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Les Chansons de Bilitis: A Symbiotic Collaboration between Two Artists Claude Debussy and Pierre Louys with an Annotated Performance Guide and Original Translations

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LES CHANSONS DE BILITIS: A SYMBIOTIC COLLABORATION BETWEEN TWO ARTISTS CLAUDE DEBUSSY AND PIERRE LOUYS WITH AN ANNOTATED PERFORMANCE GUIDE AND ORIGINAL TRANSLATIONS

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ABSTRACT


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This document examines Claude Debussy’s *Les Chansons de Bilitis* to understand how Debussy, in his musical settings reflects the literary texts of *Bilitis* written by Pierre Louÿs. The purpose is to gain insight into the interdisciplinary collaborations among artists in *fin-de-siècle* France. Many of Debussy’s most famous pieces, such as *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, were inspired by poetry. In this document I contend that *Les Chansons de Bilitis* could play a more meaningful role within the repertoire of the flute canon. This piece was composed in 1901 with a unique instrumentation of two flutes, two harps, celesta, and female narrator and is structured in such a way that the music and poetry do not overlap in sequence of the performance. This allows complete emphasis and understanding of Louÿs’s words with a direct reflection in the music. Chapter one of this document discusses background information about Debussy, Louÿs, the poetry collection, and circumstances of the musical work. Chapter two of this document provides a musical and literary analysis of the work as published in 1971 by Jobert. I have translated the twelve poems from French to English, as I believe it is extremely important to understand the text in order to capture Debussy’s musical intentions. This document is different from previous publications because it takes into great consideration the importance of the text in relation to the music.
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Chapter 1: Background

A Brief Biography of Claude Debussy

Achille-Claude Debussy is arguably one of the most influential French music composers of the modern era. His compositions greatly influenced composers in the twentieth century and continue to hold sway with composers in the twenty-first century. His experimental approaches to chromaticism, tonality, timbre, and sonority can be seen in the free forms of melody today. Several of the prominent modern compositional styles such as impressionism and spectralism hold their beginnings in Debussy’s music.

Debussy was born in 1862 to a modest family that owned and operated a small china shop. He began taking piano lessons at a young age with Jean Cerutti and Antoinette-Flore Mauté de Fleurville. Interestingly, Fleurville was symbolist writer Paul Verlaine’s mother-in-law. Debussy would later go on to set several of Verlaine’s texts, such as *Clair de lune*, to music. By the age of ten Debussy had entered into the prestigious Paris Conservatory, where he was successful at solfège and harmony, but with the piano he would not become a virtuoso. As a result he chose a path in musical composition. When Debussy began writing music, he often chose to set texts and poems to music. Some examples from early in his compositional career are *L’Enfant prodigue* and *Le Gladiateur*. Both pieces helped establish his credibility as a composer with their high placements in the Prix de Rome, a respected award for composition. *Le Gladiateur* was a cantata with words by Emile Moreau that won Debussy the second prize. *L’Enfant prodigue*, a stage piece with libretto by Edouard Guinand won Debussy the first prize in 1884.
As a young man, Debussy started forming relationships with writers and musicians associated with the symbolist movement. He built significant friendships with the composer Paul Dukas and the authors Stéphane Mallarmé and Pierre Louÿs. Mallarmé would hold gatherings at his home on Tuesday nights with other writers and artists such as, Paul Verlaine, Paul Gauguin, and André Gide.\(^1\) Debussy would often join the group as the only musical composer; he anecdotally noted that he often got along better with writers than musicians. “As far back as Debussy’s early years at the Conservatory in the 1870s he was discontented with music as it was then being taught, and he preferred the company of literary men to that of musicians.”\(^2\)

The symbolist movement “was characterized by rejection of naturalism, of realism and of overly clearcut [sic] forms, hatred of emphasis, indifference to the public, and a taste for the indefinite, the mysterious, even the esoteric.”\(^3\) The symbolist writers often tried to make their writing more musical. They let the syllables and sounds of the words determine the free style verses in their poetry. While the writers were striving for a more musical text, Debussy also adopted many of the symbolist values into his compositions. For example, Debussy avoids using traditional forms such as sonata form in his music. Arthur Wenk asserts of Debussy’s music that, “the form of each new work


had to emerge from the underlying musical idea, so that there would be complete unity between the material and its structure.”⁴ Debussy was revolutionary when he broke free from the use of long-established forms in order to let the music dictate the form to best portray his ideas and emotions. In addition, he commonly did not follow conventional harmonic chord progressions and often experimented with timbres and unique modes and scales, such as the whole-tone and pentatonic scales. Through his distinct compositional style, Debussy, like the symbolist poets “tended toward obscurity, a dreamlike expression full of evocative images whose exact significance often remained unclear.”⁵ This can be seen in the general designation given to Debussy’s musical style, impressionism.

Impressionism began as an art movement in France with painters such as Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Monet, and Paul Cézanne. These painters were interested in color and light, and they would often paint the same subjects. They frequently used natural scenery at different times of the day as their subjects to display the differences in shading and the color spectrum. The paintings of this era are also characterized through the avoidance of strong brush strokes and lines that clearly define objects. Embodying many of these ideals, composers of the impressionist style often use motives to represent objects, or ideas, and avoid expected concrete cadences. They also experiment with instrumental orchestration and timbral blends in different settings. By 1887 the term impressionism had become synonymous with Debussy’s music. He even used the word when describing his own work, La Mer.⁶ The deep intertwining of compositional

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⁵ Ibid., 9.

⁶ Lesure, *Grove Music Online*. 
elements, literary lines, and physical movement formulate the understanding of the art, literature, and musical motives essential to interpreting Debussy’s musical language.

Many of Debussy’s compositions from 1888–1900 draw influence from Richard Wagner. During this period of his life he often travelled to Bayreuth to see Wagner’s epic operas. Debussy admired Wagner’s creation of Gesamtkunstwerk, the synthesis of music, words, staging, and theater into complete, total works of art. Wagner’s compositional ideas of amalgamation can clearly be heard in Debussy’s music with his integrations of texts and musical themes. The combination of words and the use of motivic chromaticisms can be observed specifically in his opera Pelléas et Mélisande. Some even consider the opera to be the “the French Tristan.” In Pelléas et Mélisande Debussy makes use of Wagner’s idea of leitmotifs; certain chords, melodic material, or harmonies that represent specific ideas, characters, or emotions.

In 1889, Debussy attended the World Exhibition where he was exposed to Javanese Gamelan music. This experience opened his compositional palette to include exotic new sounds. In gamelan music the harmonies move slowly, the whole-tone scale, and scales other than the Western classical modes are used. More features of gamelan are the use of drones and cyclic forms and ideas. Debussy learned that he could create beautiful music without having to conform to traditions. As Debussy developed his own compositional style, he began to experiment with traits found in both gamelan music and Wagner’s music. Debussy began to use elements such as harmonic stasis, timbre, chromaticism, avoidance of tonality through unique chord progressions, and


8 Wenk, Twentieth-Century Music, 10.
collaboration with other artists. These artists came from diverse fields including: literature, visual art, theater, and dance.

The synthesis of different styles in Debussy’s compositions are evident in his opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*, where the mixing of eastern and western musical ideas are heard. The opera was first performed in 1902; this large-scale work gave Debussy a reputation as an important figure in composition. *Pelléas et Mélisande* was a product of several years of work and compromise with the playwright, Maurice Maeterlinck. Debussy paid extreme detail to the musical setting of Maeterlinck’s play into an opera. Each aspect of the play was masterfully captured by Debussy’s musical representations of characters and scenery. In addition to this fusion of words, music, and drama, as Arthur Wenk states, Debussy also makes particular use of the whole-tone scale.\(^9\) Wenk discusses Debussy’s musical motives, choice of keys, and scales, which represent specific feelings, ideas, or events in the work. This notion of specific pairings of motives with objects and ideas will be investigated in my analysis of his incidental musical piece, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*.

After the completion of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy’s goal was to create a French national style of composition that was not a copy of Western European styles. He strove to create music that represented the French identity, but which also included new compositional ideas. As seen through Debussy’s frequent use of language in his music, French became a crucial aspect of his compositional style. Debussy paid close attention when setting text to the syllables and the natural emphasis of the words in order to emulate the rhythm of the text in his pieces. In addition to setting text to music, Debussy

also endeavored to make his music as free as the verses in many of the literary works he read. “Debussy understood that contemporary poetry was home to some of the most imaginative creative minds, who were producing exciting new sounds, senses, and rhythms, and he chose to work at his own art on that site.”¹⁰ He truly wanted to create a musical style that would represent the French as a people, just as their language does. This idea fit with an emergence of nationalistic tendencies at the turn of the century that became prominent across many different fields.

One way in which Debussy was able to break away from contemporary influences was by going back to ancient and historical musical characteristics. A common occurrence in the arts in search of new inspiration is to model new works on early or classical subjects. The writer, Pierre Louÿs did this when writing his collection of poetry, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* through his references to ancient Greek poets, such as Sappho, Greek mythology, for instance, Aphrodite, and through his modeling of Meleager’s poems.¹¹ Debussy also followed this practice when he set to music poetry by Charles d’Orléans and Tristan L’Hermite.¹² The occurrence of looking to the past for a muse may be cited several times in diverse genres with many different artists. In Debussy’s music, his correlation to “ancient style…comprises pentatonic melodies in the minor or Dorian modes, a characteristic rhythm of slow even notes, a reliance on major and minor triads

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¹² Lesure, *Grove Music Online*. 
with relatively few added-note chords, and diatonic parallel progressions.” In *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Debussy makes frequent use of modes and pentatonic scales to musically represent the time period of ancient Greece.

As well as being stimulated by artists and writers, Debussy used methods borrowed from other composers and incorporated them into his own style. For instance, in the case of the cyclic form used in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Debussy used a cyclic technique to create unity, which was often associated with the composer César Franck and Gamelan music. In this piece, Debussy uses recurring themes to demonstrate stability and change through his instrumentations. For example, the flute first plays the main pastoral theme presented at the beginning of the piece. In the end of the work, the harps play this same theme.

From other composers he borrowed the ideas of using “the whole-tone scale and the alternation of nonfunctional chords.” These influences came from Russian composers, in particular, Modest Mussorgsky. Mussorgsky’s opera, *Boris Godunov* demonstrated ideas that Debussy used in his own opera, *Pelléas et Melisande*. To Debussy, Mussorgsky wrote music that did not conform to formal strictures. He believed that Mussorgsky expressed his ideas and emotions in a liberated manner; which is what

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14 Lesure, *Grove Music Online*.


Debussy was drawn to. Another influence from the Russian composers was Debussy’s “taste for ancient and oriental modes and for vivid colorations.”

In his search for a musical personality, Debussy found a distinctive musical style and created characteristics that became identifiers for which he is known today. Many of these appear in Les Chansons de Bilitis. For example, Debussy often juxtaposes diatonic and chromatic passages to display the human sensitivities of security versus insecurity, as seen in the last movement of the piece. The influences from gamelan music greatly marked Debussy’s compositional traits as well and appear in several movements of Les Chansons de Bilitis, which makes use of pentatonic and whole-tone scales. He further avoids tonal centers and cadence points to express a sense of cyclic recurrence and thematic growth. In this composition, Debussy employs these techniques to demonstrate what the poetry is portraying. Debussy often reuses, cyclically, material with different backgrounds to create a different atmosphere and intention for the characters. In addition, he makes frequent use of ostinatos and harmonic stasis. Wenk states of Debussy’s influences:

Symbolist poetry, the music of the ‘Russian Five’ (Mussorgsky, Borodin, Balakirev, Cui, and Rimsky-Korsakov), Javanese gamelan music: all provided Debussy with models for replacing a strictly linear conception of music with a circular conception in which the individual moment might take precedence over the relationships among moments, in which time might take the form of succession rather than progression, and in which the notion of goals might be greatly diminished if not altogether abolished.

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17 Lesure, Grove Music Online.

18 Wenk, Twentieth-Century Music, 57.
Through his combination of unique musical elements and ideas, Debussy created a distinctive compositional style that continues to influence artists in the twenty-first century.

**A Brief Biography of Pierre Louÿs**

French writer, Pierre Louis, was born in 1870 to an upper-middle-class family. After 1890, Louis changed his name to Louÿs to display his affinity toward the Greek language and classical subjects. In French, Y is *i grec*, a Greek ι, also he insisted on the final pronunciation of the Σ. Louÿs excelled as a student and had met a classmate who would soon become one of his closest friends, André Gide. Gide, a Nobel Prize winning author, regularly spent time with Louÿs travelling and attending social events. Gide and Louÿs held many similar ideals. For example, both writers were closely associated with the symbolist movement. They also believed that writing could inspire a high level of morality and Gide, like Louÿs, championed for women’s rights. In addition, classicism appealed to both men in terms of subject matter and writing style. Through his works, Gide follows the “laws of traditional classicism…he probes contemporary problems of universal significance, in which he constantly strives for the attainment of absolute technical mastery.”

