

MUSICAL EXPRESSIONS OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN THE *MÉLODIE* SETTINGS
OF *LES CHANSONS DE BILITIS*

by

ARIELLE P. CRUMLEY

(Under the Direction of David Haas)

ABSTRACT

Pierre Louÿs' erotic poetry collection *Les Chansons de Bilitis* contains nearly 150 poems that narrate the life of Bilitis, a fictional woman of ancient Greece whose story is centered around her sexual and romantic relationships with both men and women. Upon its first publication in 1894, composers of French art song were drawn to the ancient Greek setting and prose poetry from the perspective of the enigmatic Bilitis, and soon a variety of songs based on Louÿs' text emerged. Composers were inspired by a variety of themes within the poetry collection, and their contrasting musical interpretations reveal the intricacies of the story of Bilitis, especially in regard to the themes of gender and sexuality that are inherent to the erotic work.

In this study, four song cycles will be presented as case studies of the musical expression of different themes related to gender and sexuality found in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. The analysis of Claude Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* reveals the musical illustration of the gendered power dynamics between Bilitis and the male characters present in the early part of the poetry collection, particularly her first lover Lykas. Similarly, Rita Strohl's *Bilitis* explicitly highlights the theme of sexual violence that pervades Bilitis' first relationship. While Debussy and Strohl

both respond to Bilitis' first heterosexual relationship, Georges Dandelot's *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* emphasizes the homoerotic element of the poetry collection through the setting of poems that depict Bilitis' intimate relationship with another woman. Lastly, Charles Koechlin departs from erotic content in his *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* by centering on Bilitis' death, which relates to the broader theme of dead and dying women in art and literature. While the main theme of this dissertation is analyzing art song with this critical lens, it additionally highlights works and artists that have been overlooked in the scholarship of French music and poetry.

INDEX WORDS: French song, *mélodie*, French poetry, gender, sexuality, music and text, Pierre Louÿs, Claude Debussy, Rita Strohl, Georges Dandelot, Charles Koechlin

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In December 1894, the Librairie de l'art indépendant, a bookshop owned by occultist Edmond Bailly and frequented by those sharing Bailly's esoteric interests, published a peculiar poetry collection titled *Les chansons de Bilitis*. According to the preface of this first edition, the ninety-three poems are authentic verses originally in Greek, written by the 6th century B.C. poetess Bilitis that had been recently excavated from a tomb by the German archeologist G. Heim and "translated from the Greek for the first time by P. L."¹ The poems themselves are autobiographical, detailing Bilitis' life from her youth in Pamphylia to her death on the isle of Cyprus. Bilitis is revealed to have been a contemporary of (and apparent acquaintance of) the Lesbian poet Sappho, and her poems are similarly imbued with homoeroticism as the focus of the narrative rests on her sexual relationships with both men and women. The poems are separated into three sections: "Bucolics en Pamphylie" ("Bucolics in Pamphylia") in which a young Bilitis experiences a "sexual awakening" with a man named Lykas, "Élégies à Mytilène" ("Elegies in Mytilene") in which she sails to the island of Lesbos and meets a woman named Mnasidika with whom she falls in love, and, lastly, "Épigrammes dans l'île de Chypre" ("Epigrams in the Isle of Cyprus") where Bilitis lives out the rest of her life as a successful courtesan who becomes haunted by her waning youth and the lingering memory of her lost loves.

¹ All translations in this document are by the author unless otherwise noted. Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis: traduites du grec pour la première fois par P.L.* (Paris: Librairie de L'Art indépendant, 1895), title page. (« traduites du grec pour la première fois par P. L. »)

The collection concludes with the three epitaphs written on Bilitis' tomb in which she speaks from beyond the grave, recalling the memories of her earthly life.

Not long after the initial publication of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the poems were revealed to be not authentic Greek verses, but fabricated by an author known for his erotic fiction, Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925). Although Louÿs' ruse became quickly exposed, the artistic circles of *fin-de-siècle* Paris praised *Les Chansons de Bilitis* for its "exotic" and passionate expression of female sexuality and lesbianism. Musicians in particular were drawn to Louÿs' texts, such as Louÿs' closest friend at the time, Claude Debussy (1862-1918), who collaborated with Louÿs in choosing three poems to set to music. This collaboration would result in the *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, a song cycle based on the early years of Bilitis' life in Pamphylia and her first sexual relationship with Lykas.

In addition to Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, one can find a remarkable variety of musical responses to Louÿs' poetry, particularly in the genres of *mélodie* and the song cycle. For instance, around the same time that Debussy wrote his three songs, Rita Strohl (1865-1941) composed a 12-song cycle based on the same narrative time frame as Debussy's simply titled *Bilitis*. In 1898, Charles Koechlin (1867-1950) began writing the first of five Bilitis songs that he would eventually publish in 1923 titled *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*. Unlike the songs of Debussy and Strohl, Koechlin's song cycle reveals a completely different narrative of Bilitis' life that is centered around the unhappiness that she faces at the end of her life as she prepares for death. During a revival of interest in Louÿs' poetry collection in the late 1920's and 30's, Georges Dandelot (1895-1975) composed three collections of Bilitis songs, and his final collection titled *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* is particularly remarkable as it remains one of the only musical

interpretations, and the only song cycle, to overtly depict Bilitis' lesbian relationship with Mnasidika.

While these varied collections of songs based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* reveal the myriad of ways in which composers have interpreted Bilitis' story, each of these song cycles additionally reveal issues of gender and sexuality that are at the heart of the poetry collection. While Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* first appears to be a depiction of the subtle sensuality between Bilitis and Lykas, a closer analysis reveals musical illustrations of the power dynamic between the two characters, with the virginal Bilitis being subjected to Lykas' desire. While Debussy's setting only hints at Bilitis' subjection and never explicitly reveals Lykas' sexual assault of Bilitis that takes place in the overarching narrative, Rita Strohl's *Bilitis* unambiguously depicts sexual violence, and, in fact, emphasizes the rape's effect on Bilitis' character and her relationship with Lykas. Considering that Georges Dandelot's *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* centers on the relationship between Mnasidika, his song setting is immersed in musical eroticism, conveying the sexualization of the lesbian relationship in Louÿs' narrative. Lastly, Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* centers on Bilitis' impending and eventual death, and while his setting avoids the sexual or erotic themes found in the previously mentioned settings, his emphasis on Bilitis' death highlights the fetishization of dead women in Western art and literature.

This study is dedicated to musical expressions of the issues of gender and sexuality in the *mélodie* settings of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, specifically the song cycles by Claude Debussy, Rita Strohl, Georges Dandelot, and Charles Koechlin. My exploration of each of these settings will discuss the musical interpretation of the poetry and analyze in detail the aspects of the music that give expression to the theme of gender and/or sexuality found therein. In chapters 2 and 3, I first

provide historical background to the poetry collection and its musical responses as well as commentary on the themes of gender and sexuality in the poetry collection itself to provide the contextual foundation for my musical analyses. The chapters that follow center on the individual musical case studies, which touch on the following topics: gendered power dynamics through musical oppositions (chapter 4), musical evocations of sexual violence and its repercussions on Bilitis' character (chapter 5), techniques of musical eroticism in the depiction of a lesbian relationship (chapter 6), and compositional techniques and stylistic qualities that illustrate Bilitis' death (chapter 7).

The exploration of the issues of gender and sexuality in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* through its musical settings can provide a model for exploring these themes in other repertoires of song involving poems in various languages. In addition, my study will highlight works and composers (particularly Strohl, Dandelot, and Koechlin) that have been overlooked in the scholarship of French *mélodie*. The poetry collection itself is also rarely given scholarly attention, and this study will not only bring awareness to the poems and their influence on the genre of *mélodie*, but it will also highlight important issues of gender and sexuality in the Bilitis poems that are often overlooked or misconstrued.

Review of Scholarly Literature

French Song

The earliest scholarship to provide a thorough exploration of the development and defining of the French *mélodie* is Frits Noske's *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc: The Origin and Development of the Mélodie*.² Noske's book acknowledges "the lack of literature

² Frits Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc: The Origin and Development of the Mélodie*, translated by Rita Benton (New York: Dover Publications, 1970).

about the entire history of French song from 1600 to 1880” at the time of the second revised edition’s publication in 1970.³ In remedying this, Noske provides a thorough study of the development of the *mélodie*, detailing the evolution of the *mélodie* from its predecessor the *romance*. In addition, Noske explores the works of the notable composers who played a part in the genre’s evolution, such as Berlioz and his *Neuf mélodies* (the most probable originator of the term “*mélodie*”) and, perhaps surprisingly, the popular performances throughout the 1830’s of Schubert’s *Lieder* in the French language. Despite his thorough exploration of the early years of the *mélodie*, Noske’s work only spans the time frame from the genre’s beginnings to the works of Henri Duparc, leaving room for the exploration of *fin-de-siècle* composers of French song.

Published the same year as Noske, Pierre Bernac’s *The Interpretation of French Song* is regarded as “the standard work on its subject” and is often utilized as a necessary text for singers studying the interpretation of *mélodie*.⁴ Bernac’s work includes brief analyses of the *mélodies* of well-known composers, provides translations and guides for the performance of each song, and gives general advice on the interpretation of French *mélodie* and singing in the French language. While Bernac’s book provides valuable information on standard works in the repertoire of French song, it does not provide any thorough historical context. As Bernac himself writes:

This book is not written by a musicologist, and indeed it is not from the angle of musicology or musical analysis that the study of the interpretation of the French *mélodie* is here approached, or should be approached! It is written by an interpreter, whose only wish is to offer the benefit of his experience of those singers who wish to explore an enchanting realm of song.

Two somewhat recent studies that provide both an interpretive *and* musicological lens to the area of French art song are Katherine Bergeron’s *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle*

³ Noske, *French Song from Berlioz to Duparc*, v.

⁴ Pierre Bernac, *The Interpretation of French Song* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970), cover synopsis.

