), partly in verse and partly in prose; in verse by Lepper (1924) and Wharton (1935).

Amato's Italian edition of 1929-30 contains a good translation into Italian prose. I have noted only the complete translations but it is fairly common knowledge that such poets as Rossetti and Swinburne attempted poetical translations of some of the ballads and shorter poems.

The fact that fifty books on Villon have appeared in France, England, Italy, Germany, and Belgium during the last half-century is sufficient proof of the great revival of interest in the
man and his work. From 1489 to 1533 Thuasne has recorded at least twenty-four editions; for the next three hundred years there appeared barely four or five, and then the great outpouring from 1832 onwards.

BIBLIOGRAPHY 1927-37.