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20 Niederauer, 11.


22 Ibid., 100.
As a great admirer of music and painting, Louÿs frequently appeared at concerts and exhibits. As a writer Louÿs stated, «Je voudrais être en literature ce que Massenet est devenu en musique,» ′I would like to be in literature that which Massenet had become in music.′ \(^{23}\) The influence of music is reflected in Louÿs′s writing with his choice of words, syllables, phrasing, and flow of verses. In a parallel approach to his contemporary symbolist writers, Louÿs aimed to make his writing musical. Some early influences in his writing career were the poets of ancient Greece and the writers Victor Hugo and Johann Wolfgang van Goethe.\(^{24}\) These writers shaped Louÿs′s writing style and choices for subject material. Many of Louÿs′s favorite topics included writings in ancient Greek which motivated him to translate several works into French. His affinity for Greek culture would later incline him to write his collection of poems about a Greek woman named Bilitis.

Louÿs′s social status and artistry would soon lead him to a network of likeminded individuals which included Claude Debussy. According to David Niederauer, Louÿs and Debussy met in 1892.\(^{25}\) Other sources have diverse years, which range from 1890–1893. This close friendship spanned approximately twelve years and scholars agree that this friendship was extremely important in Debussy and Louÿs′s lives. Both artists appeared in the same social circles and rose to fame around the same time. Louÿs sparked Debussy′s interest in ancient subjects through his passion for ancient Greece.

\(^{23}\) Niederauer, 16.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 17.

\(^{25}\) Ibid., 50.
Louys first gained popularity with his novel, *Aphrodite*, published in 1896. The fame that he received from this novel helped give him momentum for a second edition of his earlier collection of poems, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, a source of collaboration for Louys and Debussy. Victor Seroff states that, “In Louys, Debussy saw the personification of his ideal – freedom from material worries, independence of any ties, freedom to devote his life to the service of beauty and art.”26 Debussy and Louys became close friends as a result of their artistic values and ardors. They would have stimulating, intellectual discussions about art, literature, and music. In addition, both men’s lives aligned in terms of family and career. Toward the end of their friendship around 1900, they both got married and had new familial obligations.

Another common interest between Debussy and Louys was the composer Richard Wagner. Debussy greatly respected Wagner, but eventually tried to free his compositional style from the influence of Wagner. In contrast, Louys considered Wagner to be one of his preferred composers. “… as for Wagner, Louys said that if he was not the greatest man that ever lived, he certainly was the man who since the origin of art understood better than anyone that an action has different gradations.”27 Louys and Debussy would discuss Wagner’s operas often fighting over their differing opinions, but would always resolve their disputes. However, Debussy frequently travelled to people’s homes to perform several of Wagner’s operas on piano.28

26 Seroff, 125.

27 Ibid., 128.

28 Ibid., 129.
Even though Louÿs and Debussy’s paths began to diverge around 1900, one significant work, *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, was completed. Other collaborations “Abandoned one by one were *Cendrelune*, a musical Christmas tale, a *Daphnis and Chloé* ballet, a score for *Aphrodite*, and a symphonic suite to be entitled *Le Voyage du roi Pausole.*”29 For the duration of their friendship, Debussy was preoccupied with writing and editing his opera, *Pelléas et Mélisande*. As a result, he did not have much free time to work on other extensive projects with Louÿs.

Debussy and Louÿs continued to find time to make trips to see Wagner’s operas. Upon suggestion from Gide, Louÿs skipped one of these trips to Bayreuth and instead travelled to Algeria. Gide introduced Louÿs to a young girl, named Meyrem, who “inspired (Louÿs) to complete the manuscript…of his ardent *Chansons de Bilitis.*”30 By the time he met Meyrem, Louÿs had already completed the majority of the poetry in the collection, but Meyrem provided the model for Bilitis and catalyst that pushed Louÿs to finish the work in 1894. In 1897, Louÿs made another trip to Algeria and met an exotic woman, named Zohra, who inspired additional poems for his collection. Louÿs interspersed these new poems into the second edition of *Chansons de Bilitis* published by the end of 1897.31 Louÿs’s thoughts on his writings and his fondness for ancient text are displayed in his publications with the literary magazine, *Mercure de France*. “Louÿs sought to defend the thesis he had first presented in *Aphrodite* which held that the greatness of antiquity was accompanied by a generally high level of sensuality and moral

29 Niederauer, 50.

30 Ibid., 51.

31 Ibid., 63.
freedom.” In his writing, not only did Louÿs create social commentary, but he also tried to change proscribed views on sexuality in writing. He did not believe it to be a taboo subject that should be avoided. Louÿs used ancient settings of his writings to make their erotic nature more socially acceptable and to elevate the forbidden content as higher art.

Regarding Louÿs’s works overall, “a theme which will reappear throughout Louÿs’s writings from his first book to his last: the theme of Lesbian love.” Les Chansons de Bilitis clearly portrays this theme, as it contains poetry about a lesbian relationship between the main character, Bilitis, and another woman Mnasidika.

Furthermore the relationships among female courtesans are also explored. Louÿs stated:

La femme est, en vue de l’amour, un instrument accompli. Des pieds à la tête elle est faite uniquement, merveilleusement, pour l’amour. Elle seule sait aimer. Elle seule sait être aimée. Par conséquent, si un couple amoureux se compose de deux femmes, il est parfait; s’il n’en a qu’une seule il est moitié moins bien; s’il n’en a aucune, il est purement idiot. J’ai dit.

[The woman is, in view of love, an accomplished instrument. From her feet to her head she is uniquely, marvelously made for love. She alone knows how to love. She alone knows how to be loved. Therefore, if a loving couple consists of two women, it is perfect; if there is only one half is good; if there is none, it is purely idiotic. I say.] 34

Louÿs tried to establish this strong opinion of female sexuality in his writings. In Les Chansons de Bilitis, he describes the maternal instincts of women and depicts forms of love by means of lesbian and female relationships. In his writings the males are often portrayed raping the courtesans and not respecting the women as much as they respect one another, displaying an inherent inequality between the sexes in society.

32 Niederauer, 66.

33 Ibid., 100.

34 Ibid., 135.
Even though Louÿs often sets his texts in the past, there are many aspects of modernity. For instance, Louÿs believed that:

In such a liberated atmosphere, women, as the most oppressed segment of society, would experience the greatest gains. Louÿs championed the cause of women and his works abound in his cult for women and his desire to help them attain this new freedom, especially in sexual matters, which, to his sensually oriented way of thinking, could only lead to a millennium, a new golden age to eventually replace the joyous antiquity which he and others viewed with nostalgia…To be sure, all of Louÿs’s principal heroines – Bilitis, Chrysis, Concha – are sexually emancipated, but how better to underline this fact than by allowing them at times to assume guiltlessly the active male role in love?35

Throughout his life, Louÿs witnessed inequality among the sexes. This is one reason why he set his writings in ancient times. In his works, Louÿs desired to affect societal stereotypes of women and female sexuality. He wanted to portray these gender roles in a different setting and break away from the traditional view of women. “Louÿs believed that one of the functions of literature was to provide society with a model, a new standard of morality.”36 Art not only provides a reflection of society and history, but Louÿs believed that it has the power to change the present and future. “In this campaign to rehabilitate passion Louÿs became an outspoken apologist of the Greek ideal and a part of the eternal tradition of writers caught up in the Hellenic dream.”37 The return to ancient settings enabled artists to combine principles and traditions once held of beauty above all with modern ideas such as feminism and sexual freedom.

35 Niederauer, 179.
36 Ibid., 180.
37 Ibid., 200.
Les Chansons de Bilitis: The Poetry Collection

In 1894, Pierre Louÿs published, Les Chansons de Bilitis, a collection of ninety-three poems that he alleged to have translated into French from ancient Greek. The structure of the poems “was clearly derived from the epigrams of the Anthology, (Greek Anthology) in particular from those of Meleager.”38 Prior to the publication of the collection, Louÿs had published his translations of epigrams by Meleager. Thus, in order to make his translations appear to be authentic, he imitated Greek poetical style. The content and character of Bilitis are similar to Sappho, an Ancient Greek poetess who wrote songs of love. Each poem consists of four verses, often in sonnet form with the most important line frequently being the first of the third verse. Les Chansons de Bilitis dealt with the powerful themes of rape, child abandonment, and gay marriage. These then-taboo subjects, coupled with the authorial hoax gained its creator rapid and successful public attention.

Louÿs convinced several scholars of the existence of a mysterious woman, Bilitis, of the authenticity of her writings, and the legitimacy of her tomb. “After the appearance of the Chansons de Bilitis an impassioned debate ensued among all the noted archeologists who supported Louÿs’ hoax with all the force of their erudition. The discovery of the tomb of Bilitis was especially remarked.”39 In the foreword to the collection, Louÿs described Bilitis’s tomb surrounded by her writings on the walls with three epitaphs in her sarcophagus. Being very well versed in ancient Greek history and the ancient Greek language, Louÿs was able to support his claim of Bilitis’s physical

38 Niederauer, 134.

39 Wenk, Poets, 175.
being. In the publication of his collection of poems, he took credit for translating the verses from ancient Greek. It was not until several years later that he had admitted to writing the poetry himself.

A second edition of the collection was published in 1898. The main difference in the second edition is the number of poems included. The 1898 edition consists of 143 poems and an additional three epitaphs. In this newer edition, Louÿs intermingled his most recent poems among the ones from the first edition. Also, he revised many of the original poems. Louÿs still retained the idea of mentioning non-translated poems. The titles of these non-translated poems however differed between the two editions. Moreover, in the 1898 edition, Louÿs still listed himself as a translator, not author.\textsuperscript{40}

Les Chansons de Bilitis follows the main character, Bilitis, throughout her life. There are three main sections with the concluding epitaphs framing the collection. Louÿs prefaces both editions by providing a brief biography of Bilitis. He describes the areas and villages in which she lived, several important life events, the love of her life, and an account of her tomb. Within the collection there are references to Greek gods, goddesses, terminology, ancient cities and villages, and mythical creatures, such as fauns and nymphs. These references helped Louÿs establish authenticity when making claims of Bilitis’s having lived. The collection is written from Bilitis’s point of view and with her narrations. There are many gaps in her life story because the poetry only describes particular events in her life that she wanted to record.

The first section subtitled, *Bucolics in Pamphylia*, contains the first 46 poems. Louÿs captures pastoral settings in the poetry through his descriptions of Bilitis as a young girl before the age of sixteen growing up in sixth-century Pamphylia surrounded by pastures and wildlife. The poems that appear at the beginning of the collection are also filled with descriptions of Bilitis’s explorations of different relationships with her mother, sisters, friends, and men. These connections shape her personality and the choices that she will make throughout her life. During her early days in Pamphylia, she heavily relies upon her mother’s assurance when her best friend gets married. In addition, Bilitis discovers what it means to have a secret relationship with a male lover and how to depend upon others. This first section of serene poetry is filled with innocent, naïve discoveries and ideas that soon are transformed as Bilitis moves to a new city.