*Époque*⁵ and Georgine Resick's *French Vocal Literature: Repertoire in Context*.⁶ Inspired by her own experiences with studying and teaching French song, Bergeron acknowledges that "the history of this art remains obscure," and thus she explores the development of French *mélodie* and, especially, the evolution of the genre.⁷ She particularly focuses on music of the *belle époque*, and within this timeframe she explores the "French sound" of *la langue française*, the history and culture surrounding early performances of *mélodie*, and the intertwining histories of the *mélodie* and the German *Lied*.

Georgine Resick's book, on the other hand, focuses not on the *mélodie*, but on French song as a whole. Resick follows the history of French song from medieval troubadour songs to the *mélodie* of the 20th-century, and while she covers a wide area of history, she provides detailed historical and cultural context surrounding the changing styles of French song. In multiple chapters, she details the evolution of the *mélodie* and its origins in the *romance*, and she describes the changing French values that led to an ever-evolving style of art song. In addition, Resick includes discussions of well-known composers and their songs that are exemplary of each changing era of French song.

The most recent survey of *mélodie* is Emily Kilpatrick's 2022 book *French Art Song: History of a New Music, 1870-1914*.⁸ Her study details the changing styles of *mélodie*, beginning with the influence of Charles Baudelaire on composers of *mélodie* at the onset of the *belle époque* and traversing through the unavoidable influence of *wagnerisme* in the 1890's and the resulting *debussysme* of the 20th century. Not only does Kilpatrick provide a thorough historical

⁵ Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶ Georgine Resick, *French Vocal Literature: Repertoire in Context* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

⁷ Bergeron, *Voice Lessons*, viii.

⁸ Emily Kilpatrick, *French Art Song: History of a New Music* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022).

discussion of the changing musical styles of the late 19th-century into the early 20th-century, she also explores the role of performances spaces and performers in the development of the genre, an aspect she considers “viewing artistic and aesthetic debates through the prism of lived musical experience.”⁹ Unlike other explorations of vocal literature, Kilpatrick’s book does not focus on surveying repertoire; instead, she discusses “certain poets [and] *mélodies* that engaged in interesting, innovative ways with the setting of text and the integration of musical and poetic forms” and works that “bear on questions of performance practice.”¹⁰ Kilpatrick also highlights works that are overshadowed by other more well-known settings of their poems, and one particular example relevant to this project is her discussion of Rita Strohl’s *Bilitis*.

Critical Studies of Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis*

Regarding the composers and works explored in this study, the composer to have received the most attention in scholarship on French *mélodie* is undoubtedly Claude Debussy. Within his repertoire of song, Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis* is not often overlooked, and the song cycle is explored in the works of Bernac, Resick, and Bergeron. While the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* is acknowledged in the discussion of vocal literature, mostly for its innovations in prosody, there are but a few critical studies devoted to the song cycle. Stephen Rumph’s 1994 article “Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*: Song, Opera, and the Death of the Subject” is one of the earliest essays to explore the song cycle with a critical lens.¹¹ In his article, Rumph draws attention to how the “fundamental distinction between art song and opera in the nineteenth century lies in the treatment of what, in Hegelian terms, we might call the individual

⁹ Kilpatrick, *French Art Song*, xii.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xii.

¹¹ Stephen Rumph, “Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*: Song, Opera, and the Death of the Subject,” *The Journal of Musicology* 12, no. 4 (1994): 464–90.

subject,” and he explores Bilitis’ expression of the subjective self throughout the three songs.¹² He focuses on Bilitis’ subjection to seduction by extracting motives representing Lykas’ desire such as the flute motive in “La Flûte de Pan” and the “masculinized chromaticism” of “La Chevelure.” While he concludes the analysis of “La Chevelure” by acknowledging that Bilitis reclaims her subjective position by “resist[ing] erotic annihilation,” Rumph also draws attention to the bleakness of the final song, “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” and how Bilitis’ subjective voice is eventually overcome.¹³

Mentions of Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis* often appear in discussions of Debussy’s sensual or erotic musical style, e.g., Julie McQuinn’s “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music.”¹⁴ The chapter describes Debussy’s inclination for erotic themes in his composition, and in describing this musical eroticism, McQuinn states:

Debussy’s experience of the world around him was an erotic one, and he extended this experience into his music, attempting to expand the musical language of eroticism to encompass the full erotic continuum, with all its ambiguities and discontinuities, as part of the mystery and magic that defined for him the essence of music.

While she covers multiple works, McQuinn of course includes a discussion of the erotically charged *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, and she points to the erotic musical symbols such as the prevalence of the flute motive in the first song and the erotic tension in “La Chevelure” that is created through chromatic motion and offbeat repetitions. While these musical moments are perhaps explored more thoroughly in Rumph’s article, McQuinn includes a discussion of the biographical context surrounding the creation of Bilitis’ character and the collaboration between Louÿs and Debussy.

¹² Rumph, “Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*,” 464.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 477.

¹⁴ Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, 117-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

A discussion of eroticism in *Trois chansons de Bilitis* is also found in Stephen Downes' *The Muse as Eros: Music, Erotic Fantasy, and Male Creativity in the Romantic and Modern Imagination* which explores the erotic in the works of various composers such as Claude Debussy, Gustav Mahler, Bela Bartok, and Francis Poulenc.¹⁵ In the chapter titled "Names, Chords, and the 'Pale Princess' in Debussy's Musical Language of Love," Downes provides insight into techniques utilized by Debussy to evoke eroticism, which include musical motives that illustrate mysterious muses and Eros' flute; the ambiguity of harmony that is akin to "the 'veiled eroticism' or Mallarmé;" extended harmonies, particularly "voluptuous" ninth chords; and the suspension of harmonic movement that Downes' describes as the "fetishized moment."¹⁶ While Downes discusses several works by Debussy in this chapter, his analysis of Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* reveals the utilization of many of Debussy's techniques of musical eroticism to convey the sensuality of Bilitis' relationship with Lykas.

Turning away from the discussion of eroticism present in the set, William Gibbons' "Debussy as Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in the *Trois chansons de Bilitis*" explores how, despite Debussy's setting of only three poems in a much larger collection of poems, the *Trois chansons de Bilitis* conveys a complete narrative through what Gibbons' calls "narrative expansion."¹⁷ According to Gibbons, while Debussy's poetic choices only cover the "cardinal points" of Bilitis and Lykas' relationship, his musical setting conveys aspects of the narrative that are missing. These include the symbolism of the pastoral in the first and last song, which

¹⁵ Stephen Downes, "Names, Chords, and the 'Pale Princess' in Debussy's Musical Language of Love," in *The Muse as Eros: Music, Erotic Fantasy and Male Creativity in the Romantic and Modern Imagination*, 168-193 (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2006).

¹⁶ Downes, "Debussy's Musical Language of Love," 173.

¹⁷ William Gibbons, "Debussy as Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*," *Current Musicology* 85 (2008): 7-28.

represents Bilitis' innocence and the subsequent loss of that innocence, and the implications of sexual physicality in the second song.

Rita Strohl's *Bilitis*

Until recently, Rita Strohl's contributions to music and song have been nearly lost to history. While Strohl had a successful career in Paris during her lifetime, there are few studies of her life or compositional output written before the 21st century. Perhaps the earliest scholarly source on Rita Strohl and her works is Carlos Larronde's *L'Art cosmique et l'Œuvre musical de Rita Strohl* (The Cosmic Art and Musical Works of Rita Strohl), a study of Rita Strohl's music that focuses especially on the spiritual and mystic elements of her works.¹⁸ Within his book, Larronde divides Strohl's compositional output into three "cycles" that he calls "a Christian cycle, a Celtic cycle, [and] a Hindu cycle," and he includes an in-depth look into the extramusical themes found in her works.¹⁹ Although Larronde thoroughly explores the thematic concepts of Strohl's compositions, he only briefly mentions the *Bilitis* cycle. However, he does provide a complete list of Strohl's works at the end of the book that is integral to becoming familiar with Rita Strohl's output.

Recent efforts have been made to familiarize audiences and scholars with Rita Strohl and her work. The 2010 article "Rita Strohl: Composer or Mystic," co-written by Paul-André Bempéchat and Strohl's own granddaughter-in-law, Marie-Madeleine Martinie, provides biographical information about the composer and speculation on her involvement with spirituality and mysticism.²⁰ The article also briefly discusses her work, emphasizing the *Bilitis*

¹⁸ Carlos Larronde, *L'Art cosmique et l'Œuvre musical de Rita Strohl* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1931).

¹⁹ Larronde, *L'Art cosmique*, 47. (« un cycle chrétien, un cycle celtique, [et] un cycle hindou »)

²⁰ Marie-Madeline Martinie and Paul-André Bempéchat, "Rita Strohl: Composer or Mystic," *Journal of the International Alliance for Women in Music* 16, 2 (2010): 17-21.

songs by saying, “inevitably, and unfortunately, they will be compared with Debussy’s cycle. Unfortunate because, through their frankness—even naïveté—and their tonal syntax, these songs, and her works in general, are quite able to stand on their own.”²¹ Martinie and Bempéchat’s article also draws attention to the revival of scholarship on Rita Strohl, mentioning particularly the work of Pamela Feo and her Master’s thesis “Rita Strohl and Her Chansons de Bilitis.”²² Feo’s thesis, completed in 2006, is perhaps the most thorough investigation of the composer, and it provides an overview of Strohl’s biography and a study of her compositions that focuses notably on her song cycle *Bilitis*. In her discussion of *Bilitis*, Feo provides context to Strohl’s poetic choices and explores musical meaning and narrative elements through the analysis of musical themes and cyclical elements. She gives particular attention to the centering of *Bilitis* as the character in the aptly named song cycle, describing *Bilitis* as a “woman’s song cycle” that “creates a female’s story from the protagonist’s experiences.”²³

As mentioned earlier, Emily Kilpatrick’s recent publication *French Art Song: History of a New Music* includes a discussion of Rita Strohl and her *Bilitis* in the chapter entitled “*Mélodie* Center Stage.” Kilpatrick incorporates a brief musical analysis of the song cycle, noting the explicit setting of sexual violence that contrasts profoundly from Debussy’s, and, like Feo, she additionally points out the sense of reclaimed subjectivity in the cycle. One particularly enlightening aspect of Kilpatrick’s discussion is the historical information she provides in regard to the premiere, subsequent performances, and the reception of *Bilitis*. She acknowledges that, although Strohl’s *Bilitis* never reached the same level of popularity that Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis* achieved, Strohl’s setting “brought [her] the first serious critical attention of

²¹ Martinie and Bempéchat, “Rita Strohl,” 19.

