



# The Songs of Bilitis

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## NOTE

Since previous editions of the *Songs of Bilitis* have been complacently unconcerned with the desirability of sympathetic treatment, accurate translation or rhythmic presentation, I offer this version of an extremely lovely book, in all humility, as leaven to their dough, although acutely conscious that the whole is bread, where cake is (this time) sadly in demand.

A. C. B.

It was M. Louÿs' little *mot* to ascribe these "songs" to a courtesan who, he declares, was a contemporary of Sappho. To heighten this false appearance of translation he has written his clever "Life" of Bilitis, as well as included several songs in the table of contents which he labels "not translated." There is, however, a strangely haunting ring, muffled, though not too carefully disguised ... a curiously Gallic undertone, which echoes incongruous down the centuries from Bilitis to us, and makes her the great creation that she is. M. Louÿs took Voltaire's sage advice. Since he has thus committed himself, the following brief notes will be concerned only with the elucidation of the ancient words employed, and occasional references to legends and institutions which may be unfamiliar to the present reader. A mock-philological study of the sources from which Louÿs drew material for this book would be amusing, but would have little sound scholastic value. He will be found to have dipped delicately into such writers of the *Palatine Anthology* as *Philodemus*, *Hedylus*, *Meleager*, *Denys*, *Paulus Silentiarius* and *Asclepiades*. In most cases he has been content merely to elaborate a phrase or idea; in a very few others he has charmingly appropriated a complete epigram, changing it but slightly to suit his occult purposes. Sappho herself has been "pilfered" for the chanson he calls "Love"! Louÿs' culpability in this respect is distinctly limited, however, for by far the greatest part of the *Chansons de Bilitis* is his original creation, and must accordingly be judged as such.

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## THE LIFE OF BILITIS

Bilitis was born at the beginning of the sixth century before our era, in a mountain village situated on the banks of the Melas, towards the east of Pamphylia. This country is solemn and dreary, shadowed by heavy forests, dominated by the vast pile of the Taurus; streams of calciferous water spring from the rocks; great salt lakes remain on the highlands, and the valleys are heavy with silence.

She was the daughter of a Greek father and a Phoenician mother. She does not seem to have known her father, for he takes no part in the memories of her childhood. He may even have died before she was born. Otherwise it would be difficult to explain how she came to bear a Phoenician name, which her mother alone could have given her.

Upon this nearly desert land she lived a tranquil life with her mother and her sisters. Other young girls who were her friends lived not far away. On the wooded slopes of the Taurus, the shepherds pastured their flocks.

In the morning, at cock-crow, she arose, went to the stable, led out the beasts to water and busied herself with milking them. During the day, if it rained, she stayed in the *gynaecium*, spinning her distaff of wool. Were the weather fair, she ran in the fields and played with her companions the many games of which she makes mention.

In respect to the Nymphs, Bilitis retained an ardent piety. The sacrifices she offered were almost always dedicate to their stream. She often spoke to them, but it seems quite certain that she never saw them, for she reports with so much veneration the memories of an old man who had one day surprised them.

The end of her pastoral life was saddened by a love-affair about which we know little, although she speaks of it at considerable length. When it became unhappy, she ceased singing it. Having become the mother of a child which she abandoned, Bilitis left Pamphylia for mysterious reasons, and never again saw the place where she was born.

We find her next at Mytilene, whence she had come by way of the sea, skirting the lovely shores of Asia. She was scarcely sixteen years old, according to the conjectures of Herr Heim, who has established, with an appearance of truth, certain dates in the life of Bilitis from a verse which alludes to the death of Pittakos.

Lesbos was then the axis of the world. Halfway between lovely Attica and sumptuous Lydia, it had as capital a city more enlightened than Athens and more corrupt than Sardis: Mytilene, built upon a peninsula in sight of the shores of Asia. The blue sea surrounded the city. From the

heights of the temples the white coastline of Atarnea, the port of Pergamum, could be seen.