The second section subtitled, *Elegies at Mytilene*, consists of poems 47–98 and begins with Bilitis’s arrival in the city of Mytilene. By the age of sixteen, Bilitis leaves her childhood behind by abandoning her baby and beginning a new life as a courtesan. In Mytilene, Bilitis finds a life full of vanity, alcohol, and sex. She is exposed to a world in which women form intimate relationships with each other as a result of their social status and obligations. The men occupy their time with dancers and courtesans while the women in their families find comfort with one another. Ultimately, this collection is about love in several different forms, such as familial love, respect, sexual relationships, friendship, and love among significant others. Louÿs believed that “loves without motives last the longest.” He reflects this proposition in the text when Bilitis finds the
love of her life, Mnasidika. They go on to maintain an intimate relationship and marriage for ten years.\footnote{Pierre Louÿs, \textit{The Songs of Bilitis}, trans. Mitchell S. Buck (New York: Liverlight Publishing Corporation, 1932), 237.}

The last section in the collection is subtitled \textit{Epigrams on the Isle of Cyprus}. This portion encompasses poems 99–155. After discovering her wife with another woman, Bilitis becomes overwhelmed with jealousy and ends her relationship with Mnasidika. She moves to Cyprus to begin life anew. Continuing her life as a courtesan in a new city, Bilitis’s poetry now reflects her life experiences and recollections as an older woman. In Cyprus, courtesans came from the wealthiest families and were treated with respect, to contrast how Bilitis was treated earlier in her life.\footnote{Rachel Iwaasa, "Fragmentation and Eros in Debussy's ‘Chansons De Bilitis’ and "Six Epigraphes Antiques’" (PhD diss., The University of British Columbia (Canada), 2007), 33, accessed November 15, 2014, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.} The people of Cyprus praised the goddess Aphrodite, and offered a lifetime of devotion to her. Throughout this section, Bilitis describes personal conflicts, love, casual encounters, emotions, and memories from her past life. Unlike the youthful experiences from Bilitis’s formative years, the latter portion of her life displays her strength as a human being. This is especially shown through her perseverance in situations of rape. It is also displayed in Bilitis’s need to be loved and remembered in her poems about Mnasidika and Bilitis’s overall storytelling. Bilitis’s passion for the verses of her songs appears in the recollection her life’s story and her statement from “La Pluie au matin,” ‘The Morning Rain,’ that those who have loved her will sing her songs together.
Bilitis’s memoirs give the reader an insight into a life that would normally be ignored and put aside as that of any other prostitute. Louys’s choice of setting Bilitis in this era and putting her sexual encounters in an acceptable situation falls in line with a “long tradition of using antique subjects to confer respectability to erotic art.” In the first two editions of the collection Louys included a number of poems that he labeled as non-translated, implying that the content was too sexually explicit and unsuitable for publication. The overall substance included in the erotic poetry reflects Bilitis’s relationships and observations of mainly lesbian affairs. Louys drew inspiration for Bilitis’s character from women in his own life. The first edition of the poetry reflects a relationship he held with a sixteen-year-old girl, Meryem, whom he met while in Algeria. More poems were added to the second edition, this time with inspiration from another exotic Algerian woman named Zohra. Through his portrayals of human relationships, especially intimate female relationships, Louys sought to shed a different light onto lesbianism through literary art. He states that, ‘In particular, I believe that the second part will seem very novel. Till now, lesbians were always portrayed as femmes fatales (Balzac, Musset, Baudelaire, Rops), or profligate (Zola, Mendès, and in comparison with them, a hundred others of lesser importance).’ Through his poetry, Louys expresses fragility and universality in human relationships of antiquity and modernity.

43 Grayson, 117.
44 Ibid., 118.
45 Ibid., 120.
46 Ibid., 124.
In the twenty-first century, the sexual implications in the poetry of Louys on the topics of lesbianism, prostitution, and rape remain to this day issues of avoidance. Louys displays Bilitis’s range of emotions on the subject matter with text including initial feelings of guilt and shame within the poetry. Louys then transforms Bilitis’s emotions through an alteration in perception of the society that made situations of rape acceptable in conjunction with an ideal that there is a general need for interaction and love between beings. Bilitis comes to learn of the separation of love and sex and to realize that love in any form is acceptable, regardless of the source. In this collection, we are shown how the character Bilitis finds her true self and becomes comfortable with her individuality. Louys constructed a life for Bilitis that was not perfect, but was filled with sentiments close to him. Love, nature, honesty, and self-acceptance are lessons for Bilitis and readers alike. As Mitchell Buck states of Louys, “…perhaps he may help us better to feel the spirit of the nocturnal, silver-flooded landscape, the glory in the surge of the sea, the mystery of life in the shadowy glades of the forest. We need someone to teach us such things.”47 Falling in line with the Greek ideals, Louys sought to portray beauty through his florid descriptions of nature, human relationships, and love and with those depictions make a place for them in contemporary society.

Les Chansons de Bilitis: Debussy’s Music and Performance Realization

By invitation from Louys, Debussy created several settings of selected poems from the collection, Les Chansons de Bilitis. The first of Debussy’s settings of Louys’s poems calls for female voice and piano, entitled, Trois Chansons de Bilitis, published in 1899. This work sets poetry from the first edition of the collection released in 1894.

47 Buck, The Songs of Bilitis, xii.
Debussy had initiated the artistic collaboration by asking Louÿs for approval to set the poem, “La Flûte de Pan.” Louÿs countered with a proposal for Debussy to set “La Chevelure.” In addition to setting these two poems to music, Debussy included a third, “Le Tombeau des Naïades.” One of Debussy’s biographers, Léon Vallas considers these three songs to be some of Debussy’s “most significant and perfect works.” Debussy paid great detail to setting the vocal line to preserve the rhythm of the text in each of these three Louÿs collaborations. Also, great consideration was given to the musical lines as emotional and figurative representations of the poetry. The combination of setting music for voice and instruments to poetry is an inspired achievement of connecting different arts.

As the compositional process advanced for Debussy he ruminated on further ideas for Bilitis. After attending a lecture about Louÿs’s poetry collection in 1898, Debussy gained a greater understanding and decided to use a female narrator in his next musical setting of Louÿs’s poetry. In a letter to Louÿs, Debussy wrote, “what’s the point of making Bilitis sing either in the major or in the minor, considering hers is the most persuasive voice in the world… I say that if Bilitis is there, let her speak without accompaniment.” The structure of this setting of Les Chansons de Bilitis is a direct

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48 Grayson, 120.


50 Robert Orledge, Debussy and the Theater, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 245

result of Debussy not wanting to obscure the text or music with overlap of the gesture of narrator or instruments. The creation of this work came about because Louÿs had asked Debussy to write music to accompany the mimed recitation of several of the poems at a performance for the publisher, _Le Journal_, at the Salle des Fêtes.\(^\text{52}\) The exclusive performance of the work for three hundred people included recitation of the poetry and musical accompaniment for staged _tableaux vivants_.\(^\text{53}\) Models would hold poses reflective of the poetry while the narration and music were being presented. As a respected writer, _Le Journal_ supported Louÿs, so he was allowed certain freedoms when exhibiting this work to the select public. Two performances of the work were originally scheduled, even though only one performance would come to fruition. The second performance would have been performed at the Théâtre des Variétés, which often featured nude performers, similar to the Moulin Rouge. According to David Grayson, “Ferdinand Samuel, director of the Théâtre des Variétés, wished to repeat the performance at his theater but wanted music to be incorporated into the production.”\(^\text{54}\) It is unclear as to the reasons why the second performance did not occur and even the performance at _Le Journal_ was denied to have ever taken place.\(^\text{55}\)

With the intent of these two performances, Louÿs and Debussy were able to choose models who presented the tableaux in the nude, or partially nude. “The fact that it was a private soirée made the work less vulnerable to moral censure than it would have

\(^{52}\) Grayson, 124.

\(^{53}\) Seroff, 183.

\(^{54}\) Grayson, 121.

\(^{55}\) Seroff, 183.
been had it been a public entertainment.”\textsuperscript{56} Although it is a common occurrence, governmental editing of art still happens to this day. Louÿs had been quite vocal about the freedom of speech and expression through his articles released into publication. An article that appeared in the \textit{Mercure de France} in 1897 “challenged the prevailing attitude that nudity and lover were scandalous subjects and wondered why nudity created a furor onstage but was glorified in the plastic arts.”\textsuperscript{57} The singular performance of the work embodies a non-conformist attitude toward societal expectations of sex, nudity, and lesbianism. However, the performance with the inclusion of nudity did not go unnoticed or without opposition. French Senator René Bérenger intimidated the director of \textit{Le Journal} with a promise of arrest for the enactment.\textsuperscript{58} Louÿs strongly disagreed with Bérenger’s politics. Bérenger’s “violent and uncompromising opposition to any activity he deemed a danger to moral rectitude frequently led him to censure essentially harmless incidents.”\textsuperscript{59} Despite the attempt to stop the performance, it went ahead as scheduled.

The turn of the century was a time of significant change for France, and the art that was being created was a mirror for those revolutionary attitudes. The friendship between Louÿs and Debussy is representative of the collaboration and transcendence of genre between writers, musicians, and artists in \textit{fin-de-siècle} France. According to Paul Roberts, Debussy, “lived in an age obsessed with the interrelation of the arts, partly a

\textsuperscript{56} Grayson, 128.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 128.

\textsuperscript{58} Niederauer, 159.

consequence of the Wagnerian conception of the ‘total art form.’”⁶⁰ Many of Debussy’s most famous works were influenced by poetry, incorporated dancing, and maintained quintessential philosophies held by impressionists and symbolists close to him. *Les Chansons de Bilitis* demonstrates Debussy’s working partnership with Louÿs through the interaction of the music with the poetry and the staged tableaux. This is a significant work relevant for musicians today because of the opportunity to work with an uncommon chamber ensemble. Debussy’s piece showcases a unique orchestration of instruments with an interpretation of poetry that contains gripping social commentary.

**Issues with the interpretation of the piece**

Several speculations and discrepancies exist regarding the performance setting. *Les Chansons de Bilitis* musically interprets only twelve of the 143 poems and involves a unique instrumentation of two flutes, two harps, celesta, and female narrator. Regarding the performance, Debussy’s notes contain settings for twelve of the poems; however, in the review of the Salle des Fêtes only ten are listed.⁶¹ Also, in letters to his brother, Louÿs writes about only eleven of the poems.⁶² The inconsistency of the original number of poems performed is not the only irregularity between performance and poems set. The 1897 article review also listed the order of the poems in a different sequence from Debussy’s notes. Two of the poems, eight and nine, were reversed from Louÿs’s chronology in the poetry collection.⁶³ The harmonic change between the movements is

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⁶¹ Grayson, 122.

⁶² Ibid., 122.

⁶³ Ibid., 123.
more pronounced with the reversed order. If poems eight and nine are inverted then the contextual progression of the poetry is no longer chronological. In Louÿs’s collection, poem eight describes a relationship between courtesans and poem nine portrays a relationship between a courtesan and her client. The repercussions of the change in sequence for the performance goes from dealing with a heterosexual relationship to a homosexual relationship are disfiguring in terms of the poetry.

Another discrepancy deals with the instrumental parts. The celesta part and score were lost after the Salle des Fêtes performance. There are several scholars, such as Arthur Wenk who believe that Debussy improvised at the celesta during the concert. David Grayson however, believes that there is not “conclusive evidence that he (Debussy) was playing the celesta.” In the concert review, there is no mention of Debussy playing the celesta part. In addition, Debussy created a third setting of Louÿs’s collection for piano four-hands, therefore indicating that Debussy had a copy of the score still in his possession.

There are now numerous editions of Les Chansons de Bilitis even though this work was not published during Debussy’s lifetime. Regardless of the fact that the celesta part was lost, there remain several measures of celesta cues in the flute parts. Expanding upon these, Pierre Boulez edited the celesta part for the second performance of the piece in 1954, but regrettably this edition was never published. The first publication of the

64 Wenk, Poets, 178.
65 Ibid., 131.
piece came in 1971 by Jobert. Arthur Hoérée edited and contributed to the celesta part in this edition. Since 1971, there have been several other editions of the work with various instrumentations. One of the most recent editions was published by Amadeus in 2012 for two flutes and harp with or without narrator. The discrepancies in the publications indicate a difference in interpretation of how the original piece should be performed with varying emphasis on the voice of Bilitis and the instrumentation.

The structure of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is exceptional when looking at Debussy’s œuvre. However, many similarities occur between this work, *Prélude à l'après-midi d’un faune*, and *Syrinx*. Not only do they prominently feature the flute, but they were also all composed with the same formal structure in mind. In *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Debussy provides instruction within the score regarding the recitation of the poetry and the playing of the music: the two should not occur simultaneously. The alternation of narration and music enhances each component of the performance because the words spoken alone allow the text to be understood. For the audience, the music can be heard drawing a direct reflection of the poetry just as the tableaux did when it was originally performed. Despite several of the movements being broken up by the text, the continuity of Debussy’s musical ideas remain. The connection of music with poetry is mindful of one of his most famous compositions, *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*, published in 1894. The work, originally intended for theater, would have been divided intermittently between music and spoken text. Debussy eventually turned it into a complete concert piece that would accompany a ballet. Following this structure, a later work also important in the flute repertoire was *Syrinx* for solo, unaccompanied flute published in 1913. Debussy composed both *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and *Syrinx* as incidental music to accompany
text; *Les Chansons de Bilitis* set to poems by Pierre Louÿs and *Syrinx* set to text by Gabriel Mourey.⁶⁷ The interaction of words and melodic lines in these works provides musicians with insight into achieving a more in depth performance of the pieces. *Syrinx* like *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune* was originally divided into sections, but later made whole, as they are most commonly heard in performance settings.