²² Pamela L Feo, “Rita Strohl and Her Chansons de Bilitis” (Master’s Thesis, Tufts University, 2006).

²³ Feo, “Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis,” 58.

her career, and it remained her best received and most-performed work.”²⁴ In addition, considering that both settings premiered within the same timeframe, Kilpatrick comments on the possibility of influence, including direct quotes from Strohl that suggest her conscious rejection of Debussy’s influence.

The Songs of Georges Dandelot and Charles Koechlin

Little scholarly attention has been given to the *mélodies* of either Georges Dandelot or Charles Koechlin. Robert Orledge provides a significant contribution to biographical information on Koechlin in *Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): His Life and Works*, but little discussion of *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* is included.²⁵ A discussion of Koechlin’s vocal works is also included in Georgine Resick’s *French Vocal Literature*, but *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* is only briefly mentioned. One very recent study of the song cycle can be found in Chia-Wen Chen’s dissertation “Bilitis as Interpreted in Charles Koechlin’s *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*,” which was published in 2022. While the study is predominately a practical guide for singers on the performance practice of the work, it appears to be the most complete study on the composition.²⁶

Study of Georges Dandelot’s life and works have been mostly neglected, and subsequently his contribution to the genre of *mélodie* has been left mostly unexplored. However, there is one article that simultaneously explores the Bilitis songs of Koechlin and Dandelot: Federico Lazzaro’s “Bilitis après Debussy: Hommage, influence, prise de distance?” (“Bilitis

²⁴ Kilpatrick, *French Art Song*, 300.

²⁵ Robert Orledge, *Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): His Life and Works* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1989).

²⁶ Chia-Wen Chen, “Bilitis as Interpreted in Charles Koechlin’s *Cinq Chansons de Bilitis*,” DMA Dissertation, University of North Texas, 2022.

after Debussy: Homage, Influence, Distancing?”).²⁷ Lazzaro’s study centers on the influence of Debussy’s popular *Trois chansons de Bilitis* on other compositions based on Louÿs’ text, and both Koechlin’s song cycle and the various Bilitis songs of Dandelot are the predominant case studies for this possible influence. While Lazzaro describes Dandelot’s songs as “openly following the Debussyan model,”²⁸ he finds stark differences between Koechlin and Debussy’s settings, noting that this difference is “above all because the Greece they evoke is not the same.”²⁹ “Bilitis après Debussy” is also an important resource for discovering musical works based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as Lazzaro provides a list of works at the end of the article. In the appendix of this document, I have also provided a list of songs and vocal works based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* that includes song titles and additional works that are not included in Lazzaro’s article.

Methodology

To provide a foundation for the musical case studies explored in this dissertation, I have researched the historical and cultural context surrounding *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. In chapter 2, I provide a chronology of the creation and reception of the work itself and the song cycle settings of Debussy, Strohl, Dandelot, and Koechlin. In Chapter 3, I summarize the narrative structure of the poetry collection and identify the main themes related to gender and sexuality that are represented in each section. While I include important passages from *Les Chansons de Bilitis* (and other writings by Louÿs) that highlight these themes, I also draw from the broader secondary literature that comments on these various issues including Orientalism and

²⁷ Federico Lazzaro, “Bilitis après Debussy: Hommage, influence, prise de distance?” *Revue musicale OICRM* 2, 1 (2014): 159-190.

²⁸ Lazzaro, “Bilitis après Debussy,” 186. (« suivent ouvertement le modèle debussyste »)

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 178. (« surtout parce que la Grèce qu’ils évoquent n’est pas la même »)

fetishization of the other, sex and sexual violence, female character archetypes, and lesbian representation.

In exploring themes of gender and sexuality in the various song interpretations in chapters 4-7, I employ methodology that combines critical scholarship with musical analysis. My discussions of gender and sexuality center on a variety of themes pertaining to the diverse musical interpretations that include representations of gender and sexuality (such as archetypes, stereotypes, and subversions of typical representations), desire and eroticism, sex and sexual violence, and queerness. My musical analysis of the contrasting musical settings and the literary themes therein employ various methods of analyzing musical meaning, which include topic theory, markedness and oppositional voicing, and thematic and harmonic analysis. Below, I will expand on the particular methodology used in analyzing each of the musical works represented in this project.

My analysis of Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* draws on the aforementioned studies of Rumph and McQuinn and, in particular, their insights into the power play between Bilitis and the male characters in the setting. Elaborating on the concept of power dynamics, I provide a thorough analysis of the musical expression of this theme that focuses on markedness and oppositional voicing. As an example of oppositional analysis, the second song, "La Chevelure," is a dialogue between Bilitis and her lover Lykas. The song begins in Bilitis' voice, which is characterized by a light texture, an ominous, chromatically descending line, and a monotone vocal melody. However, when Lykas begins to speak, the music shifts to a full texture and a more animated vocal line. As he speaks, Lykas details a dream in which Bilitis seduces him, and the different "voices" of Bilitis and Lykas are created through the oppositional musical features. The way in which these voices are created through musical oppositions not only distinguishes

Bilitis' voice from Lykas', but it also creates a differentiation between the "real" Bilitis and the seductress of Lykas' dream. These contrasting images of Bilitis fall in line with the ever-present dichotomy of artistic representations of women: the virgin and the whore.

In my analysis of Rita Strohl's song cycle *Bilitis*, I focus predominantly on the musical features that highlight the theme of sexual violence. For instance, in the song "Les Remords," Bilitis is sexually assaulted by Lykas, and Strohl's music gives vivid expression of Bilitis' fluctuating emotions. The song begins with a quick-moving accompaniment figure *avec une agitation haletante et passionnée* (with breathless and passionate agitation) and a desperately leaping vocal line as she recounts the event, a shift to a slow and somber accompaniment as Bilitis is left alone in the forest, and an eventual return to the agitated opening musical characteristics as panic begins to set in. In addition to analyzing the depiction of the horrific act of sexual violence in songs such as "Les Remords," I also explore how the song cycle reveals the ramifications of this sexual violence. While songs such as "Bilitis" highlight Bilitis' vulnerability as she is stripped bare through an *a capella* setting, Strohl revisits and alters musical themes found earlier in the cycle that reveal how Bilitis is changed by the event. My musical analysis focuses heavily on this thematic development and the extramusical meaning that can be drawn from it.

My exploration of Georges Dandelot's *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* focuses predominately on his expression of musical eroticism. Foundational to my analysis is previous scholarship on the subject, especially as it pertains to stylistic qualities of French musical eroticism. In my discussion of Dandelot's "La Dormeuse," I expand on Stephen Downes' concept of the "fetishized moment," particularly the use of extended harmonies that create a sense of harmonic stasis. In subsequent songs in Dandelot's collection, I will provide motivic and harmonic

analysis that point to more non-traditional forms of musical eroticism. In “Le Baiser,” for instance, Dandelot uses hypnotic, repetitive motives and harmonic ambiguity to equate seduction with hypnotism, and this is further enhanced in latter parts of the song when the harmonic language devolves into the whole tone scale, placing the characters in a dream-like state of hypnosis. In “L’Étreinte éperdue,” on the other hand, the poetry correlates sexual pleasure with pain, and Dandelot’s musical setting highlights this through a continual sexual tension that is never resolved and dense harmonic dissonance.

Lastly, my analysis of Charles Koechlin’s *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* centers on the composer’s musical expression of the dying woman archetype. The five songs in Koechlin’s cycle express Bilitis’ looming death in a variety of ways, and thus, my analysis of the five songs utilizes a variety of analytical techniques. One analytical method that I employ is topic theory, a theoretical concept first described by Leonard Ratner that describes figures from styles and genres (particularly those that developed in music of the 18th century) that provide “subjects for musical discourse.”³⁰ In “Hymne à Astarté,” I discuss the use of the *tempesta* topic to represent both the powerful supernatural figure Astarté and Bilitis’ madness as she faces her mortality, and likewise, I discuss the use of the *ombra* topic, a style predominately used to depict the dead, in “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” the moment in which Bilitis becomes a ghostly figure.³¹ While Koechlin employs musical topics that are typically reserved for discussions of 18th-century music, his innovative musical style emphasizes the horrific elements of these topics; my musical analysis will thus explore *ombra* and *tempesta* in the context of Koechlin’s style which incorporates heavy dissonance, non-functional chord progressions, and non-diatonic scales. In “Chant

³⁰ Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 9.

³¹ My discussions of *tempesta* and *ombra* are informed especially by the scholarship of Clive McClelland, who has written extensively on both topics.

funébre,” my analysis centers on Koechlin’s use of recognizable themes that relate to the dead, such as the famous motif from the final aria in *Dido and Aeneas* simply referred to as “Dido’s Lament.” Lastly, my analysis of “Pluie au matin” and “Hymne à la nuit” highlights musical motifs that depict nature imagery in conjunction with poetic and musical themes of death, a fact that illumines the connection between death, femininity, and beauty.

Chapter Organization

Chapter 2 provides background information on the creation and reception of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* in order to provide historical and cultural contexts for the remainder of the document. I discuss Louÿs’ initial inspirations for the poetry collection, the false portrayal of the poems as translations of authentic Greek poems, and the reception of the work by scholars, literary critics, and the artistic circles of *fin-de-siècle* Paris. I additionally focus on reactions by composers of *mélodie* and provide the composition and performance history of the works that will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 will explore the narrative structure of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, focusing especially on the literary themes related to gender and sexuality that are present in the various sections of the poetry collection. An overview of the work’s narrative and themes will give insight into the vast array of musical responses to the work. The chapter will be organized by the separate sections of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*: the preface, the three sections covering the different phases of Bilitis’ life, and the final section containing the epitaphs written on Bilitis’ tomb.