The narrow and perpetually crowded streets shone with parti-colored stuffs, tunics of purple and hyacinth, [cyclas](#)<sup>1</sup> of transparent silks and [bassaras](#)<sup>2</sup> trailing in the dust stirred up by yellow sandals. Great gold rings threaded with unfinished pearls hung from the women's ears, and their arms were adorned with massive silver bracelets, heavily cut in relief. Even the tresses of the men themselves were glossy and perfumed with precious oils. The ankles of the Greeks were bare amidst the jingling of their [periscelis](#),<sup>3</sup> great serpents of a light metal which tinkled about their heels; those of the Asiatics moved in boots of soft and painted leather. The passers-by stopped in groups before the shops which faced on to the streets, and where finery only was displayed for sale: rugs of sombre colors, saddle-cloths stitched with threads of gold, amber or ivory jewelry, according to the district. The bustle of Mytilene did not cease with the close of day: there was no hour, no matter how late, when one could not hear, through the open doors, the joyous sounds of instruments, the cries of women and the noise of dancing. Pittakos himself, who wanted somewhat to regulate this perpetual debauch, made a law forbidding flute-players who were too young to take part in any nightly revel; but this law, in common with all laws which attempt to change the course of natural customs, found no observance, but rather brought about a secret practice.

In a society in which the husbands were so occupied at night by wine and female dancers, it was inevitable that the wives would be brought together and find among themselves consolation in their solitude. Thus it came about that they were favorably disposed to those delicate love-affairs to which antiquity had already given their name, and which held, no matter what men may think of them, more of actual passion than of dissolute curiosity.

Then Sappho was still beautiful. Bilitis knew her, and speaks of her to us, under the name of Psappha, which she bore in Lesbos. No doubt it was this admirable woman who taught the little Pamphylian the art of singing in rhythmic cadences, and of preserving for posterity the

memory of dearly cherished beings. Unhappily Bilitis gives few details about this figure today so poorly known, and there is reason for regretting it, so precious would have been the slightest word about the great Inspiratrix. In return she has left us, in thirty elegies, the story of her friendship for a young girl of her age named Mnasidika, who lived with her. We had already known this young girl's name, through a verse of Sappho's in which her beauty is exalted; but even this name was doubtful, and Bergk was nearly convinced that she called herself simply Mnaïs. The songs which will be read further on prove that this hypothesis should be abandoned. Mnasidika seems to have been a sweet and naïve young girl, one of those charming creatures whose mission it is to allow themselves to be adored; the more dear, the less effort they make to merit what is given them. Unmotivated loves last longest; this one lasted ten years. It will be seen how it was broken up through the fault of Bilitis, whose excessive jealousy could not understand the least eclecticism.

When she felt that there was nothing to keep her in Mytilene any longer except unhappy memories, Bilitis made a second voyage: she proceeded to Cyprus, an island both Greek and Phoenician like Pamphylia itself, and which must often have recalled to her the aspect of her native land. It was there that Bilitis commenced her life for the third time, and in a fashion for which it will be more difficult for me to obtain sanction without again recalling how sacred a thing was love among the ancient races. The courtesans of Amathus were not fallen creatures, like our own, exiled from all worldly society; they were girls sprung from the best families of the town. Aphrodite had given them the gift of beauty, and they thanked the goddess by consecrating their grateful loveliness to the service of her cult. All cities which possessed, as did those of Cyprus, a temple rich in courtesans, cherished the same respectful solicitude over these women.

The incomparable story of Phryne, such as Athenaeus has handed it down to us, will give some idea of this kind of veneration. It is not true that Hyperides needed to display her nude in order to prevail upon the Areopagus, and nevertheless the crime was great: she had committed murder.<sup>4</sup> The orator removed no more than the upper part of her tunic and only revealed her breasts. And he begged the judges "not to put to death the priestess and the *Inspired of Aphrodite*." Contrary to the usage of other courtesans, who went about clothed in transparent mantles, through which all the details of their bodies were apparent, Phryne was in the habit of enveloping even her hair in one of those great wrinkled

robes, whose grace has been preserved for us in the figurines of Tanagra. No man, if he were not one of her intimates, had ever seen her arms or shoulders; and she had never appeared in the pool of the public baths. But one day an extraordinary thing happened. It was the day of the Eleusinian festivals; twenty thousand people had come from all the countries of Greece and were assembled on the beach when Phryne advanced towards the waves: she took off her robe, she undid her girdle, she even removed her undergarment, "she unrolled all her hair and she stepped into the sea." And in this crowd there was Praxiteles, who designed the *Aphrodite of Cnidos* after this living goddess; and Apelles who caught a glimpse of his *Anadyomene*. Admirable race, to whom Beauty might appear nude without exciting laughter or false shame!