In order to perform *Les Chansons de Bilitis* with appropriate stylistic characteristics, one must acquire an understanding of the complete work. It is important to know Debussy’s compositional influences and style in order to emphasize each of the different aspects of the piece. Debussy’s nuances with instrumentation, harmonic structure, scale patterns, chromaticism, and form reflect his options as representations of Louÿs’s poems. With text being an integral part of the work, one must also understand Louÿs’s choices in his poetry collection to know Bilitis’s story as a whole to find a truer gestural meaning. Since only twelve of the 143 poems are included, there are crucial aspects of Bilitis’s life that are inherently excluded, but simply implied. Therefore, interpretation of the text in relation to the musical setting is imperative to playing Debussy’s *Les Chansons de Bilitis* with the correct purpose.

⁶⁷ Grayson, 132.
Chapter 2: Literary and Musical Analysis of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*

**Introduction**

Throughout this portion of the paper, I will discuss the relationship between the text that Pierre Louÿs wrote, and the music that Claude Debussy composed for *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. The fin-de-siècle artists of France were famous for collaboration across disciplines and rugged political statements. The partnership of Louÿs and Debussy resulted in a style of music that forced audiences to take on a fresh gestalt in this imaginative story. *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is a piece that exemplifies the creation of aural spaces that demonstrate scenes depicted through narrated text; it is a cyclic illustration of “…the mythological associations of the text.”\(^\text{68}\) In a basic analysis, one can note that the piece musically ends as it began, with a pastoral melody. The twelve movements work together to portray a condensed story of Bilitis’s life. Debussy’s use of modes, motives, instrumentation, and sonority evoke and typify the characters and storyline of the chosen poems. An understanding of the overall story from the collection of poems is essential to a complete understanding of the piece. In addition, consideration of the different women who inspired the two editions of poetry must be given. Through musical analysis of each of the twelve movements, it is clear that Debussy had mastered musical representations of literary descriptions. Just as Louÿs illustrated these female characters in his two editions of the collection, Debussy captured the unique facets of their personalities in musical form.

As stated, Debussy musically set a total of twelve poems from the entirety of Louÿs collection on Bilitis. Seven of the poems set are derived from Louÿs’s first edition,

\(^{68}\) Wenk, *Poets*, 180.
while five are taken from his second edition. The musical settings for the two editions are contrasted through the diversity of the female muses of the poetry. In the piece, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the movements with poems from the first edition are two, three, five, seven, nine, eleven, and twelve, which gain novelty from Meryem’s persona, a woman Louÿs met in Algeria. Zohra, a Moorish model, motivated the remaining movements: one, four, six, eight, and ten. To interpret the variances between the movements, the structure of the music and the poetry must be contrasted. For example, four out of the five movements taken from the second edition are structured with interspersed poetry, while only one from the first edition follows this form. Furthermore, the five movements from the second edition combined are almost the same length as the seven movements from the first edition. Debussy represents these two versions of Bilitis quite differently. The poems that were inspired by Zohra contain exotic descriptions, which allow Debussy the freedom to use scales such as the pentatonic, whole-tone, and octatonic. These movements are more musically complex than the ones from the first edition. This is shown through the independence between the instrumental lines, the number of measures, and the more interactive structure of the movements. Within these movements Debussy musically expands upon the poetry by using the instrumentation to specifically represent different characters. He also varies the texture more in the Zohra inspired movements when emphasizing ideas or events in the poetry. These movements offer more melodic and harmonic variation because Debussy allows the characters in the poems and their inspiration to guide his musical settings.

As previously discussed, there are several different editions of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. This analysis is based on the Jobert edition published in 1971 and will incorporate
literary and musical discussion by drawing parallels between Louÿs’s poetry and Debussy’s musical realizations. This edition contains the original instrumentation for two flutes, two harps, celesta, and female narrator. Composer, Arthur Hoérée edited the celesta part, as the original was lost. He referenced the original score and reconstructed the part based on Debussy’s notes and his musical excerpts from *Six épigraphes antiques*. In this setting, the twelve poems from the collection by Louÿs alternate with the musical movements by Debussy without overlap between narration and music.

Debussy’s choice of flutes, harps, and celesta reflects his timbral desire for lighter instruments and shows his “attraction to the flute as an instrument of pure melody.” The flute and harp are also reflective of pastoral instruments. This will be seen throughout each movement as Debussy makes prominent use of the flutes when presenting melodic material. In addition, the use of the flute and harp, two instruments that existed in Ancient Greece, is a sonic representation of the time period of Louÿs’s poetry. Debussy’s affinity for the flute particularly, “serves as a symbol for musical and sexual initiation.” He similarly used this attraction for the instrument with his interest in the story of Pan and Syrinx. Debussy set the story several different times to varying instrumentation and for several occasions. The settings are, “La Flûte de Pan” from *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*, *Syrinx, Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune, Le faune* set to Verlaine’s work, and “Pour invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d’été” from *Six épigraphes antiques* for piano. Wenk further discusses Debussy’s choice of the flute in his works. “The narrative of Louÿs’ text clearly

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reflects the erotic implications of the myth, in which Pan literally plays upon Syrinx, like Mallarmé’s faun, employing the flute—a highly suggestive instrument for the purpose—to transform sexual frustration into art.”

The phallic representation of the flute as well as Debussy’s belief that the flute was symbolic of nature, make it an obvious choice when setting the story of Pan. In Bilitis’s story, the sensual and pastoral poetry validate Debussy’s likeness for the flute representing nature and Bilitis. Debussy said, “‘My favorite music is those few notes an Egyptian shepherd plays on his flute: he is part of the landscape around him, and he knows harmonies that aren’t in our books.’”

This statement epitomizes Debussy’s unique compositional style. In terms of instrumentation, tonality, and harmony he wrote music in a way that he felt and that displayed his emotions and intent, even though his works did not follow the traditional path.

In *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the quintet of instruments sets the tone for the entire composition and displays Debussy’s musical intentions as portrayals of the text. Some scholars such as Vallas, have dismissed this piece as being insignificant in Debussy’s work. “This music, written for two harps and two flutes, consisted of some hundred and fifty hastily written bars divided into a dozen numbers. It was a mere improvisation, pleasant and elegant, but of no great importance.”

This analysis will make evident the musical and literary synthesis of Debussy’s work. Together, Debussy and Louÿs created a unique work that encapsulated social attitudes in *fin-de-siècle* Paris, and brought to life a woman who never existed. This exceptional piece, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, shows the

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74 Vallas, 110.
importance of and demonstrates the personification of the interdisciplinary collaboration of the arts.

**Part I: Poems 1-6**

The first six poems contain texts from the first part of the collection describing Bilitis’s childhood up until the age of sixteen in Pamphylia with pastoral themes evocative of nature.

**I.**

Movement one, “Chant pastoral” [“Pastoral Song”] begins with an instrumental introduction that creates a calm mood. The solo first flute opens the composition with a singing three-measure, melodic, pastoral theme, as seen in figure 1.

Figure 1. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Chant pastoral,” mm. 1–3

This melody evokes the imagery of the first line in the poem. “One must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind.” Debussy orchestrates the flute to play a melody that can entice Pan to bring the summer wind carrying warmth and promise of a harvest. This movement contains one flat in the key signature; however, Debussy bases the melody on an F major pentatonic scale centered on the Dorian mode, G. He chose this unique pentatonic scale to depict the natural scenery and to express the exoticism of ancient Greece. Similar to the movement of the wind, the pastoral melody follows a
natural arc through a rise and fall of the pentatonic scale. As seen in the melodic line, Debussy juxtaposes duple and triple rhythms and 4/4 and 2/4 time signatures. He uses these changes to create a feeling of fluctuation and flexibility. From the poetry, the character Bilitis is distracted while watching Sélenis and their herds in the meadow. To show the conflict of Bilitis’s thoughts, Debussy obscures the time signature through his use of ties over the barlines and slurs that begin in the middle of the measure. The pastoral melody reaches its first resolution on the downbeat of the fourth measure. This resolution also begins a second restatement of the melody.

In measure four, the second flute joins the first in a unison repetition of the pastoral theme. Underneath the melody, the two harps enter also playing in unison and provide a simple chordal accompaniment. With this second statement, Debussy experiments with the color of the pastoral melody by using a different background. At the opening, the theme is presented alone, but in measure four, the chords in the harps support the melody. They provide rhythmic stability with their accompanying chords adding a natural emphasis to the phrasing of the melody. The celesta then enters in the fifth measure to generate an upward shift in the melody by an interval of a fourth. In measure seven, Debussy maintains the same F pentatonic scale and the modulation from G to C then changes the temperament. The pastoral theme becomes more insistent with a \textit{forte} dynamic, doubled parts, and an elongation of the note value of c’’. This is the highest note in the movement, occurring at the end of measure seven into measure eight. The harps help to reinforce the persistence by following the melodic shape of the flute lines. Within the poetry, the scene is described: the day is reaching its high point causing
the sun and the shade to move. Under the branches of the olive tree, Athena protects Bilitis and Sélénis as they watch their herds.

Represented by the olive tree, in ancient Greece, Athena also symbolizes peace, prosperity, resurrection, hope, and wisdom. These are all characteristics in which Debussy’s pastoral theme personifies. In this cyclic composition the recurring pastoral theme is significant. The restatement of the pastoral theme at the end of the first stanza of poetry completes the first A section. The overall form of this movement is ABA’, rounded binary form. The next section, B, begins in measure ten. This is marked with a meter change into compound meter, 12/8 along with melodic and harmonic changes. The flutes that have had unison lines are now split into two independent lines. These separate parts interact together to rhythmically fill in held notes of the overall melody. Transforming from a supportive role to a more melodic one, the celesta part echoes the second flute line.

Figure 2. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “Chant Pastoral,” mm. 11–12
This leads to the harmonic change from an F pentatonic scale to an arpeggiated figure based on a G minor-major-seventh chord shown in figure 2. This more rhythmically active figure also reflects the description within the poetry of Sélénis’s movements of catching grasshoppers, picking flowers and grass, to washing herself in the stream. These actions symbolize thematic material that is important to Louÿs’s poetry and to the form of Debussy’s piece. The representation of the grasshopper in ancient Greece expresses the idea of immortality, a notion that is important throughout Bilitis’s life. The flowers and grass display nature, Mother Earth, and magic. The idea of nature is significant as Louÿs often describes Bilitis’s surroundings and her transitions as she moves to different cities.

Signaling the end of the B section, the first flute repeats the G minor-major-seventh chord in an ascending and descending pattern while the second flute acts retransitionally to bring the original melody back in measure thirteen. Here, the two flutes at A’ join in unison with a restatement of the three-measure pastoral melody, this time as a reminder, or memory, at a piano dynamic.

The audience is now introduced to Bilitis in the third stanza of the poetry which changes from descriptions of nature and Sélénis to Bilitis describing herself. The quiet dynamic representation of the pastoral theme reflects youthful innocence and the common life, as shown by the imagery of sheep and wool.

Measures sixteen and seventeen create a synthesis between the preceding pentatonic melody and the G minor-major-seventh chord to thus end this portion of the movement on a B-flat major chord. Representing the poem, the longer note values in the harps and celesta exhibit the long hours as the day drags on. The B-flat major chord
provides hope as represented in the poetry, as the heroic eagle passes in the sky. At this point in the movement the music pauses and leads to the recitation of the first poem.

The poem begins and ends with the same line of text, an invocation of Pan, god of the summer wind, brought about by the playing of a pastoral song. The music also follows this cyclic form with a restatement of the pastoral theme. To contrast the narration, the pastoral theme is presented this time with both flutes starting in unison, but then dividing to bring the entire movement to a final close on a G minor chord. Debussy uses this chord as a precursor of what is to come in the remaining movements by leaving the last moment with an unstable feeling and lack of a strong resolution.

This first movement describes an event in Bilitis’s younger years while growing up. The pastoral theme reflects the naivety and innocence of youth in conjunction with Debussy’s choice of the flute to play the theme that is evocative of Pan’s flute and nature. The literary references of Greek mythology and picturesque scenes included in this poem return throughout the collection. Additionally, Debussy continues to build upon Greek exoticism and the literal references surrounding Greek Mythology for themes, scales, harmonies, and instrumental roles in later movements.

II.

Entitled, “Les Comparaisons” [“The Comparisons,”] the second movement is only nine measures long, but it presents playful, intertwined melodic lines. The celesta and two flutes are the featured instruments in this movement. Akin to the first movement, this poem begins and ends with the same line of text, “Wagtail, bird of Kypris, sing with our first desires.” Wagtails were a symbol of love and a gift from Aphrodite in ancient Greece. Louÿs uses the wagtail as a foreshadowing of Bilitis’s life path when she
becomes a devotee of the goddess. Debussy musically portrays the bird through the use of grace notes and trills. The poem follows young girls comparing themselves to one another. The close tessitura of the flutes and celesta contributes to the ambiguity making it difficult as a listener to differentiate the parts, thus representing the comparisons.