Chapter 4, the first musical case study, centers on the gendered power dynamics that are highlighted in Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis*. My analysis highlights the oppositional voicing between Bilitis and the male characters represented in the cycle that characterize Bilitis

as virginal, innocent, and subjected to seduction and violence; I additionally use oppositional analysis to explore Lykas' sexualization of Bilitis (specifically in "La Chevelure") by observing the different voicings of the real and fantasized Bilitis. In addition to oppositional analysis, I also explore motives that represent seduction or hint to other aspects of the narrative that express Bilitis' subjection, particularly in regard to sexual violence.

While there are poetic similarities between Strohl and Debussy's settings, chapter 5 focuses on one narrative element that starkly contrasts Strohl's setting from Debussy's: the explicit depiction of Bilitis' rape. In this chapter, I explore how sexual violence is musically illustrated in Strohl's setting, both in the way that the act itself is portrayed as well as how Bilitis is changed afterward. While I provide an overview of all twelve songs in Strohl's cycle, the musical analysis focuses predominately on the second half of the cycle that begins with "Roses dans la nuit."

Chapter 6 analyzes Dandelot's use of musical eroticism, paying special attention to how this eroticism manifests in the three songs that explicitly portray the lesbian relationship between Bilitis and Mnasidika: "La Dormeuse," "Le Baiser," and "L'Étreinte éperdue." Considering that *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* centers on the lesbian relationship between Bilitis and Mnasidika, I also explore lesbian representation in the work. Dandelot's harmonic language, which negates traditional, heterosexual techniques of musical eroticism, falls in line with the depiction of a queer relationship; however, the illustrative techniques used to depict eroticism in the overtly sexual songs additionally highlight problematic aspects of Louÿs' construction of a lesbian relationship, which include fetishization, the reliance on heteronormative power dynamics, and the stereotypical representation of lesbians as dangerous.

Chapter 7 focuses on Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* and the evocation of Bilitis' impending and untimely death. In exploring this topic, I will analyze various methods of musical meaning in each of the songs, focusing on musical topics, themes, and illustrative techniques that represent or allude to death. In connection to gender and sexuality, this chapter will also contemplate the relationship between death and femininity, drawing connections to the notion that "the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world."³²

Chapter 8, the final chapter, offers concluding thoughts on the musical settings of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* explored in this document and the related discussions of gender and sexuality found therein. In addition, I propose avenues for further research on the works and composers explored in this dissertation, reflect on my own performances of these works and the opportunities that my research can provide for other performers, and discuss the possibilities of applying the methodologies that are used in analyzing these musical case studies to other works.

³² Edgar Allan Poe, "The Philosophy of Composition" *Graham's Magazine* 28, 4 (1846): 164.

CHAPTER 2

PIERRE LOUÏS' *LES CHANSONS DE BILITIS*: CREATION, RECEPTION, AND MUSICAL RESPONSES

An exploration of the origin of Pierre Louÿs' *Les Chansons de Bilitis* provides a glimpse into the *fin-de-siècle* Parisian culture that produced the work and its various musical interpretations. An overview of the poetry collection's creation reveals the initial inspirations for the work, which include Louÿs' fascination with exotic cultures and the allure of antiquity that exhibit the general Orientalist and neoclassical sentiments of 19th-century France. After the work's initial publication in 1894, which involved Louÿs' elaborate hoax and the quick discovery of the work's true origins, the responses by and interactions with scholars, critics, and, especially, musicians reveal a variety of artistic, cultural, and political dialogues with the work that carried into the 20th century. The chronology of the history of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and the exploration of the culture surrounding the work that are provided in this chapter will give contextual framework for the literary themes found within the poetry collection itself and the variety of musical settings that will be explored in subsequent chapters.

Beginnings and Inspiration

In the summer of 1894, Pierre Louÿs set out on what was to be his third pilgrimage to Bayreuth. Despite the poet's loyalty to Wagner, however, Louÿs did not reach his destination that summer. At a stop in Geneva, he met his friend André Gide who had recently completed a

months-long stay in Algeria; there, Gide experienced a “moral transformation” as his experience with the young prostitutes caused him to “reject the Christian religion and its puritanical ethic.”¹ Gide regaled Louÿs with his experience with a particular woman, Meryem bent Ali, who belonged to the Oulad-Naïd tribe, a group whose cultural practices involved young girls procuring dowries through prostitution. The tales of Meryem bent Ali’s sexual expertise were so convincing that Louÿs abandoned his journey to Bayreuth in order to visit her. Once in Algeria, Louÿs wrote a letter to one of his closest friends at the time, Claude Debussy, discussing his stay in the city of Constantine:

We found there a young person of sixteen years that had the most depraved morals and who was called like a little bird: Meryem Bent-Ali... She is of this Arab tribe where young girls win their dowries in dishonest ways... It is hot, the light is amazing, all of the women resemble Bilitis, especially the little girls...²

The name mentioned at the end of this correspondence, Bilitis, refers to the protagonist of the narrative poetry collection Louÿs had begun writing in the spring of that same year. Inspired by his recent translations of the erotically tinged poems of Greek writers Meleager and Lucian of Samosata, Louÿs formed the idea of a fictional poetess of ancient Greece whose verses would be similarly imbued with eroticism. The poems were to be written from the first-person perspective of the protagonist Bilitis, a young woman whose verses would recount details of her life, particularly her romantic and sexual encounters with both men and women.

As Louÿs would later present the poems as faux translations of a supposedly “real-life” poet, Louÿs took care to research ancient Greek customs before composing the poems

¹ H.P. Clive, *Pierre Louÿs (1870-1925): A Biography* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press, 1978), 95.

² Letter dated 31 June 1894. Quoted in Fathi Ghlamallah, *Pierre Louÿs: Arabe et amoureux* (Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1992), 28. (« Nous avons trouvé là-bas une jeune personne de seize ans qui a les mœurs les plus dépravées et qui s’appelle comme un petit oiseau : Meryem-bent-Ali... Elle est de cette tribu arabe, où les jeunes filles gagnent leur dot par des moyens déshonnêtes... Il fait chaud, la lumière est épatante, les femmes ressemblent toutes à Bilitis, du moins les petites filles »)

themselves in order to create an authentic depiction of ancient Greece. According to Jean-Paul Goujon:

...nothing had been left to chance. Louÿs had, for example, drawn up lists of “words not used (*chair, sexe, front*),” “words to repeat (*cheveux, paupières, yeux...*),” and “words to avoid” (*tête, mains, seins, lèvres...*.)” Besides this, [there were] a quantity of notes taken about ancient Greece: women’s names, epithets, frequency and significance of certain terms, etc. Once this enormous preparatory work was executed, the writing began.³

It is thus that Pierre Louÿs began to envision the ancient world in which Bilitis inhabited; on the 5th of March 1894, Louÿs wrote the first “song of Bilitis,” a poem aptly titled “Chanson”⁴ that, according to Louÿs, was modeled “after a Levantine song.”⁵

In constructing the poems themselves, Louÿs opted for a style that is formulaic yet free in its verse structure. Each poem is set into four paragraphs, and these distinct verses are set in prose without regard for rhyme or quantity. This style of free verse was popular with the Symbolists, who drew inspiration from the stylistic qualities of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Mallarmé. While this form of poetry is essentially free from formal constraints, the Symbolists were concerned with creating nuances of rhythm and poetic detail. In addition, these poets were also fond of a synesthetic approach to language, evoking visual and musical effects in their texts by “constructing the sentences on an almost purely musical basis, aiming not only at broad rhythmic effects, but also at the establishment of a regular harmonic system in which vowels and consonants should play the part of notes in a chord, with cadences, resolution and other

³ Jean-Paul Goujon, *Pierre Louÿs: Une vie secrète* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1988), 139. (« rien n’avait été laissé au hasard. Louÿs avait par exemple dressé des listes de « mots non employés (*chair, sexe, front*) », de « mots à répéter (*cheveux, paupières, yeux...*) » et de « mots à éviter (*tête, mains, seins, lèvres...*) » A côté de cela, quantité de notes prises à propos de la Grèce antique : noms de femmes, épithètes, fréquence et signification de certains termes, etc. Une fois cet énorme travail préparatoire exécuté, la rédaction commença »)

⁴ Considering that there are several poems in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* titled “Chanson,” this poem is the 26th poem in the original edition (Incipit: *Quand il est revenu...*). In the second edition (and subsequent editions), it is the 37th poem.

⁵ A note left in the margins of the original manuscript. Quoted in Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis, suivi de Pervigilium Mortis, avec divers textes inédits*, edited and annotated by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 271. (« d’après une chanson levantine que j’ai eu tort d’allonger »).

refinements borrowed from musical techniques.”⁶ Louÿs himself commented on the nuances and subtleties of prose poetry, saying:

At twenty-one years old, I had written twelve thousand verses before daring to write a line of prose, because prose is a poetry that ventures on a tightrope, without orchestra and that, supple, like its rhythm, throws the pendulum. I had only written in verse. With my first page of prose, I felt that it takes seven years of training in poetry to have a sense of rhythm and that otherwise prose does not exist.⁷

As outlined above, Louÿs had already begun work on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* before his sojourn in Algeria. However, after entering into the sensual and erotic world of Meryem bent Ali in the summer of 1894, Louÿs had discovered a muse who was the embodiment of the exotic protagonist that he had imagined. About Meryem bent Ali, Louÿs writes, “[she] came to live with me during my stay in Constantine. [This] was the cause that I entirely began Bilitis again based on her, from the day that I saw her.”⁸ Enchanted by his new mistress who “evok[ed] the very affectionate Greek courtesans,” Louÿs began rewriting preexisting Bilitis poems and composing new ones based on her image and the exotic city in which he had found her.⁹ Also during this time, Louÿs became inspired to construct a preface to the work titled “Vie de Bilitis” (“Life of Bilitis”), which details a biographical account of the life of Bilitis, and glimpses of Meryem bent Ali’s influence can no doubt be found in this character study; for example, the description of the courtesans of Amathus being “not like our own” reflects Louÿs’ exoticization of Meryem and the other Algerian girls, and the detailed descriptions of the excavations of

⁶ Rollo Myers, *Modern French Music: From Fauré to Boulez* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1984), 68.

