

## Cashman Kerr Prince

### Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, and the Queered Lyric Voice

Published in 1894, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* presents itself as the French translation by Pierre Louÿs (pen name of Pierre-Félix Louis) of texts engraved on the walls of a tomb on Cyprus. Dating from the sixth century BCE, these poems record the amorous life of a female contemporary of Sappho, who, like Sappho (only more explicitly) loved women.

The «Vie de Bilitis» which opens Louÿs' translation quotes from the site report of the German archaeologist G. Heim; the young Louÿs was then inspired to present the first French translation of these lyric poems in "rhythmical prose." In both the first, and expanded second editions, of *Les Chansons*, the tables of contents list titles of poems which are not translated; with titles such as "The Joy" and "The Bed," the audience is left to assume some poems, although written 2,500 years previous, were too explicit for even fin-de-siècle French readers. Despite this seeming reticence, Louÿs found a large and receptive audience for his book.

For all the trappings of verisimilitude, these poems are fraudulent translations. Under the guise of translating the love lyrics of an ancient Greek courtesan, Louÿs wrote original poems in prose. This translation is a deliberate obfuscation: Louÿs' Bilitis takes its starting point from the notice of one Damophyla, an imitator of Sappho, in Philostratos' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. The spirit of ancient Greece suffuses these poems, yet this is a resurrection of an imagined ancient Greece; perhaps most daringly, one poem recounts Bilitis waking next to Sappho (or, "Psappha," as her name appears in *Bilitis*). Scholars still debate Louÿs' intentions; suffice it to say that some readers were deceived by these "translations" and many took Bilitis for a real personage (including the editors of some dictionaries of Classical antiquities).

History and lyric merge; so do sex and lies. From the pen of a French dandy and decadent, nominally heterosexual, came the poster-girl for early twentieth century lesbianism: when Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney started hosting their (largely lesbian) literary salon, they styled themselves followers of Bilitis. (Indeed, Louÿs was a major influence on the literary style of Vivien.) The first edition was dedicated to André Gide; following a rupture between these two men, the dedication of the second edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* reads: "This little book of antique love is respectfully dedicated to the young women of a future society." From Vivien and Barney, the image of this "future society" passed (thirty years after the author's death) to the American lesbian movement, The Daughters of Bilitis (founded in San Francisco in 1955). From the nexus of Classical archaeology (imagined) and Classical philology (real), decadence, literary deceit, the rise of homosexuality (as a category), and some degree of prurient sexual interest on the part of Louÿs into the love-lives of lesbians, was born an enduring figure of twentieth-century lesbian hopes and dreams. Bilitis began as an apparition, one man's shocking (certainly to Wilamowitz) and subversive expression of lesbian desire in the ancient Mediterranean; a miasma of Orientalism veils this fictional embodiment of female homosexual desire. Yet from this queer beginning comes a queer icon; Bilitis lives on, having transcended Louÿs'

literary deception to acquire new layers of meaning from successive generations of lesbians in search of a foremother.

This paper proposes to present *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, examine poems typical of the collection, and trace the confluence of events which speak through the figure of Bilitis. Within this nexus of influences we see the imbrication of Classical Studies and queer identity; fortunately for us, this is an instance of vice speaking (in French, if not in ancient Greek).