Throughout this movement the celesta acts as an anchor with repetitive motives. The left hand of the celesta plays a three note-descending pattern for the majority of the movement while the right hand plays a sextuplet figure as shown in figure 3.

Figure 3. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “Les Comparaisons,” mm. 1–2

Also comparable to the first, this movement has one flat in the key signature, but instead of choosing a pentatonic scale, Debussy tonicizes the B-flat Lydian mode. The choice of Lydian contributes to the hopeful, rhythmically energetic tone. Even though the Lydian mode is implied throughout the movement with the constant, almost drone like use of B-flats in the celesta part, many of the passages begin on D. While D is the relative minor, the harmonies between the two flute parts and the celesta do not tonicize the Aeolian mode. Debussy’s use of larger intervals such as fourths and fifths maintain the Lydian mode and consonant harmonies. The first flute entrance begins with a bird-like trill on B-flat while the second flute plays an improvisatory scalar melody.
The two lines switch these established figures in measure three with the first flute taking over the melodic figure, this time with an additional measure displaying dominance. The second flute in measure six again reclaims the melodic figure, an octave lower than the original appearance. This movement concludes with the second flute playing a D an octave above the first flute while the first harp and celesta double on the notes, G and D in various octaves. The change in tessitura in the flute lines displays a change in authority. Bilitis is comparing herself to Melanthô. Even though Melanthô “conquered upon one point” Bilitis “far vanquished her on the others.” This final chord of the movement avoids the minor mode through the exclusion of the B-flat as the third in a G chord that displays Debussy’s tonicization of G major.

In this movement, through his interwoven writing of melodic lines and his use of the Lydian mode, Debussy is able to achieve two different effects. The body of the poetry details the young girls comparing themselves physically. In addition to the trills, grace notes, and fast scalar passages representing the birds, they also characterize the girls. The motion of the figures creates forward momentum with the aid of the tempo marking, \textit{assez animé}. This brisk tempo in combination with fast scalar passages demonstrates the young girls as they discover themselves. The singing of the bird inspires the girls to show
themselves to one another and to connect to their desires. As Debussy implies with the mingling flute lines, the girls, even though they think they are very different, are more similar than they believe.

III.

The third movement, “Les Contes” [“The Stories”] is about Bilitis’s popularity. Young children follow her, give her flowers, hold onto her, and beg her to tell them stories of Perseus, or Hellé. Debussy writes a melody reflective of the young children’s desire to hear Bilitis’s storytelling. The first measure begins with the two flutes in thirds and the celesta doubling the flutes. The grace notes played by these three voices create an unclear articulation as a result of the responses of the instruments. This figure represents the children shadowing Bilitis. The grace note is always just out of sync with the main note value. In addition to being viewed as following Bilitis, this grace note figure may also display the giving of presents to Bilitis. The children are very eager to share their belongings with one of their idols. This is further enhanced when the harps enter in the second measure playing figures that do not include grace notes. The harps continue playing each beat with block chords to support the two flutes and the offset grace note pattern. Similarly to the first movement, the flutes play a melody that juxtaposes duple and triple rhythms. Debussy creates the peak of the movement to arrive in measure five. Tension and a thicker texture are generated by Debussy’s use of contrary motion between the flutes and harps. In measures three and four, when the flutes have a leap downward; the harps have a leap upward.
Highlighting one of Louÿs’s ideals for Bilitis in this set of poetry, the peak of the music occurs conceptually when the children are able to finally gather around Bilitis. They embrace and kiss her, begging to hear a heroic tale. Finally, Bilitis agrees. In the music the rhythms become sparser with the use of silence between figures in imitation of the text of storyteller and listener. The first harp then continues with the triplet idea taken from the flutes while the two flutes play a duple figure that fades to the end of the movement.

This movement, like the previous one, uses a major mode. E-flat major is established through the arpeggios in the flutes and the block chords in the harps and celesta. Debussy makes use of tonal borrowing with his inclusion of the V/V dominant F chord. Also, underlying the upper voices, the bass-clef line of both harp parts plays a constant alternation of E-flat and B-flat, tonic and dominant, to solidify the key. The use
of E-flat major establishes an uplifting atmosphere for the movement. Debussy also reflects the children’s energy with the fast tempo marking, *assez vif et très rythmé.* Similar to the second movement, the use of grace notes creates energy representative of youth. The juxtaposition of duple and triple rhythms expresses the children’s desire to follow Bilitis and to hear her tell them an exciting story. As the movement draws to an end, the dynamics dissipate, representing the children’s settling down around Bilitis and giving her their undivided attention.

**IV.**

One of the longest movements in the collection, “Chanson (ombre du bois)” [“Song (Shadow of the Woods),”] is structured comparably to the first movement in the work. Debussy plays with the idea of interspersing poetry in between musical fragments. This idea is reflective of the poetry because of the question and answer passages in both the poetry and the music. The instrumental ensemble acts as a unit by asking the question, “where has my mistress gone?” The narrator asks the question and responds through a series of replies. In the end, the ensemble and narrator find the mistress, but they cannot reach her.

The movement begins quietly with a lyrical, singing melody played in octaves by the flutes.

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**Figure 6. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “Chanson (ombre du bois),” mm. 1–2**

![Musical notation](image)
This melody represents the question. The celesta begins in the background with an accompanimental figure of sixteenth note repeated D-flats in several octaves. To reflect the poetry, this part represents the various objects Bilitis is addressing, the shadow of the wood, the plain, the river, the path, the street, and the palace. Like the musical figure, the entities she encounters are a constant, ever-present, response to the flutes and to Bilitis. Twice the ensemble asks the question and each time receives an answer from the narrator. The second time, the first flute drops down an octave to play in unison with the second flute and the two harps join the flutes doubling in octaves. Bilitis has been searching for her mistress and is beginning to lose hope of finding her. Debussy confirms Bilitis’s uncertainty with the subdued restatement of the question motive.

After the final response from the narrator, we learn that the mistress has gone to the palace of the king, where she is draped in pearls and necklaces. The ensemble replies with another restatement of the question, but the background has changed and so has the question itself. This time the first harp plays a repeated triplet figure, while the second harp plays a repeated duple figure. The celesta part provides a very different rhythmic duple ostinato motive that propels the movement forward. The two flutes again separated by octaves float over the thick texture with the lyrical melody. A once four-note melody has been transformed into a five-note melody. Demonstrating the search and the success in finding the mistress, embellishments are added to the song motive as the key modulates. The music portrays the mistress entering the palace of the king in the third portion of the movement, beginning four measures before the end. This is shown through the change in the accompanimental figures and their interactions with the flutes. The D-flats that were prominent in the celesta line earlier in the movement have changed to the
notes E and D with the harps playing patterns with intervals of fifths. This quickly changes when the D-flats and E-flats begin to dominate the harmonies. The harmonic change brings about a more optimistic, light-hearted feeling to the question motif. The climax of this movement occurs in the second to last measure. Here, the dynamics are *forte* and the pattern in the flutes has changed to a more rhythmic emphasis on each beat.

Figure 7. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Chanson (ombre du bois),” mm. 9–10

This pattern becomes interrupted dynamically when an interval leap downward occurs; this drop then creates an echo effect reflective of the distance between the narrator and her mistress.

The poetry emphasizes the doubt concerning the mistress’s location. One way Debussy emulated this was through the alternation of poetry and musical excerpts. Another way is his experimentation with the harmony in his use of unique chord successions. Instability is first established in the first statement of the melody with the
flutes ending on a G and the celesta on a D-flat. The tri-tone demonstrates the open-ended question. With the second statement, the flutes again end on a G and the celesta on a D-flat, but the harps join playing a B-flat. This second inversion G minor chord still portrays the question, but the dissonance is not as jarring as the previous tri-tone. The last six measures lack a clear chord progression and tonal center. Debussy starts the last section using predominantly a D minor-ninth chord. In the fourth to last measure it changes to alternations of a D-flat augmented-ninth chord and a D-flat ninth-chord. These chords do not establish a secure tonality and the very last chord remains questioning with the flutes and celesta holding E-flats while the first harp ends the ostinato pattern on a D-flat and F. Debussy highlights the search for Bilitis’s mistress in his choice of form and tonality. He also changes the melodic material when the search is over and the mistress has been found at the palace. This is shown through the louder dynamics and more consonant intervals, but the elation quickly turns back to uncertainty at Bilitis’s realization that she can no longer be in contact with her mistress.

V.

Movement five, “La Partie d’osselets” [“The Game of Jacks”] describes an intense game of jacks that Bilitis and her friend are playing in order to win the heart of a man. The poetry explains that the game was played in front of several onlookers and that the throws of the jacks represented attacks by different mythological Greek characters. For instance, some of the named characters are Cyclops, Solon, and Aphrodite, who in terms of the poetry and the melodic figures, ends the dispute. At the conclusion of the poem, the girls decide not to let the game determine their fate. They resolve to have the man choose his lover.
To express the playful aspect of the game in poetry, Debussy chose a fast tempo and composed the instrumental parts with moving, rhythmic patterns.

Figure 8. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “La Partie d’osselets,” mm. 1–2

The key signature contains one flat. Debussy simultaneously tonicizes F major and D minor. The two flutes are written in thirds playing a perpetual sixteenth note rhythm that drives the movement onward. The two flutes represent the two girls with both flute parts evolving as the movement progresses. The first flute begins on an F, but soon becomes the deviant part as it settles on a G in the second measure. This instability is reflective of Bilitis losing hope in the beginning of the game. This pause is also reflective of the line, “I prayed to the goddess.” Bilitis then continues to throw rolls that are not strong enough. The harmonic clash between the flutes, one on an F, the other on a G further enhances the conflict between the girls. The second flute is much steadier throughout the movement.
For example, in measure one, the second flute begins with figures that tonicize D minor, but moves to the relative major, F, with several repetitions of the tonic note. The rolling of the jacks is exhibited in measure three with the figure of a sixteenth note tied to an eighth note. Through the recurrence of this figure, Debussy shows Bilitis’s desperation, as well as the repeated action of the game.

Figure 9. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “La Partie d’osselets,” mm. 2–3

In addition to tonality, Debussy experiments with different articulations such as *tenutos*, slurs, and accents that bring about the vivacity of the melody. These variations create the atmosphere of the game. For instance, the accents in measure two demonstrate the desperation of winning the game as well as the hitting of the jacks on the ground. The sudden shifts in dynamics and the articulations bring about certain notes that are emphasized often unexpectedly.

In this movement, the harps and celesta act as background accompaniment, but they contribute to the lightness of the movement with their dotted-eighth-sixteenth note patterns and scalar passages. These lines outline the harmonic structure and enhance the flute lines. In order to again emphasize the playfulness, Debussy uses two unexpected *sfz* marking. Both are used as pivot points to change the music. The first *sfz* marking occurs at a fermata in the second measure, where Bilitis is praying. This dynamic change happens quite suddenly as the passage leading up to it does not have a crescendo.
marking. Following the sfz the harps play chords in the sixteenth note rests of the flute lines to fill in the rhythm and to maintain a steady pulse.

Figure 10. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “La Partie d’osselets,” mm. 4–5

In the fourth measure, another sfz appears in the two harp lines. The second change of music occurs when the harps join the persuasive flutes with sixteenth notes. The first flute, representing Bilitis, maintains the dissonance with the second flute, however, in the second to last measure, the first flute has conformed harmonically. Instead of a descending seventh, the interval is now a consonant octave on an A. As the movement and game comes to an end, the first harp continues the sixteenth note pattern, but eventually the rhythmic motion is slowed until the movement ends. The game is over and the intensity has died away. When Bilitis sees the face of the competing girl, they decide to not let the game control the decision, but to have the lover choose between them.
Reflective of this decision the first harp ends the movement on a whispering F, just as Bilitis had whispered in the girl’s ear, instead of the flutes having the last word.

VI.

The sixth movement, “Bilitis,” is a poetic and musical description of the main character for which the cycle is named. The narrator begins the movement with the recitation of the poem. The text creates the tone for the movement by portraying Bilitis’s personality and physique. In *Bilitis*, Louÿs comments on societal expectations in regard to materialism. While this was set in ancient Greece, the subject matter applied to the turn of the century France, and it still applies today. The first line of the poem displays a common woman wearing wool. The next line goes on to describe a higher class woman wearing a more expensive silk fabric with gold. The last woman is wearing flowers, leaves, and grapes. This last woman is a representation of Dionysus and nature. In opposition to these other women, Bilitis accepts herself for who she is including her flaws. She is who she is and material possessions will not change that fact. Bilitis does not need anyone or anything to make her a complete person. “My hair is the black of their black and my lips are the red of their red.” One cannot change who they are. As Louÿs intended to emphasize, self-acceptance is an important lesson that Bilitis learns as she moves into the second portion of her life. The poetry discusses Bilitis understanding her essential self, just as her mother made her, not like others who cover themselves with wool, flowers, and gold.