I would that this were the story of Bilitis, for, in translating her Songs, I fell in love with the little friend of Mnasiidika. Doubtless her life was quite as marvellous. I only regret that it has not been further spoken of, and that the ancient authors, those at least who have survived, are so poor in information about her. Philodemus, who pilfered from her twice, does not even mention her name. In default of happy anecdotes, I beg that all will be good enough to be content with the details that she herself gives us about her life as a courtesan. That she was a courtesan cannot be denied; and even her last songs prove that, if she had the virtues of her vocation, she also had its worst weaknesses. But I am concerned only with her virtues. She was pious and devout. She remained faithful to the temple as long as Aphrodite consented to prolong the youth of her purest worshipper. The day she ceased being loved she ceased to write, she says. However, it is difficult to suppose that the songs of Pamphylia were written during the time they were being lived. How could a little mountain shepherdess have learned to scan her verses according to the difficult rhythm of the Aeolic tradition? It would be found more plausible that, grown old, Bilitis pleased herself in singing for herself the memories of her far-off childhood. We know nothing about this last period of her life. We do not even know at what age she died.

Her tomb was rediscovered by Herr G. Heim, at Paleo-Limisso, by the side of an ancient road not far from Amathus. These ruins have almost disappeared in the past thirty years, and the stones of the house in which Bilitis may have lived pave the quays of Port-Said today. But the tomb was underground, according to the Phoenician custom, and it had even escaped the depredations of treasure-hunters.



Herr Heim penetrated into it through a narrow well filled with earth, at the bottom of which he found a walled-up door which it was necessary to demolish. The low and spacious cavern, paved with slabs of limestone, had four walls, covered with plaques of black amphibolite, upon which were carved in primitive capitals all the songs which will be read hereafter, with the exception of the three epitaphs which decorated the sarcophagus.

There it was that the friend of Mnasidika rested, in a great terra-cotta coffin, beneath a lid modeled by a careful sculptor who had carved in the clay the face of the dead: the hair was painted black, the eyes half-closed and lengthened by a pencil, as in life, and the cheek scarcely softened by a slight smile born from the lines of the mouth. No one will ever solve the mystery of these lips: both clear-cut and pouting, both soft and dainty, touching each on each, but still as though drunk to kiss and clasp again.<sup>5</sup>

When the tomb was opened she appeared in the state in which a pious hand had laid her out twenty-four centuries before. Vials of perfume hung from earthen pegs, and one of them, after so long a time, was still fragrant. The polished silver mirror in which Bilitis saw herself, the little stylus which spread blue paint upon her eyelids, were found in place. A little nude Astarte, relic forever precious, still watched over the skeleton, decked with all its golden jewels and white as a branch of snow, but so soft and fragile that the moment it was breathed upon it fell to dust.

PIERRE LOUÏS

*Constantinople, August 1894.*

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# 1. BUCOLICS IN PAMPHYLIA

Ἄδὸ δέ μοι τὸ μέλισμα, καὶ ἦν σύριγγι μελίσδωκῆν αὐλῶ  
λαλέω, κῆν δώνακι, κῆν πλαγιαυλίῳ

THEOCRITUS<sup>6</sup>

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## THE TREE

I undressed to climb a tree; my naked thighs embraced the smooth and humid bark; my sandals climbed upon the branches.

High up, but still beneath the leaves and shaded from the heat, I straddled a wide-spread fork and swung my feet into the void.

It had rained. Drops of water fell and flowed upon my skin. My hands were soiled with moss and my heels were reddened by the crushed blossoms.

I felt the lovely tree living when the wind passed through it; so I locked my legs tighter, and crushed my open lips to the hairy nape of a bough.

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## PASTORAL SONG

One must sing a pastoral song to invoke Pan, God of the summer wind. I watch my flock, and Selenis watches hers, in the round shade of a shuddering olive-tree.

Selenis is lying on the meadow. She rises and runs, or hunts grasshoppers, picks flowers and grasses, or bathes her face in the brooklet's cooling stream.

I pluck the wool from the bright backs of my sheep to supply my distaff, and I spin. The hours are slow. An eagle sails the sky.