⁷ Quoted in Goujon, *Une vie secrète*, 143. (« À vingt et un ans, j’avais écrit douze mille vers avant d’oser une ligne de prose, car la prose est une poésie qui hasarde de la corde raide, sans orchestre et qui, souple, comme son rythme, jette le balancier. Je n’écrivais qu’en vers. Ma première page de prose, je sentais qu’il faut sept ans de stage en poésie pour avoir le sens du rythme et qu’autrement la prose n’est pas »)

⁸ Quoted from Louÿs’ annotations written on a copy of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* meant to be gifted to his brother Georges. A facsimile is reproduced in Goujon, *Une vie secrète*, 140. (« Est venue habiter avec moi pendant mon séjour à Constantine. A été cause que j’ai recommencé entièrement Bilitis d’après elle, à partir du jour où je l’ai vue »)

⁹ Fathi Ghlamallah, *Pierre Louÿs: Arabe et amoureux*, 31. (« évoqu[é] les courtisanes grecques si affectionnées »)

Bilitis' tomb call to mind Louÿs' description of Meryem's jewels as being "the same as those of ancient tombs."¹⁰

Publication and Reception

With a new muse to inspire the evolving conception of his enigmatic protagonist, Louÿs completed the first draft of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* in September. The final edits of the manuscript were completed by October, and copies of the first edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* appeared in the Librairie de l'art indépendant by the 12th of December 1894.¹¹ Louÿs dedicated the work to André Gide, the man who introduced him to Meryem bent Ali, and as a nod to his mysterious muse, Louÿs additionally dedicated the work to a mysterious "M.b.A."¹²

As mentioned in the introduction to chapter 1, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* was initially marketed as original French translations of poems found in the recently excavated tomb of a real-life Bilitis. Throughout the initial creation of the work, Louÿs had gone back and forth on the idea of mystifying audiences, though by the time it was completed, he had settled on the plan.¹³ Several aspects of the work factored into his ruse, such as his meticulous research on Greek customs, the prefatory "Vie de Bilitis" that purported the "facts" of Bilitis' life and the excavation by Professor G. Heim, and a title page that claimed that the work had been "translated

¹⁰ From a letter to André Gide, dated 10 August 1894. Quoted in Clive, *Pierre Louÿs*, 106. (« les mêmes que ceux des tombeaux antiques »)

¹¹ Despite first being available in 1894, the publication date of the first edition reads 1895, creating discrepancies in the publication date of the work.

¹² Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis: traduites du grec pour la première fois par P.L.* (Paris: Librairie de L'art indépendant, 1895), dedication page.

¹³ In a sketch of a forward to *Les Chansons de Bilitis* written 11 May 1894, Louÿs describes how he had abandoned the idea of pretending that Bilitis was a real poet, describing the ruse as "parfaitement inutile et vain." However, by August, he had constructed a letter, supposedly written by Professor G. Heim, that provided information on "sources" offering information on the life of Bilitis, which included G. Heim's own work, *Bilitis sämtliche Lieder, zum ersten Male herausgegeben, und mit einem Wörterbuche versehen, von G. Heim* (Liepzig, 1894). Transcriptions of Louÿs' sketch and "G. Heim's" letter can be found in Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 207-209.

from the Greek for the first time by P. L.” In addition, the poetry collection contained 93 poems, and yet the table of contents listed 100 titles as the seven songs not included in the book were supposedly “untranslated” songs that were assumed not to have been included due to their overly scandalous nature.

The detail with which Louÿs constructed the illusion of a real-life Bilitis initially led readers to fall for the hoax, including renowned scholars. Soon after the publication of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Louÿs sent copies of the work (as well as his translations of other actually historical Greek writers) to renowned Hellenist scholars, including a professor of Greek archeology at the University of Lille who responded to Louÿs with “some variants of translations” of Bilitis’ poems, to which Louÿs later sarcastically retorted, “his testimony is of an authority that cannot be doubted.”¹⁴ In response to receiving copies of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and *Poésie de Méléagre*, another scholar allegedly responded by saying, “[Bilitis and Meleager] are not strangers to me.”¹⁵ Despite Louÿs’ construction of a ruse believable enough to fool academics, certain hints seem to suggest that Louÿs never fully intended to completely mystify his audience. For instance, the name of the enigmatic Professor G. Heim is a blatant reference to *Geheim*—the German word for “secret.”

Whether or not Louÿs had intended for his audience to discover the truth behind *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, it did not take long for readers to begin questioning the authenticity of the poems; an early example of this is found in writer and columnist Paul Ginisty’s observation, published in *Le Gil Blas* in January of 1895, that “these poems are impregnated somewhat with a

¹⁴ Quoted in Goujon, *Une Vie Secrète*, 144. (« quelques variantes de traductions » ; « son témoignage est d’une autorité qui ne peut être mise en doute »).

¹⁵ Quoted in Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 320. (« ce ne sont pas pour moi des inconnus »).

modern spirit.”¹⁶ In April, Louÿs’ friend Séverin Faust (under the pseudonym Camille Mauclair) named the author in a praising review in the *Mercure de France*:

Under this simple title, and of a subtle convention for those who know that Bilitis never existed, M. Pierre Louÿs took pleasure in bringing together a hundred little prose poems where luxury, sadness, grace, and gaiety appear little by little and unite.¹⁷

Thus, Louÿs’ ruse was quickly unveiled, and despite the mystification and the controversial subject matter of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the work was overall well received. Other than a small number of critics, such the classics scholar Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff who published an article criticizing Louÿs’ depiction of Greece and the “disgustingly obscene content” of the poems, reviews were overwhelmingly positive.¹⁸

Mélodie Settings of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*

The artistic circles of Paris, and particularly composers of *mélodie*, were especially taken with the songs of Bilitis. According to Goujon, “more than Hellenism, it was the poetic and artistic quality [of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*] that struck contemporaries,” and composers of *mélodie* were certainly captivated by the sensual, ancient Greek setting and the trending rhythmic nuances of prose poetry.¹⁹ Perhaps the most notable composer of *mélodie* to show interest in Louÿs’ poems was the poet’s close friend Claude Debussy. As mentioned previously, Debussy had been aware of Bilitis since her early beginnings, and after having read the poems himself, Debussy became captivated by her. In May 1897, Debussy wrote to Louÿs to ask permission to

¹⁶ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 324. (« ces poèmes paraissent imprégnés aussi quelque peu d’esprit moderne »).

¹⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 325. (« Sous ce titre simple, et d’une convention subtile pour qui sait que Bilitis n’exista jamais, M. Pierre Louÿs s’est plu à réunir cent petits poèmes en prose où la luxure, la tristesse, la grâce et la gaieté transparaissent tour à tour et s’unissent »)

¹⁸ Quoted and translated in Clive, *Pierre Louÿs*, 112.

¹⁹ Goujon, *Une vie secrète*, 144. (« Plus que l’hellénisme, c’était la qualité poétique et artistique du livre qui frappait les contemporains »)

set one of the poems to music to be published in the magazine *L'Image*;²⁰ for the song, Debussy proposed the text of “La Flûte,” a poem from the early part of Louÿs’ collection that subtly portrays the sexual tension between a young Bilitis and her first lover Lykas. Louÿs responded with the suggestion of another poem, “La Chevelure,” a poem that had not appeared in the first edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as he had only just written it.

By 1897, Pierre Louÿs had written a number of additional poems which would be included in the second edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* published by Mercure de France in 1898. Similar to Louÿs’ earlier inspiration in the form of Meryem bent Ali, many of the new poems owed their inspiration to various muses. One such figure is Zohra bent Brahim, a woman he had met during a second visit to Algeria in 1897. While Louÿs had only enjoyed the presence of his first muse Meryem bent Ali while in Algeria, with Zohra bent Brahim, Louÿs “shattered the boundary between the ‘pure’ home and exotic Other” when she accompanied Louÿs on his return to Paris; Louÿs and his friends could thus “enjoy *La Mauresque*, as they called her, anytime.”²¹ Even Debussy himself enjoyed the company of Zohra bent Brahim, as surviving photographs of the two suggest.²²

At the same time in which Louÿs returned to Paris with his new Algerian muse, Louÿs harbored unshakable feelings for Marie de R gnier (n e de Heredia), the Cuban-born wife of his friend Henri de R gnier. Even before her marriage in 1895, Marie de R gnier and Louÿs had long shown interest in one another, and these feelings exploded with the arrival of Zohra bent Brahim in Paris in 1897. In order to quell R gnier’s jealousy and anger toward Brahim, Louÿs

²⁰ Transcriptions of this correspondence can be found in Claude Debussy and Pierre Louÿs, *Correspondance de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs*, compiled and edited by Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie Jos  Corti, 1945), 94-95.

²¹ Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, 117-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127.

²² These images can be found in various sources, including Goujon’s *Une vie secr te*.

met with Régnier alone for the first time, and this initial meeting soon turned into an affair that would continue for four more years. According to H.P. Clive, the love affair would prove to be a huge inspiration for Louÿs and his work as it was “the most profound and emotional experience of Louÿs’ life.”²³

Louÿs thus wrote “La Chevelure,” the poem that he suggested for Debussy’s musical setting, while being “caught between two mistresses.”²⁴ In the poem, Bilitis’ hair is utilized as an erotic object, and the emphasis on the blackness of her hair brings to mind images of both of Louÿs’ “exotic” mistresses at the time; however, the author’s own annotations on a copy of the 1914 edition perhaps suggest that it was specifically his secret affair with Marie de Régnier that inspired the poem. As Louÿs wrote in the margins: “Paris, 189[7]. To conceal the name better, I do not give the date. Everything is true, down to the last detail.”²⁵

After Louÿs presented “La Chevelure” to Debussy, the composer obliged Louÿs’ suggestion, and his musical setting of the poem for voice and piano was soon after published in *L’Image* in October 1897 under the title “Chanson de Bilitis.” Debussy still harbored interest in his original suggestion, and by September of 1898, Debussy had completed a musical setting of “La Flûte de Pan” as well as a setting of an additional poem “Le Tombeau des Nâïades,” the final poem in the first part of Bilitis’ story. After completing the three songs, Debussy wrote to Louÿs to express his admiration for Bilitis:

Do you want to tell me, now, to tune Bilitis’ voice in major, or in minor, since she has the most persuasive voice in the world? You will say to me, “why do you make music?” That, old wolf, is another thing... it is for other settings; but, believe me, when Bilitis is here, let her speak for herself.²⁶

²³ Clive, *Pierre Louÿs*, 144.