The key signature of the movement has five sharps, however, Debussy tonicizes two keys, G-sharp major at the beginning, and B major at the end. He uses the different key centers to represent Bilitis finding harmony within herself and in contrast the outer
expectations of society. The first note, in relation to the key, is a dissonant C-double-sharp in the second flute part. This signifies Bilitis’s uniqueness. When the first flute enters a beat later with an A-sharp that soon leads to a scalar descent, it is clear that the established key is G-sharp major which leaves the second flute as an outlier. In the second measure, the harp and celesta reinforce the first flute by playing G-sharps on the last beat in the measure.

Figure 11. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Bilitis,” mm. 1–2

Debussy investigates the idea of duality in this movement. Not only does the poetry address this idea with Bilitis accepting her own identity, but also Debussy demonstrates this by juxtaposing G-sharp, which represents how others see Bilitis, and B major, which represents her true self. In addition, he uses rhythmic and phrasal diminution in repeated motives. The first two measures are repeated almost exactly in measures three and four.
with some variation in the harps and celesta. This unsure musical statement shows the
women covered by fabric hiding their true selves. Measure five presents an extended
scalar pattern that is repeated in measure six. Bilitis is gathering the strength to declare
her identity. The first two beats in measure seven display yet another idea and the motive
is repeated again in beats three and four. A declaration is made, “here is Bilitis all alone.”
In measure eight, the sixteenth note pattern slows rhythmically down to eighth notes in
the last half of the measure. Finally in the second to last measure Debussy slows the
repetition even more with quarter notes on the dual tonic and dominant notes that
ultimately reach a final cadence. Bilitis has surrendered herself to her lover and asked to
be loved for who she is.

In the poem the idea of duality is presented when Bilitis describes others with
material possessions and herself as naked. Along with these spoken words, the two flutes
both represent Bilitis, but in differing ways. The first flute is more grounded in B major,
while the second flute finds its center around G-sharp. Both work together as reflections
to create multiple personas as a unified voice. As the movement continues, the two parts
and keys become increasingly interwoven. The second flute begins to find the way to B
major, while the first flute gravitates more toward G-sharp. On the last B major chord,
even though the first flute is the higher voice, the second flute has the most important
note, B, the tonic. Debussy takes Louÿs poem and creates musical representations of the
text. Just as Bilitis comes to terms with herself, the flutes reconcile their differences and
learn that they can co-exist.
Part II: Poem 7

The second part of Bilitis’s story takes her away from her home in Pamphylia and to a new home in Mytilene. In the collection of poetry, this section is proportionally equivalent with the number of poems to the first and last sections. However, it is interesting to note that Debussy chose to set only one poem from this portion of the story. There are several possible reasons for the exclusion of musical settings from this section. In this middle part of Bilitis’s life, she becomes a courtesan and a devotee of the goddess, Aphrodite. The women in Mytilene create intimate relations with one another and Bilitis is no exception. She has a ten-year lesbian relationship with a woman named Mnasidika. The poetry greatly describes their relationship and Bilitis’s experiences as a courtesan with various lovers. Louÿs knew that the sexual content and explicitness of the poetry would gain him attention because of the scandal. Many of his works and writings display an erotic nature. Perhaps because of the audience and intimidations made by Senator Bérenger for the first performance of this piece, Debussy and Louÿs did not include the explicit poems in order to have a successful and socially acceptable performance.

VII.

“Le Tombeau sans nom” [“The Tomb Without a Name”] begins with Bilitis being led by Mnasidika out of the village and into a field where there is a marble headstone. Mnasidika tells Bilitis that it is the tomb of her mother’s lover. After this discovery the music enters with a brief two-measure statement. This movement differs from the previous movements in terms of orchestration because it only uses the first flute and harp to introduce the main motives. Debussy uses the first flute, first harp, and celesta to display the loneliness and sadness of the poem. The flute plays a sad two-part melody
with sparse harp interjections. Debussy uses 5/4 meter with subdivisions indicated by broken barlines. The measures are divided in terms of melody, rhythm, and key centers. In addition, Debussy uses a whole-tone scale as a basis to use different keys. In measure one, the flute plays a descending figure that implies the key of A-flat major, but the second half of the measure centers around D major. This tri-tone distance and the solitary figure enhance the desolation and isolation of the movement. Bilitis will remember this moment throughout her life. Within this movement, the poetry describes Bilitis and Mnasidika’s loving, comforting relationship. However Debussy’s music foreshadows the division in their relationship. He does this with a sad theme that does not have tonal stability and with the presentation of the melody by only the first flute throughout the movement.

After the first two measures the narrator speaks again. This time the audience gains a small glimpse into Bilitis and Mnasidika’s relationship. They are holding hands and Bilitis leans against her lover to read the verse found on the tomb. The writing on the stone says that the Nymphs of the fountain have taken the woman away, not death and that she will not say her name. The music then enters as a continuation from the previous musical statement. Just as the second measure ended on an A-flat, the third measure begins on the same note. Similarly to the beginning a descending pattern follows, but this time is elongated to encompass notes lower than the octave A-flat. Beneath this melodic line, the harp continues with the earlier motive, but sustains notes of longer duration. While the second half of this new melodic material is similar to the first melody in contour and rhythm, the line jumps down a fourth to slowly build back up to a fermata on
a D. This change is reflective of the verses on the tomb, in particular, the line regarding
resting under the light earth.

The last two lines of the text bring about a question that ends the poem. Bilitis and
Mnasidika’s day is winding down and they remain standing at the tomb contemplating
death, the afterlife, and the unnamed soul. They bring no offering to call a soul back from
Hades. After the final lines of the poem the third portion of the movement begins. In this
section, the orchestration expands to all five instruments.

Figure 12. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “Le Tombeau sans nom,” mm. 6

The second flute is now present, but only to double the first flute in peak points and the
second harp plays only quarter note D and block chords. Debussy creates this last section
of music by combining the two parts of the melody that were previously introduced in
order to create a long, lyrical, gloomy phrase that represents loss. Underneath the first
flute melody, the two harps play a supporting, yet essential role, acting as a rhythmical heart beat with an ostinato. The first harp takes the dotted eighth sixteenth note idea from earlier in the movement and now plays it unrelentingly on every beat until the second to last measure. By the end of the movement the optimism of the D major has turned to doubt with the final notes, D, G-flat, and A-flat. Debussy uses this to foreshadow the split in Bilitis’s relationship with Mnasidika. As mentioned earlier, only one poem from the middle portion of Bilitis’s life was chosen, however, the continuation of the storyline is important for understanding the final portion of her life.

**Part III: Poems 8-12**

After jealousy drives Bilitis to break-up with Mnasidika, she decides to start a new life for the third and final time. She moves from Mytilene to Cyprus. In this new city Bilitis continues her work as a courtesan and lives out the rest of her days. As an adult who has gone through many different experiences, Bilitis now reflects upon her memories and displays her yearning to be remembered. She realizes that through her songs and verses, she can live eternally.

**VIII.**

In movement eight, “Les Courtisanes égyptiennes” [“The Egyptian Courtesans,”] Bilitis and her friend Plangon visit the home of several Egyptian courtesans. The poetry describes the courtesans’s home with plates of copper, yellow mats, and clay vases. The home is quiet and within the rooms there are no sharp angles or corners and the blue lime is dulling the pillars. The opening of this movement creates this setting for the courtesans. The steady harp ostinatos at an *mf* dynamic represent Bilitis’s description of the Egyptian courtesan’s living quarters. The courtesans seem polite and subdued in their mannerisms,
but Bilitis states that the Egyptians try to keep secrets by speaking in another language. The poem ends with the courtesans surprise when Bilitis and Plangon speak in Lydian, making the courtesans anxious.

Throughout this movement, Debussy depicts the exoticism of the Egyptian courtesans by avoiding a concrete key center. Similarly to the previous movement, he uses a whole-tone scale to elude a tonal expectation. The two harps begin the movement by playing an ostinato of eighth notes on D, C, B-flat, and A-flat. The celesta doubles the harps and adds an ornamental triplet figure using the same notes. In measure three, the second flute enters in the low register on an e’ and f’. The second flute represents Bilitis and Plangon. They are unsure how to act around the Egyptian courtesans and this is reflected in the low hesitant melody. The second flute plays a short ascending and then descending line of five total notes with several half-step intervals. This scale with D, E, F, G, and A-flat breaks with the established whole-tone scale. This motive is repeated in the second flute three times until the end of the movement. To bring contrast to Bilitis and Plangon, Debussy uses the first flute to represent the Egyptian courtesans. In measure five, the first flute plays a rhythmically active, chromatic, descending passage. This passage falls into a typical musical illustration of female prostitutes because of the chromatic descent, use of duple and triple rhythms, and grace notes. The chromaticism avoids any tonal center and thus represents nonconformity.
The deviance of prostitution in society is characterized by chromaticism, as Susan McClary states, “excessive ornamentation and chromaticism that mark the madwoman’s deviance have long been privileged components in Western music—the components that appear most successfully to escape formal and diatonic conventions.” In addition, Debussy is also using the chromaticism, rhythmic variation, and grace notes to exemplify exoticism. Shown in figure 13, this melody eludes strong beats through the use of tied notes and repeated notes. There is again, an abnormality from the established pattern set apart by the harps to show the orientalism and unconventionality of the courtesans.

Debussy juxtaposes the two very different flute melodies to represent the two different languages the people in the room speak, and the meeting of courtesans from varying backgrounds. To the listener one melody is not more important than the other. When heard together it is difficult to distinguish the two parts once the first flute begins

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75 Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings* (University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 82.
IX.

“L’Eau pure du basin” [“The Pure Water of the Basin,”] illustrates a scene where Bilitis looks into the pure basin water and asks it about her beauty. The ripples of the water can be heard in the second harp playing the repeated note, E, in three octaves. The high and low juxtaposition of the notes embodies the image of the pure water. The water of the basin tells Bilitis that she is beautiful and begins to physically describe her beauty. Bilitis’s reflection is represented by the first harp, which enters in the second measure. Debussy writes the melody in thirds based on a whole-tone scale. This melody is first presented as a two-measure motive, which is repeated twice for insistence when the water reassures Bilitis that she is beautiful. The water tells of her thick hair with flowers and perfume. The pure water of the basin speaks to Bilitis of her superficial beauty, but upon deeper examination, we learn more about her life experiences.

In the third stanza, Bilitis truly sees herself reflected in the clear image of the basin. She sees her weariness from the previous night. It is unclear from the context whether or not her lover’s abuse was forced. The marks still on her skin, Bilitis carries the burden of being a courtesan. Throughout her life she recounts positive experiences as well as negative ones. Louÿs did not shy away from alluding to the dangerous life of courtesans and rape is often an issue. In the last stanza of the poem, Bilitis yearns for the
purity of the water to wash away the remnants of the previous night. She also wants to purify her life, even just for a brief escape from her reality.

Debussy uses the idea of repetition to build a louder dynamic and to bring the movement to reach a climax in measure six. As shown in figure 14, at this peak, the first harp reaches its highest note so far in the movement, the second harp breaks its ostinato pattern to play a high e‴, and the celesta plays broken chord arpeggiated figures instead of block chords.

Figure 14. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “L’Eau pure du bassin” mm. 6–8

In measure seven, the first harp melody is expanded to an ascending scale to end the movement in E major. Debussy’s use of the whole-tone scale to avoid tonal tendencies represents Bilitis’s acceptance of her life. She doesn’t place blame; she just wishes to wash it away.
X.

Movement ten, “La Danseuse aux crotales” [“The Dancer of Crotales,”] opens with an instrumental introduction. The second harp sets the tonality by emphasizing the note, C. Conversely, the first harp outlines a D minor seventh-chord and an A minor chord. The texture begins very sparsely just as the setting for the poetry is created. The dancer attaches crotales (ancient metal castanets) to her hands, removes her robe, and slowly begins to dance. As the dancer starts sliding her feet, the texture thickens and a cyclical motion is created as the first and second flute trade triplet passages. In measure four, the first flute begins to experiment around the note G with a motion that moves up to a D, but finds its way back to a G. The second flute then takes over the triplet passage, but instead of wandering, the flute never moves far from the note G. Taking over this idea, the first flute is not content to stay in the low register, so it moves up to a high b’’. As the dancer is becoming more confident in her movements, the music gains energy. The thirty-second note figures generate forward rhythmic momentum while the higher registers create excitement with louder dynamics.