The shadow moves; let us move the basket of flowers and the crock of milk. One must sing a pastoral song to invoke Pan, god of the summer wind.

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## MATERNAL COUNSEL

My mother bathes me in the dark, she dresses me in the sunlight and coifs me in the soft glow of the lamp; but if I go out in the moonlight she ties my girdle and makes a double knot.

She tells me: "Play with the virgins, dance with the little children; do not look out of the window; fly the conversation of young men and fear the widow's counsel.

"Some evening, someone, as has always been, will come to lead you over the threshold in the midst of a great cortège of sounding drums and amorous flutes.

"That evening, when you go out, Bilitis, you will leave me three gourds of gall: one for the morning, one for the afternoon, and the third, the bitterest, for the festival days."

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## BARE FEET

I have long black hair down my back, and a little round cap. My frock is of white wool. My sturdy legs are browning in the sun.

If I lived in town I should have golden trinkets and gold-embroidered frocks and silver slippers. . . I look at my naked feet in their slippers of dust.

Psophis! come here, little creature! carry me to the brook, bathe my feet in your hands, and press some olives with some violets, to scent them among the flowers.

Today you shall be my slave; you shall follow me and serve me, and at the end of the day I will give you some lentils from my own garden . . . to give your mother.

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## THE OLD MAN AND THE NYMPHS

An old blind man lives on the mountain. For having looked at the nymphs his eyes have long been dead. And from that time his happiness has been a far-off memory.

"Yes, I saw them," he told me: "Helopsychria, Limnanthi; they were standing near the bank, in the green pool of Physos. The water shimmered higher than their knees.

"Their necks were bent beneath their heavy hair. Their nails were filmy, like the wings of grasshoppers. Their breasts were deep, like the calyx of the hyacinth.

"They trailed their fingers upon the water, and pulled long-stemmed lilies from the unseen silt. About their separated thighs, slow circles spread. . ."

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## SONG

Torti-tortue, what are you doing there? --I am winding wool and I spin Milesian thread. --Alas! alas! Why don't you come and dance? --I am so sad. I am so sad.

Torti-tortue, what are you doing there? --I cut a reed to make a funeral pipe. --Alas! alas! And tell me what has happened. --I'll never tell. Oh, I shall never tell.

Torti-tortue, what are you doing there? --I am crushing olives to make a funeral oil. --Alas! alas! And who has died, mayhap? --How can you ask? Oh, say, how can you ask?

Torti-tortue, what are you doing there? --He fell into the sea. . . --Alas! alas! and tell me how was that? --From his white horses' backs. From his white horses' backs.[7](#)

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## PEDESTRIAN

One evening, as I sat before my door, a young man passed me by. He looked at me, I turned away. He spoke to me, I did not answer him. He would have come nearer. I took a scythe that leaned against the wall and should have split his cheek had he advanced one pace. Then, stepping back a little, he began to smile, and blew across his hand, saying: "A kiss for you." I screamed and wept. My mother ran to me, Anxiously, thinking I had been stung by a scorpion. I cried, "He kissed me." My mother kissed me too, and bore me off in her arms.

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## AWAKENING

It is already daylight. I should have long arisen. But morning sleep is sweet, and the warmth of the bed keeps me snuggled up. I want to stay still longer.

Soon I'll go to the stable. I'll give grass and flowers to the goats, and a skin of fresh water, drawn from the well; and I shall drink out of it just as they.

Then I'll tie them to the post and draw the milk from their warm udders; and, if the kids are not jealous, we all shall suck the soft teats together.

Did not Amalthea<sup>8</sup> give suck to Zeus? Then I shall go. But not yet. The sun arose too soon, and mother has not yet awakened.

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## RAIN

Softly and in silence the fine rain has moistened everything. It is still raining a little. I am going to stroll under the trees. Bare-footed, not to soil my sandals.

The spring rains are delicious. Branches laden with rain-soaked blossoms daze me with their perfume. The delicate skin of the bark shines in the sun.

Alas! how many blooms have fallen to earth. Pity the fallen flowers. Pray do not sweep them up, or crush them in the mud: but leave them to the bees.

Beetles and snails promenade in the pathways between the pools of water; I do not wish to tread upon them, nor frighten this gilded lizard which stretches and blinks its eyes.

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