²⁴ David Grayson, “Bilitis and Tanagra: Afternoons with Nude Women,” in *Debussy and His World*, edited by Jane F. Fulcher, 117-139 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 120.

²⁵ Translated and quoted in Grayson, “Bilitis and Tanagra,” 120.

²⁶ Letter dated 16 October 1898. Debussy and Louÿs, *Correspondance de Claude Debussy and Pierre Louÿs*, 118. (« Veux-tu me dire, maintenant, accorder la voix de Bilitis soit en majeur, soit en mineur, puisqu’elle a la voix la plus

Thus, Debussy's song cycle *Trois chansons de Bilitis* was published by Fromont in 1899. The three songs were first performed on March 17th, 1900 by singer Blanche Marot with the composer himself on piano at a concert sponsored by the Société nationale de musique. Reviews of the premiere were generally "inconsequential,"²⁷ such as Hugues Imbert's entry in *Le guide musical* which describes the work as "odd and affected" while subsequently praising Debussy's depiction of an ancient Greek setting, saying "the composer knew how to give a Grecian tinge to these rather licentious little poems!"²⁸ After the premiere, subsequent performances brought positive recognition to the songs, and the singer Lucienne Brèval especially championed them; according to Louÿs himself, Brèval "discovered them, singing them everywhere for fifteen years, and has contributed to their renown."²⁹

Trois chansons de Bilitis would not be Debussy's only work inspired by Louÿs' poems. Six months after the premiere of the song cycle, Debussy accepted a request from Louÿs to compose incidental music for a performance involving the recitation of selected poems from *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. This led to the creation of *Musique de scène pour les chansons de Bilitis*, a series of twelve pieces for two flutes, two harps, and celesta whose titles correspond to twelve of the poems recited at the performance, which took place on February 7th, 1901. In addition, Debussy later reworked material from his incidental music in *Six épigraphes antiques* (1914), a piano suite originally written for four hands and later reworked for solo piano.

While Claude Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* were some of the first *mélodies* to be inspired by Louÿs poetry collection (and undoubtedly the most successful), Debussy was not the

persuasive du monde? –Tu me diras, « pourquoi as-tu fait de la musique? » Ça, vieux loup, c'est autre chose... C'est pour d'autres décors; mais crois-moi, quand Bilitis est là, laissons-la parler toute seule »)

²⁷ François Lesure, *Claude Debussy: A Critical Biography*, translated by Marie Rolf (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2019), 164.

²⁸ Quoted and translated in Lesure, *Claude Debussy*, trans. Marie Rolf, 164.

²⁹ Quoted and translated in Emily Kilpatrick, *French Art Song: History of a New Music* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 292.

only composer of art song to be moved by Louÿs' erotic poetry. A month before the premiere of Debussy's three songs, singer Henriette Menjaud performed a new song cycle at the Salle de la Bodinière titled *Bilitis*, written by composer Rita Strohl (who also accompanied Menjaud on piano at the premiere). While relatively unknown today, Rita Strohl (1865-1941) was a prolific composer who was greatly recognized in the Parisian music scene during her lifetime. Her compositional output includes works for orchestra, chamber ensembles, solo piano works, and a number of *mélodie* settings of texts by 19th-century French poets including Baudelaire and Verlaine. Her setting of the poems of Pierre Louÿs was first suggested to her by her husband who had stumbled upon *Les Chansons de Bilitis* in a store window, and the resulting completion and publication of the twelve-song cycle based on Louÿs' text brought Strohl immediate success when the first five hundred copies of the work "were quickly sold out."³⁰

The song cycle continued to be performed regularly in subsequent years, most notably by singer Jane Bathori who "kept it in her repertoire for decades."³¹ Bathori's performances of *Bilitis* were well-received, and as a review from a 1904 concert suggests, she adequately portrayed Strohl's illustration of *Bilitis*' youth in Pamphylia: "Mme Bathori seemed to betray the secrets of another world, she came from somewhere else, without doubt from the pagan horizon where blossomed *Bilitis*' [love]."³² Strohl herself often accompanied singers, including Menjaud and Bathori, in performances of her song cycle, and she may have even sung them herself. It appears that Pierre Louÿs heard one of these performances, as an undated letter from poet to composer reads: "In spite of the artistic representation of your beautiful interpreter, it seems to me that your poems cannot be better sung than by you. I heard them from your voice, I will hear

³⁰ Pamela L. Feo, "Rita Strohl and Her Chansons de Bilitis" (Master's Thesis, Tufts University, 2006), 9.

³¹ Kilpatrick, *French Art Song*, 294.

³² Quoted and translated in Feo, "Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis," 50-51.

them, I hope, again, and I like to keep intact the memory of an impression that the public does not know at all.”³³

Being a female composer in a male-dominated profession, performances of Rita Strohl’s *Bilitis* also gained recognition from the blossoming feminist movement of late 19th-century Paris. Strohl’s influence and success are documented well in *La Fronde*, a feminist newspaper established by women’s activist Marguerite Durand that not only discussed issues related to women’s rights, but also promoted works by female artists. Strohl is mentioned a number of times throughout the duration of the newspaper’s run, and entries are often focused on her *Bilitis*. The 1900 premiere of *Bilitis* is advertised in the issue dated February 21st (the same day as the work’s premiere),³⁴ and a subsequent performance of the cycle by Menjaud and Strohl in 1903 is given a positive review by a critic under the elusive pseudonym “La Dame d’Orchestre:”

Madame Strohl has composed on the songs of *Bilitis* a voluptuous music that harmonizes with the text. We guess that Madame Strohl is an artist in love with beauty. Much applauded was Mademoiselle Henriette Menjaud, talented singer that interpreted these ravishing songs with an infinite charm.³⁵

One of the most detailed writings on Strohl and her *Bilitis* found in *La Fronde* is Cécile Max’s two-page article titled “La Tribune: Sur quelques femmes compositeurs” (“The Tribune: On Women Composers”) published in the daily posts for November 4th and 5th, 1902. The article, which appears to be one in a series of write-ups on female composers, gives a lengthy overview of Strohl’s background and compositional output. Max writes, “if [Strohl’s] works do not themselves offer sufficient musical interest, I am convinced that her personality as a woman

³³ Quoted and translated in *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁴ La Dame d’Orchestre, “Nouvelles Théâtrales,” *La Fronde*, 21 February 1900, 3.

³⁵ La Dame d’Orchestre, “Nouvelles Théâtrales,” *La Fronde*, 26 February 1903, 4. (« Mme Strohl a composé sur les chansons de *Bilitis* une musique voluptueuse qui s’harmonise avec des paroles. On devine en Mme Strohl une artiste éprise de beauté. Très applaudie a été Mlle Henriette Menjaud, cantatrice de talent qui a interprété ces ravissantes chansons avec un charme infini »)

would be a study in itself of the highest interest. She should be given a very special place among female composers.”³⁶ The exploration of Strohl’s life and compositions are followed by an in-depth analysis of *Bilitis*, and while Max offers a few criticisms (such as apparently unrelated key relationships and “banal” and “outdated” cadences), Max’s exploration of the work is overwhelmingly positive:

But these criticisms only touch on quite particular questions of form which could be discussed at length. Fortunately for them, the *Chansons de Bilitis* have qualities of such an order that these critiques become very light. They have a poetry, a flavor so particular that this form itself becomes a charm. From the antique character they have all the distinguished grace, while at the same time naïve. And without Madame Strohl having used with an absolute degree of accuracy the old Greek tonalities, so rich and so supple when they are fortunately employed, the musical context of her phrases knows how to tear us away from our usual atmosphere.³⁷

Throughout Strohl’s career, *Bilitis* would remain her most-recognized work. Nonetheless, Strohl’s song cycle, like many of the other songs inspired by *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, has been overshadowed by the unwavering success of Debussy’s three songs, and even during the early years of *Bilitis*’ success, comparisons were made to the *Trois chansons de Bilitis*.³⁸ However, Strohl maintained that her work was not inspired by Debussy’s, and she suggested that hers actually appeared first, saying, “mine are older... they appeared before his.”³⁹ While the earliest

³⁶ Cécile Max, “La Tribune: Sur les femmes compositeurs—Madame Rita Strohl,” *La Fronde*, 4 November 1902, 2. (« Mme Strohl a composé sur les chansons de Bilitis une musique voluptueuse qui s’harmonise avec des paroles. On devine en Mme Rita Strohl une artiste éprise de beauté. Très applaudie a été Mlle Henriette Menjaud, cantatrice de talent qui a interprété ces ravissantes chansons avec un charme infini »)

³⁷ Cécile Max, “La Tribune : Sur les femmes compositeurs—Madame Rita Strohl,” *La Fronde*, 5 November 1902, 2. (« Mais ces critiques ne touchent que des questions de forme assez particulières et sur lesquelles on pourrait discuter longuement. Heureusement pour elles les *Chansons de Bilitis* ont des qualités d’un tel ordre que ces critiques deviennent bien légères. Elles ont une poésie, une saveur si particulière que cette forme même en devient un charme. Du caractère antique elles ont toute la grâce distinguée en même temps que naïve. Et sans que Mme Strohl ait utilisé avec un souci absolu d’exactitude les ancienne tonalités grecque si riches et si souples lorsqu’elles sont heureusement employées, la contexture musicale de ses phrases sait nous arracher à notre atmosphère habituelle »).

³⁸ Kilpatrick, *French Art Song*, 294-295.