In relation to the eighth movement, Debussy displays the exoticism of the dancer through the use of grace notes, trills, and rhythms. These figures are also reminiscent of the music from movement two, “Les Comparaisons.” As shown in figure 15, Debussy brings back thirty-second note scalar patterns similar to the second movement and the use of trills and grace notes that make the two flute parts hard to distinguish when they are simultaneously playing.
While the flutes are playing this interactive passage, the two harps support the lines with block chords that outline the harmony. They alternate between C major, D minor, and G major chords. The energy wanes in measure fifteen when the texture grows sparse with only the first harp playing the notes G and D while the second flute takes an idea presented earlier by the first flute, but this time without a resolution.

As the dancer, Myrrhinidion seems as if she will not continue, a change in the music and the poetry occurs at the third stanza. Musically, Debussy leads the listener to an unresolved idea in order to create the element of surprise. “All of a sudden you slap the crotale!” As the crotales ring the dancer falls into a seductive rhythm while she gains confidence and forgets about the audience. The hemiolas in the flute figures create a swaying effect that symbolizes the smooth, circular movements of the entrancing dancer, Myrrhinidion. Throughout the movement, the harps provide steady rhythmic motion acting as an anchor for the dancer and the flutes. Bilitis gets lost in her memories while watching Myrrhinidion’s recurring motions.
As the dancer reaches the peak of her dance, the audience applauds with great approval. Her movements, teasing looks over her shoulder, and her confident attitude, enthral them. In addition to representing the movements of the dancer, Debussy also uses the figure to display Bilitis’s reminiscence of her youth. As stated, he emphasizes this memory with the use of music that is similar to the second movement. In the second movement, “Les Comparaisons,” Bilitis was just coming into her own and learning about herself. While she is watching this young dancer do the same, Bilitis relives her past. The two differing flute lines reflect Bilitis and Myrrhinidion. The second flute plays material from earlier in the movement representing the dancer, while the first flute remains in an unrelated key area, A minor. At the end of the movement, the two lines end on what is implied to be a D minor chord, but the harp adds a G on the last beat forming a G dominant-seventh chord. This dissonance acts as a premonition of the next movement.

XI.

“Le Souvenir de Mnasidika” [“The Memory of Mnasidika,”] elaborates on the previous movement’s theme by describing dancing girls both physically and emotionally. The two girls dance passionately and swiftly. They almost touch, but are always just out of reach, except for their lips. The key signature has three flats and is set in 3/4 meter. The two harps play B-flat major chords that are predominant in the first eight measures. The meter and the ostinato lines establish the sensual dance of the girls. Displaying the girls’ elusive movements, in measure one, Debussy writes the harp lines in a descent, but counters this in the second measure with an ascent. In the musical lines, one can feel the repeated pattern, but the meter becomes disjointed and is not clearly identifiable. Bilitis watches the girls and describes the way the girls act and look at each other.
In measure three, the motive from movement seven, “Le Tombeau sans nom,” returns in the flute parts playing in unison. Representative of a memory, or blurry image, the entrance of the flutes seem hesitant with their repeated note D. Bilitis is trying to remember Mnasidika as she watches the girls dance, but the memory has changed. In measure four, the flutes finally present the beginning of the motive from the seventh movement. This time however, Debussy has altered the theme by setting it to a different harmonic background and orchestration. The melodic material that took only one measure in movement seven is now spread over four measures. This is shown in figure 16.

Figure 16. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Le Souvenir de Mnasidika” mm. 5–8

Instead of reaching up to a higher octave A-flat” from the earlier movement, the music tends more toward a downward motion. Bilitis has changed and her recall of the previous
event is different from the original. The motive draws the accompaniment away from the B-flat major chords to a D minor setting.

The intensity of this movement remains at a quiet dynamic. This is suggestive of nostalgia and reminiscence. Debussy is reflecting her internal emotions, not what is occurring externally between the dancers. Louÿs clearly displays the passion and sensuality between the dancers when describing, “…the languor of their eyes, the fire of their cheeks, the solemnity of their faces.” Debussy on the other hand chose to musically represent the fading memory of Mnasidika. To finish the dance, the girls suddenly fall to the ground. This ending of the dance is also represented in Debussy’s choice of quiet dynamics. In addition, this musical setting reveals the calm that Bilitis felt while remembering Mnasidika’s face. Looking back upon the tomb without a name, perhaps Bilitis recalls her lost relationship with Mnasidika with feelings of loneliness and sadness analogous to those of the seventh movement.

XII.

The twelfth and final movement, “La Pluie au matin” [“The Morning Rain,”] begins with the instrumental ensemble at a pianissimo dynamic marking. This quiet, reflective dynamic marking represents the transition from night to morning with the stars seeming to distance themselves and disappear. The fading of the night also suggests the last portion of Bilitis’s life with transformation. The repetitive rising harp intervals show the growing separation while at the same time providing a constant reminder of the passage of time. The seasons change while everyday occurrences, such as the returning of courtesans with their lovers happens. The perpetual movement of time is portrayed with the harps and celesta repeatedly playing the major third, G and B, implying the key of G
major. Almost as a reaction against the sensitive, ostinato in the harps and celesta, a unison flute passage enters in the second measure that incorporates a modal mixture.

Figure 17. *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “La Pluie au matin” mm. 1–3

![Musical notation]

Debussy juxtaposes alternations of consonant and dissonant intervals above the constant background. The alterations represent Bilitis’s insecurity about the future and her constant reminders of the past. The chromaticism that occurs between the flutes and the accompanimental harps and celesta represent the courtesans. In this setting, Bilitis returns to her roots with a pastoral theme. She describes the morning rain while writing her words in the sand; this act of writing in the sand can be seen in the tempo and lilt of the eighth notes in the flute parts. In the ostinato, with the celesta representing time, one can imagine the falling rain in the grace note figures. In measure six, the celesta changes the harmonies to create tension against G major with the notes, B-flat, G-sharp, and A. Chromaticism occurs as a result of the intervallic alternations to generate feelings of instability and contradiction. Here, Bilitis is caught in thought of change. As the leaves
on the trees grow heavy with water, the water on the ground carries away the earth and dead leaves. Everything – life, the weather, and the seasons – is a constant cycle. As Bilitis is pouring her heart out with her words in the sand, the raindrops are slowly making them fade.

A change in the text and music occurs as Bilitis realizes that her words are fading and that she is alone. In measure thirteen, the music and poetry have returned to the original, pastoral subject where Bilitis is seeking a time when she felt youthful and hopeful. The first harp plays the pastoral song, but also provides the harmonic motion with an ascending scalar pattern. The second harp doubles the first harp’s melody in octaves to reinforce the cyclic presentation of the pastoral theme. In the first movement, Debussy based the movement on a G pentatonic scale in the key of one flat.

Figure 18. Les Chansons de Bilitis, “La Pluie au matin” mm. 9–12
To contrast the introductory theme in this final movement, Debussy presents the original melody in the key in the setting of G major, the intended home key. The melody is not just in the flute part for the ultimate recurrence of the pastoral theme, but also in the harp parts doubling the theme. Debussy’s use of key is interesting because in the first movement the theme is written in F pentatonic starting on a G and in the final movement the same melody is written but is in the setting of G major. The change of key signature is significant psychologically, as Bilitis is a songstress and poetess. Her attitude toward the events in her life and the memory of her childhood come together in a visual resolution of the cognitive dissonance caused by the initial statement of the theme in the key of F for the performers.

In the third stanza there is a distinction between her reflections on nature and how she feels. Bilitis proclaims her loneliness and sadness by looking back upon the life she left, the family she abandoned, and her youth. She complains that the young people do not look at her anymore and the old ones have forgotten her. This indicates her on-going transformation and her desire for change. In the first movement, the first flute representing a young Bilitis played the pastoral song. In this movement, the two harps play the pastoral theme as a trace of a previous life. Just as Bilitis has remembered her childhood, those after her will continue to learn her verses. Following the restatement of the pastoral theme, the first flute reiterates Bilitis’s uncertainty of the future in the face of mortality, with material from earlier in the movement.

As the piece comes to a close, the texture in the harps has thinned with only sparse triplets in the first harp and octaves following a scalar pattern in quarter notes in the second harp. The night has finally disappeared, as well as the memory of what had
been. The flute finally finds resolution after a brief chromatic descent to a low d’ to show that Bilitis can do what women before her have not, live on, immortally. The harps display this glimmer of hope with their F pentatonic scales that lead to a quiet resolution on a G major chord. This represents Bilitis’s acceptance of her passed youth and self-acceptance. She finds comfort in knowing that her words and thoughts will remain alive after her death by readers. Bilitis knows that through her poetry, not only will she live forever, but her story and youth will remain. “Those who will love after me will sing together my stanzas.”

**Conclusion**

The last movement, “La Pluie au matin” captures the attitude of togetherness representative of the juxtapositions of ancient and modern, music and text, Louÿs and Debussy, and *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and the songstress, Bilitis. *Les Chansons de Bilitis* was a product of Debussy and Louÿs’s close friendship. Through a literary and musical analysis of the work it becomes evident that the collaboration was a success. This piece embodies the *fin-de-siècle* attitude of symbiotic relationships within the arts. To play this composition with the correct stylistic intentions, an understanding of Louÿs’s poetry as well as Debussy’s music is necessary. An interdisciplinary approach to this piece leads to an appropriate interpretation. Even though the text and the music do not overlap in the performance of this work, both elements must be considered as a synthesis, not individual facets that have no correlation.

In addition to unifying the written word and musical sound, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* challenged societal attitudes. An important function of art is to create authentic works that reflect society and history, but that also cause people to think. In his writing,
Louÿs confronted societal views on women, lesbianism, rape, marriage, and nudity. He refused to accept stereotypical opinions. As a result Louÿs was able to produce works that were controversial, but that maintained his integrity and presented his viewpoints. Likewise, Debussy changed attitudes in music composition. He wrote music that pleased his own ear and did not conform to musical traditions. Debussy realized that beautiful music could be structured as a result of expressive intentions. His music attracted listeners and influenced modern composition. Through Debussy’s experimentation with timbre and color combinations of instruments he was able to capture an ancient setting while using the various instruments to represent characters or ideas. This classicist setting allowed Debussy to use different modes and scales, while Louÿs was able to address more taboo subjects in his poetry. Both artists, Louÿs and Debussy, epitomized the fin-de-siècle perspective by not compromising their art for mass appeal and tradition. Les Chansons de Bilitis is a significant, oft-overlooked work of interdisciplinary collaboration from two respectable artists that deserves consideration in flute chamber music. To quote Louÿs’s original dedication in his poetry collection, “This little book of ancient love is respectfully dedicated to the young ladies of the society of the future.”

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76 Buck, 241.
Appendix: Les Chansons de Bilitis translation by Carmella Cao

1. Chant pastoral

Il faut chanter un chant pastoral, invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été.
Je garde mon troupeau et Sélénis le sien, à l'ombre ronde d'un olivier qui tremble.

Sélénis est couchée sur le pré. Elle se lève et court, ou cherche des cigales, ou cueille des fleurs avec des herbes, ou lave son visage dans l'eau fraîche du ruisseau.

Moi, j'arrache la laine au dos blond des moutons pour en garnir ma quenouille, et je file. Les heures sont lentes. Un aigle passe dans le ciel.

L'ombre tourne, changeons de place la corbeille de figues et la jarre de lait.
Il faut chanter un chant pastoral, invoquer Pan, dieu du vent d'été.

2. Les Comparaisons

Bergeronnette, oiseau de Kypris, chante avec nos premiers désirs! Le corps nouveau des jeunes filles se couvre de fleurs comme la terre. La nuit de tous nos rêves approche et nous en parlons entre nous.

Parfois, nous comparons ensemble nos beautés si différentes, nos chevelures déjà longues, nos jeunes seins encore petits, nos pubertés rondes comme des cailles et blotties sous la plume naissante.

Hier je luttai de la sorte contre Melanthô, mon aînée. Elle était fière de sa poitrine qui venait de croître en un mois, et, montrant ma tunique droite, elle m'avait appelée: Petite enfant.

Pas un homme ne pouvait nous voir, nous nous mîmes nues devant les filles, et, si elle vainquit sur un point, je l'emportait de loin sur les autres. Bergeronnette, oiseau de Kypris, chante avec nos premiers désirs!

1. Pastoral Song

One must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind.
I watch my herd and Selenis hers, under the round shade of the trembling olive tree.

Sélénis lies in the meadow. She rises and runs or looks for grasshoppers, or gathers flowers with the grass, or washes her face in the fresh water of the stream.

Me, I pull the wool from the blond backs of the sheep to stock my distaff and I spin. The hours are slow. An eagle passes in the sky.

The shadow turns, let’s move the basket of figs and the jar of milk. One must sing a pastoral song, invoke Pan, god of the summer wind.

2. The Comparisons

Wagtail, bird of Kypris, sing with our first desires. The fresh body of young girls bloom with flowers like the earth. The night of all our dreams approaches and we speak of it between us.

Sometimes, we compare together, our different beauties, our already long hair, our young breasts still small, our puberties round like quails and nestled under the budding down.

Yesterday I fought in this way against Melanthô, my elder. She was proud of her chest that had grown in a month, and, pointing out my straight tunic, she had called me: Little child.

No man could see us, we placed ourselves naked before the girls, and, if she conquered upon one point, I far vanquished her on the others. Wagtail, bird of Kypris, sing with our first desires.
3. Les Contes

Je suis aimée des petits enfants; dès qu'ils me voient, ils courent à moi et s'accrochent à ma tunique et prennent mes jambes dans leurs petits bras.

S'ils ont cueilli des fleurs, ils me les donnent toutes; s'ils ont pris un scarabée, ils le mettent dans ma main; s'ils n'ont rien, ils me caressent et me font asseoir devant eux.

Alors ils m'embrassent sur la joue, ils posent leurs têtes sur mes seins; ils me supplient avec les yeux. Je sais bien ce que cela veut dire.

Cela veut dire: « Bilitis chérie, redis-nous, car nous sommes gentils, l'histoire du héros Perseus ou la mort de la petite Hellé. »

4. Chanson (ombre du bois)


— Beau fleuve qui l'a vue passer, dis-moi, est-elle près d'ici? — Elle m'a quitté pour le chemin. — Chemin, la vois-tu encore? — Elle m'a laissé pour la route.

— O route blanche, route de la ville, dis-moi, où l'as-tu conduite? — A la rue d'or qui entre à Sardes. — O rue de lumière, touches-tu ses pieds nus? — Elle est entrée au palais du roi.

— O palais, splendeur de la terre, rends-la-moi! — Regarde, elle a des colliers sur les seins et des houppes dans les cheveux, cent perles le long des jambes, deux bras autour de la taille. »

3. The Stories

I am loved by the little children; as soon as they see me, they run to me and cling to my tunic and take my legs in their little arms.

If they have picked flowers, they give them all to me; if they have caught a beetle, they put it in my hand; if they have nothing, they caress me and make me sit in front of them.

Then they kiss me on the cheek, they put their heads upon my breasts; they plead with their eyes. I know very well what that means.

That means: “Bilitis dear, retell us because we are good, the story of the hero Perseus or the death of the little Hellé.”

4. Song (Shadow of the woods)

“Shadow of the woods where she was supposed to come, tell me, where has my mistress gone? — She has gone to the plain. — Plain, where has my mistress gone? — She followed the banks of the river.

— Beautiful river who saw her pass, tell me, is she close to here? — She left me for the path. — Path, do you see her still? — She left me for the road.

— Oh white road, road to the city, tell me, where have you led her? — To the street of gold into Sardes. — Oh road of light, do you touch her bare feet? — She entered the king’s palace.

— Oh palace, splendor of the earth, give her back to me! — Look, she has necklaces on her breasts and circlets in her hair, one hundred pearls down to her legs, two arms around her waist.
5. La Partie d'osselets

Comme nous l'aimions toutes les deux, nous l'avons joué aux osselets. Et ce fut une partie célèbre. Beaucoup de jeunes filles y assistaient.

Elle amena d'abord le coup des Kyklôpes, et moi, le coup de Solôn. Mais elle, le Kallibolos, et moi, me sentant perdue, je priais la déesse!

Je jouai, j'eus l'Epiphénôn, elle le terrible coup de Khios, moi l'Antiteukhos, elle le Trikhias, et moi le coup d'Aphroditê qui gagna l'amant disputé.

Mais la voyant pâlir, je la pris par le cou et je lui dis tout près de l'oreille (pour qu'elle seule m'entendit): « Ne pleure pas, petite amie, nous le laisserons choisir entre nous. »

6. Bilitis

Une femme s'enveloppe de laine blanche. Une autre se vêt de soie et d'or. Une autre se couvre de fleurs, de feuilles vertes et de raisins.

Moi je ne saurais vivre que nue. Mon amant, prends-moi comme je suis: sans robe ni bijoux ni sandales, voici Bilitis toute seule.

Mes cheveux sont noirs de leur noir et mes lèvres rouges de leur rouge. Mes boucles flottent autour de moi libres et rondes comme des plumes.

Prends moi telle que ma mère m'a faite dans une nuit d'amour lointaine, et si je te plais ainsi n'oublie pas de me le dire.

5. The Game of Jacks

As we both loved him, we played for him with jacks. And this was a famous match. Many girls watched.

She began first with the stroke of Kyklôpes, and I, the stroke of Solon. But she the Kallibolos, and I feeling lost, I prayed to the goddess.

I played, I had Epiphênon, she the terrible stroke of Khios, me the Antiteukhos, she the Trikhias, and me the stroke of Aphroditê which won the contested lover.

But seeing her turn pale, I took her by the neck and I told her very close to her ear so only she heard me: “Don’t cry, my little friend, we will let him choose between us.”

6. Bilitis

A woman wraps herself in white wool. Another wears silk and gold. Another covers herself with flowers, green leaves, and grapes.

Me, I would only know to live naked. My lover, take me as I am: without clothes or jewels or sandals, here is Bilitis all alone.

My hair is black from its blackness and my lips are red from its redness. My curls float around me free and round like feathers.

Take me as my mother made me in a night of far away love, and if I please you thus don’t forget to tell me.
7. Le Tombeau sans nom

Mnasidika m'ayant prise par la main me mena hors des portes de la ville, jusqu'à un petit champ inculte où il y avait une stèle de marbre. Et elle me dit: « Celle-ci fut l'amie de ma mère. »

Alors je sentis un grand frisson, et sans cesser de lui tenir la main, je me penchai sur son épaule, afin de lire les quatre vers entre la coupe creuse et le serpent:

« Ce n'est pas la mort qui m'a enlevée, mais les Nymphes des fontaines. Je repose ici sous une terre légère avec la chevelure coupée de Xanthô. Qu'elle seule me pleure. Je ne dis pas mon nom. »

Longtemps nous sommes restées debout, et nous n'avons pas versé la libation. Car comment appeler une âme inconnue d'entre les foules de l'Hadès?

8. Les Courtesanes égyptiennes

Je suis allée avec Plangon chez les courtisanes égyptiennes, tout en haut de la vieille ville. Elles ont des amphores de terre, des plateaux de cuivre et des nattes jaunes où elles s'accroupissent sans effort.

Leurs chambres sont silencieuses, sans angles et sans encoignures, tant les couches successives de chaux bleue ont émoussé les chapiteaux et arrondi le pied des murs.

Elles se tiennent immobiles, les mains posées sur les genoux. Quand elles offrent la bouillie elles murmurent: « Bonheur. » Et quand on les remercie, elles disent: « Grâce à toi. »

Elles comprennent le hellène et feignent de le parler mal pour se rire de nous dans leur langue; mais nous, dent pour dent, nous parlons lydien et elles s'inquiètent tout à coup.

7. The Tomb Without a Name

Mnasidika having taken me by the hand led me out of the gates of the city up to a small uncultivated field where there was a marble headstone. And she said to me: “She here was my mother’s lover.”

Then I felt a great chill, and still holding her hand, I leaned against her shoulder, to read the four verses between the broken cup and the serpent:

“It is not death that has carried me away, but the Nymphs of the fountains. I rest here under the light earth with the cut hair of Xanthô. Let her alone cry for me. I do not say my name.”

We stood there for a long time and we did not pour an offering. Because how can we call an unknown soul among the masses in Hades?

8. The Egyptian Courtesans

I went with Plangon to the home of the Egyptian courtesans, above the old city. They have vases of clay, plates of copper and yellow mats where they squat without effort.

Their rooms are quiet, without angles and without corners, so much the successive layers of blue lime have dulled the pillars and rounded the feet of the walls.

They stay motionless, their hands resting on their knees. When they offer the porridge they murmur “happiness” and when we thank them they say “Thanks to you.”

They understand Hellenic, and feign to speak it poorly, so as to laugh at us in their own language; but as for us, word for word, we speak Lydian and they are suddenly worried.
9. L'Eau pure du bassin

« Eau pure du bassin, miroir immobile, dis-moi ma beauté. — Bilitis, ou qui que tu sois, Téthys peut-être ou Amphritritê, tu es belle, sache-le.

« Ton visage se penche sous ta chevelure épaisse, gonflée de fleurs et de parfums. Tes paupières molles s'ouvrent à peine et tes flancs sont las des mouvements de l'amour.


— Eau claire du bassin, ta fraîcheur repose. Reçois-moi, qui suis lasse en effet. Emporte le fard de mes joues, et la sueur de mon ventre et le souvenir de la nuit. »

10. La Danseuse aux crotales

Tu attaches à tes mains légères tes crotales retentissants, Myrrhinidion ma chérie, et à peine nue hors de la robe, tu étires tes membres nerveux. Que tu es jolie, les bras en l'air, les reins arqués et les seins rouges!

Tu commences: tes pieds l'un devant l'autre se posent, hésitent, et glissent mollement. Ton corps se plie comme une écharpe, tu caresses ta peau qui frissonne, et la volupté inonde tes longs yeux évanouis.

Tout à coup, tu claques des crotales! Cambre-toi sur les pieds dressés, secoue les reins, lance les jambes et que tes mains pleines de fracas appellent tous les désirs en bande autour de ton corps tournoyant!

Nous, applaudissons à grands cris, soit que, souriant sur l'épaule, tu agites d'un frémissement ta croupe convulsive et musclée, soit que tu ondules presque étendue, au rythme de tes souvenirs.
11. Le Souvenir de Mnasidica

Elles dansaient l'une devant l'autre, d'un mouvement rapide et fuyant; elles semblaient toujours vouloir s'enlacer, et pourtant ne se touchaient point, si ce n'est du bout des lèvres.

Quand elles tournaient le dos en dansant, elles se regardaient, la tête sur l'épaule, et la sueur brillait sous leurs bras levés, et leurs cheveux fines passaient devant leurs seins.

La langueur de leurs yeux, le feu de leurs joues, la gravité de leurs visages, étaient trois chansons ardentes. Elles se frôlaient furtivement, elles pliaient leurs corps sur les hanches.

Et tout à coup, elles sont tombées, pour achever à terre la danse molle… Souvenir de Mnasidika, c'est alors que tu m'apparus, et tout, hors ta chère image, me fut importun.

12. La Pluie au matin

La nuit s'efface. Les étoiles s'éloignent. Voici que les dernières courtisanes sont rentrées avec les amants. Et moi, dans la pluie du matin, j'écris ces vers sur le sable.

Les feuilles sont chargées d'eau brillante. Des ruisseaux à travers les sentiers entraînent la terre et les feuilles mortes. La pluie, goutte à goutte, fait des trous dans ma chanson.

Oh! que je suis triste et seule ici! Les plus jeunes ne me regardent pas; les plus âgés m'ont oubliée. C'est bien. Ils apprendront mes vers, et les enfants de leurs enfants.

Voilà ce que ni Myrtalê, ni Thaïs, ni Glykéra ne se diront, le jour où leurs belles joues seront creuses. Ceux qui aimeront après moi chanteront mes strophes ensemble.

11. The Memory of Mnasidika

They dance one in front of another, with rapid and elusive movements; they seemed always desiring to embrace and yet not touching at all, unless with the tips of their lips.

When they turned their backs in dancing, they looked at each other, the head on the shoulder, and the glistening perspiration under their raised arms, and their fine hair passing before their breasts.

The languor of their eyes, the fire of their cheeks, the solemnity of their faces, were three ardent songs. They furtively brushed against each other, they bent their bodies at their hips.

Suddenly, they fell, to finish the soft dance on the ground…Memory of Mnasidika, it is while you appeared to me, and all, except your dear image, troubled me.

12. The Morning Rain

The night fades. The stars move away. Here the last courtesans have returned with lovers. And me, in the morning rain, I write these verses in the sand.

The leaves are weighed with brilliant water. The streams that cross the paths carry away the earth and the dead leaves. The rain, drop by drop makes holes in my song.

Oh! how I am sad and alone here! The youngest don’t look at me; the oldest have forgotten me. It’s well. They will learn my verses and the children of their children.

Here is neither Myrtalê, nor Thaïs, nor Glykéra will say to each other, the day when their beautiful cheeks will be sunken. Those who will love after me will sing together my stanzas.


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