³⁹ Quoted and translated in *Ibid.*, 295.

accessible version of Strohl's song cycle published by Tolédo & Cie. appeared in 1900, it is possible that the earliest edition was published in 1898, preceding Debussy's by a year.⁴⁰

In the years following the earliest publications of Bilitis songs by Debussy and Strohl, numerous other composers sought inspiration from Louÿs' poems, and by the mid-20th century, at least twenty-five different composers had published songs based on Louÿs' text (see Appendix). However, few composers focused on setting a narrative cycle in the manner of Debussy and Strohl as most composers set a single *mélodie* or small song collections with no narrative thread. An early exception to this is Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, a five-song collection composed between the years 1898 and 1908.

Now recognized predominantly for his orchestral works, Charles Koechlin wrote a significant amount of *mélodies*, though his songs are rarely performed or discussed.⁴¹ In both his instrumental and vocal works, Koechlin showed a propensity for subjects that centered around Classical mythology and ancient Greek settings and "the Orient," which undoubtedly led him to the exotic antiquity of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. However, Koechlin's interpretation of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* differed greatly from the works of Debussy and Strohl; instead of depicting the sensuality of Bilitis' first relationship, Koechlin took inspiration from the darker themes in Louÿs' collection by setting five poems that focus on Bilitis' increasing unhappiness at the end of her life and her impending and eventual death. The first Bilitis song that Koechlin composed is "Hymne à Astartè," which was completed in 1898 and subsequently premiered in 1899 by

⁴⁰ Feo, "Rita Strohl and her *Chansons de Bilitis*," 48.

⁴¹ The only well-known *mélodie* by Koechlin is "Si tu le veux," which is still performed today. While the song was originally a setting of Armand Silvestre's "Chanson de Bertrade" from *Griseldis*, his publisher pressured him to change the text to something more commercial. Koechlin himself later lamented that the song was "adapted, by the editor, to other verses whose banal sentimentality enchants listeners who dream of cinematic kisses in the moonlight!" (« adaptée, par l'éditeur, à d'autres vers dont la sentimentalité banale enchante les auditeurs rêvant de cinématographiques baisers, au clair de lune ! »). Charles Koechlin, "Étude sur Charles Koechlin par lui-même," in *Charles Koechlin: 1867-1950 « Koechlin par lui-même »*, 39-72 (Paris: La Revue musicale, 1981), 47.

Jane Hatto, one year before Debussy and Strohl's song cycles would premiere. Koechlin completed his final Bilitis song, "Hymne à la nuit," in 1908. A decade later, the five songs in their entirety premiered for the first time by singer Jane Bathori and pianist Andrée Vaurabourg. Still, it was not until 1923 that *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* was finally published by Éditions Maurice Senart.

In the years following the publication of Koechlin's five songs, Paris saw a renewed interest in musical settings of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* that included revived performances of Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, a new orchestrated version of Debussy's songs by Maurice Delage (1926), and new *mélodie* settings of the poems. By the end of the 1930's, Bilitis had "imposed herself in the Parisian musical landscape" as a number of new songs and collections continued to be published throughout the decade.⁴² One notable composer of Bilitis songs during this time is Georges Dandelot, who began writing the first of fifteen Bilitis songs the same year that saw the publication of Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*. Throughout the late 1920's and 1930's, performances of Dandelot's Bilitis songs brought the composer recognition and many positive reviews, such as the following review in *Le Ménestrel*, which comments on a performance of six of Dandelot's Bilitis songs and their masterful evocation of ancient Greece:

Charming and translucent... appeared the *Six chansons de Bilitis* written by Dandelot on the prose of Louÿs. Dandelot knew how to conserve all of their freshness and their naivety in these stanzas, he understood how the Greek line has frankness, simplicity, and humanity: his song is supple, limpid, as elegant as the folds of the antique chlamys. It covers the body, but lets one guess all the forms. His accompaniment is also as discreet as that of the antique lyre. Dandelot has made both a personal work and a pretty reconstruction.⁴³

⁴² Federico Lazzaro, "Bilitis après Debussy: Hommage, influence, prise de distance?" *Revue musicale OICRM* 2, 1 (2014): 162. (« s'impose dans le paysage musical parisien »)

⁴³ Pierre de Lapommeraye, "S.M.I.," *Le Ménestrel: journal de musique*, 26 April 1929, 193. (« Charmantes et translucide, au contraire, apparurent ensuite les *Six chansons de Bilitis* écrites par Dandelot sur la prose de Louÿs. Dandelot a su conserver toute leur fraîcheur et leur naïveté à ces strophes, il a compris tout ce que la ligne grecque a de franchise, de simplicité et d'humanité : son chant s'en va souple, limpide, aussi élégant que les plis de l'antique chlamyde. Il couvre le corps, mais en laisse deviner toutes les formes. Son accompagnement est aussi discret que celui de la lyre antique. Dandelot a fait là à la fois œuvre personnelle et jolie reconstitution »)

While Dandelot's construction of Bilitis' ancient Greek setting found favor with critics, his songs unavoidably drew comparisons to Debussy; an example is found in another review of a 1932 performance that states:

It is difficult for M. G. Dandelot to not sometimes awaken in us the precise and formidable memory of three striking pages where the subtle, whimsical, and profound genius of Claude Debussy is expressed entirely. But he knew how to manifest a sincerity, a freshness, and a precision of accent rarer than you would think in these times and which seemed to have an action most direct on the listener.⁴⁴

Dandelot's fifteen songs would eventually be published in 3 collections: *Six chansons de Bilitis* (1929), *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* (1931), and *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* (1933). The collections, particularly the first and last, are constructed in the manner of song cycles whose poetic choices reflect their own self-contained narrative. Perhaps the most unique of Dandelot's published Bilitis collections is the final *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*, as the four songs center around Bilitis' lesbian relationship with a woman named Mnasidika. Other than a few individual settings, most composers of Bilitis songs shied away from the overt lesbian themes found in the poetry collection;⁴⁵ Dandelot's third collection, however, focuses solely on the relationship between the two women, even setting poems such as "Le Baiser" and "L'Étreinte éperdue" that explicitly depict the sexual relationship between the two women.

While the blatant depiction of homoerotic themes in Dandelot's *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* suggests new thematic opportunities for composers of Bilitis songs, few composers afterward tackled the subject. In fact, after the revival of musical settings of *Les Chansons de*

⁴⁴ G.S. "Concert Georges Dandelot," *Le Ménestrel: journal de musique*, 27 February 1932, 96. (« il était difficile à M. G. Dandelot de ne pas éveiller parfois chez nous le souvenir précis et redoutable de trois pages saisissantes où le génie subtil, fantasque et profond de Claude Debussy s'est exprimé tout entier. Mais il a su manifester une sincérité, un fraîcheur, et une justesse d'accent plus rares que vous ne pensez par le temps qui court et qui ont paru avoir l'action la plus directe sur l'auditoire »)

⁴⁵ Examples of other song settings that include overt references to Bilitis' lesbian relationship include Pierre Langlois' "Paroles dans la nuit" (1904-1905) and Andre-Marie Cuvelier's "Les Seins de Mnasidika" (1935).

Bilitis in the 1920's and 30's, other than a handful of songs and an operetta by Joseph Kosma, composers of song in the late 20th and 21st centuries have left Louÿs' collection relatively untouched. In addition, with the exception of Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, which is still performed and recorded regularly today, song settings of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* have been forgotten or are severely underperformed.

Legacy of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*

Like most of its musical settings, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* remained popular throughout the early 20th century but it has since fallen into obscurity. Throughout Pierre Louÿs' lifetime, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* continued in popularity due to its continuous output of new editions; after the publication of the collection's second edition in 1898 that included numerous poetic additions, subsequent editions were published in 1900, 1906, 1912, 1914, and 1922—the latter including beautifully colored illustrations by Georges Barbier. While the poetry collection continued to bring Pierre Louÿs success and recognition, the initial mystification surrounding *Bilitis* solidified his reputation as a “clever hoaxer.”⁴⁶ At one point, Louÿs referred to *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as “at once my success and my loss.”⁴⁷

In the mid-20th century, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and its English translations found a new audience in the emerging LGBTQ rights movement, especially in the United States. Since its beginnings, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* had been popular with lesbian readers, particularly the “wealthy, white members of the lesbian salon culture,” for its unapologetic depiction of lesbian relationships.⁴⁸ In 1955, the poetry collection became associated with the first American lesbian

⁴⁶ Clive, *Pierre Louÿs*, 211.

⁴⁷ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 210 (« à la fois mon succès et ma perte »)

⁴⁸ Cat Lambert, “Forging Lesbians: Sappho and *The Songs of Bilitis*,” *Classical Receptions Journal* 16 (2024): 163.

civil rights group Daughters of Bilitis, who adopted the name for its obscure origins. This association led to the poetry collection's growing popularity amongst lesbian audiences, but it later expanded outside of the lesbian underground with new publications, such as the popular 1988 Dover publication of a reprint of Alvah C. Bessie's 1926 English translation.

Despite the revival of English translations of Pierre Louÿs' poems in late 20th century, the poetry collection remains little known today. For those who are aware of the poetry collection, the work is often referenced only as erotic, lesbian literature, and the complexities and issues at the heart of the text including (but certainly not limited to) Bilitis' bisexuality, lesbian fetishization, and the objectification of Algerian women that directly inspired the work are rarely discussed. Luckily, the continuing evolution of feminist, postcolonial, and queer scholarship in the 21st century has produced several critical analyses of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* that brings to light these previously mentioned issues, such as a 2024 article by Cat Lambert that examines Louÿs' hoax in order "to understand Bilitis as part of another story, a patriarchal, colonialist economy of forgeries created by white European and American men."⁴⁹

In the remainder of this document, I aim to continue the critical study of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* through the lens of its musical interpretations. The variety and diversity of musical responses, especially the song cycles explored here, bring to light various issues of gender and sexuality at the heart of the text that have been overshadowed or underdiscussed. While the study of these musical settings will bring to light the problems and complexities of their literary source, it will also hopefully familiarize readers and audiences with the poetry collection and its musical interpretations that continue to fade with time. Before delving into the various song cycles based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the following chapter will expand on how issues of

⁴⁹ Lambert, "Forging Lesbians," 172.

gender and sexuality are addressed in the poetry collection itself in order to provide context for the musical analyses in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER 3

GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND ISSUES OF REPRESENTATION IN *LES CHANSONS DE BILITIS*

In the previous chapter, the discussion of the reception of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* brought to light the variety of musical works based on the poetry collection. Might there have been factors responsible for a general appeal to composers? Certainly, the combination of prose poetry, the pervasive and diverse eroticism, and an exotic setting in ancient Greece would offer a range of creative possibilities. Bilitis herself is an enigmatic and multifaceted character as she traverses through the different stages of her life and takes on various lovers. Louÿs' careful characterization of Bilitis certainly captivated composers, enough so to make Claude Debussy proclaim that "she has the most persuasive voice in the world."¹

Though *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is often known merely as an example of erotic literature, the story and its protagonist are quite complex, and this complexity is seen clearly in the range of musical responses to the poems. The song cycles of Claude Debussy and Rita Strohl, for instance, show vastly different interpretations of Bilitis' youth and sexual awakening with her first lover, Lykas. While most composers of songs based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* shied away from poems found in the second part of Bilitis' story in which she discovers her bisexuality on the island of Lesbos, Georges Dandelot's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* is centered around the sexual

¹ From a letter from Debussy to Louÿs, dated 16 October 1898. Claude Debussy and Pierre Louÿs, *Correspondance de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs*, compiled and edited by Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1945), 118. (« elle a la voix la plus persuasive du monde »)

relationship between Bilitis and another woman named Mnasidika. While these composers drew inspiration from Bilitis' two most notable relationships in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* rejects the themes of love and sex in favor of the darker theme of death as he illustrates her unhappiness in the face of mortality in the final stage of her life.

The various musical responses mentioned here also highlight issues of gender and sexuality that are inherent to the work. Before delving more into these song interpretations in the following chapters, I shall first examine aspects of the poetry collection's narrative and the characterization of Bilitis in order to give context to the themes of gender and sexuality that are represented in the musical settings. First, I will explore the preface to the work, "Vie de Bilitis" ("Life of Bilitis"), which gives biographical account of Bilitis' character while firmly placing her in a setting that can be considered an Orientalized ancient Greece. Subsequently, I will examine the various sections that organize the poems into the various stages of Bilitis' life. This thorough examination of the poetry collection itself will bring to light issues of gender and sexuality that pervade the text and provide narrative and thematic background for the following chapters in which these issues will be examined through my interpretation of the musical responses.

Vie de Bilitis: Establishing an "Oriental" Greece

Bilitis was born at the beginning of the sixth century before our era, in a mountain village situated on the edge of Melas, toward the east of Pamphylia...²

² Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis, suivi de Pervigilium Mortis, avec divers textes inédits*, edited and annotated by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 31. (« Bilitis naquit au commencement du sixième siècle avant notre ère, dans un village de montagnes situé sur le bord des Mélas, vers l'orient de la Pamphylie... »)

As mentioned previously, *Les Chansons de Bilitis* begins with a preface titled “Vie de Bilitis” that, in the work’s initial publication, was purported to have been written by the “translator,” P.L. Louÿs modeled the format of the preface on his earlier translation of the poetry of ancient Greek poet Meleager, which begins with a contextual biography of the poet titled “Vie de Méléagre.”³ Just as the short biographical preface to Meleager’s translated poems provides an overview of the poet’s life, Bilitis’ faux biography provides the “facts” of her life, including the places in which she lived and died, conjectures about her family, and an overview of the important stages of her life. The preface ends with the details of the moment in which Professor G. Heim “discovered” her tomb which include a lengthy and poetic description of the state of Bilitis’ mummified remains.

As discussed in chapter 2, the detail with which Louÿs constructed the illusion of a “real-life” Bilitis played into the initial hoax of presenting the work as authentic translations of ancient Greek poems, and placing Bilitis in the historical yet “exotic” setting of classical antiquity only enhanced the mystification and sensuality at the heart of her verses. In *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as well as his other works, Pierre Louÿs’ espoused a reverence for ancient Greek customs, particularly in regard to sexuality. In the preface to his novel *Aphrodite*, Louÿs details his thoughts on Greek sexuality while simultaneously critiquing the moralistic Parisian society of the 19th century:

Until this day, modern writers who have addressed themselves to a public less prejudiced than that of young girls and young *normaliens* have used a laborious strategy whose hypocrisy displeases me: “I have depicted voluptuousness as it is,” they say, “in order to exalt virtue.” At the beginning of a novel whose intrigue unfolds in Alexandria, I absolutely refuse to commit this anachronism... Love, with all its consequences, was for the Greeks a sentiment most virtuous and most fertile in grandeurs. They never attached to it ideas of impudence or immodesty that the Israelite tradition has imported among us with the Christian doctrine.⁴

³ Pierre Louÿs, *Poésie de Méléagre* (Paris: Petite collection à la Sphinx, 1894).

⁴ Pierre Louÿs, *Aphrodite : mœurs antiques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1896), v-vi. (« Jusqu’à ce jour, les écrivains modernes qui se sont adressés à un public moins prévenu que celui des jeunes filles et des jeunes normaliens ont usé

Louÿs' particular sentiments about ancient Greece were not unique to him. Artistic figures of the time, especially those associated with the Symbolist movement, saw ancient Greece as an ideal site for sexual pleasure separated from the confines of contemporary moral constrictions. In *Sex, Symbolists, and the Ancient Greek Body*, Richard Warren explains:

Broadly speaking, we may speak of an ideal common to many Symbolists that associated the classical world with the free expression of feelings and emotions, and above all those of a sexual nature... The Symbolists' classical ideal was most often articulated as an expression of praise for the religious culture of antiquity, usually conceived of as pagan in nature. That paganism had its own aesthetic attractions for the Symbolist poet and artist, but this dynamic also had much to do with a rejection of Christianity—at least to the extent that it was perceived as having put paid to the cherished emotional and sexual liberality of the ancient world.⁵

Not only did ancient Greece have the allure of a purported sexual liberation, but the setting allowed artists in the *fin-de-siècle* to experiment with erotic fantasies in an exotic yet esteemed historical setting far from 19th-century Paris. According to Julie McQuinn, this is precisely what made the ruse behind the publication of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* so seductive. She says, “the hoax... allowed the reader to revel in the erotic activities of Bilitis without feeling any tinges of moral guilt. This was history, not fiction, and the authenticity of Bilitis made her even more enticing.”⁶

The association of ancient Greece with exoticism in 19th-century artistic depictions such as *Les Chansons de Bilitis* invites comparison to the way in which Eastern cultures were fetishized in general. Elaborating on this connection in Symbolist art, Warren explains, “where

d'un stratagème laborieux dont l'hypocrisie me déplaît : « J'ai peint la volupté telle qu'elle est, disent-ils, afin d'exalter la vertu. » En tête d'un roman dont l'intrigue se déroule à Alexandrie, je me refuse absolument à commettre cet anachronisme. L'amour, avec toutes ses conséquences, était pour les Grecs le sentiment le plus vertueux et le plus fécond en grandeurs. Ils n'y attachèrent jamais les idées d'impudicité et d'immodestie que la tradition israélite a importées parmi nous avec la doctrine chrétienne »)

⁵ Richard Warren, *Sex, Symbolists and the Greek Body* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 19.

⁶ Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy's Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, 117-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 128.

we speak of the classical world, we must do so loosely, because for many Symbolists this was closely associated with a similarly idealized (and not necessarily historical) notion of the Near East, or Orient.”⁷ The French in particular became preoccupied with Orientalist art in the 19th century, and the resulting brand of 19th-century French Orientalism was exacerbated by Napoleon’s 1798 campaign in Egypt and the French conquest of Algiers in 1830. As Susan McClary explains in her critique of *Carmen*, this fascination with Eastern cultures and their representation in 19th-century art, literature, and music can be seen as early as Victor Hugo’s 1829 poetry collection *Les Orientales*.⁸ Hugo admits his own “preoccupation” with the Orient which, according to him, encapsulates all things “Hebraic, Turkish, Greek, Persian, Arab, even Spanish.”⁹ Subsequent writers, artists, and musicians similarly became fascinated in particular with the “sensuality” of their fantasized Orient, and this fantasy “became a kind of utopian projection, a place offering in unchecked profusion those qualities the West had traditionally denied itself through Christian prohibition, political oppression, or regimented bourgeois mores.”¹⁰

While many artists used their creative medium to project their sexual fantasies through an Oriental lens, Pierre Louÿs additionally indulged his fantasies in reality with the young prostitutes he met in French-colonized Algeria. This blend of Louÿs’ imagined ancient Greece and the real-life encounters with Meryem bent Ali and the young prostitutes who inspired *Les Chansons de Bilitis* resulted in the poetry collection’s setting that, according to Jean-Paul

⁷ Warren, *Sex, Symbolists, and the Greek Body*, 19.

⁸ Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 30.

⁹ Quoted in McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen*, 30.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 31.

Goujon, is “not a classic Greece... but an Orientalized Greece.”¹¹ Stephen Downes elaborates further on this point, saying:

Louÿs’ aim, inspired by his twin muses, the teenaged Biskran Meryem ben Ali and the Algerian Zohren ben Brahim, was to restore ancient Greek sensuality, at once mysterious and creative, in a modern synthesis of the fleshly and imaginative. In the erotic play of command, control, and cruelty, in a heady mix of neoclassical distance and oriental fantasy, Louÿs expressed the indivisibility of artistic creative fecundity and the endless pursuit of sexual seduction.¹²

In his own words about the construction of Bilitis’ ancient Greek setting, Louÿs writes, “I made a point of giving this book a character less Hellenistic than Asian.”¹³

One of the most prominent ways in which Louÿs creates his Orientalized Greece is through the physical descriptions of women that often highlight the darkness of their skin and hair. Bilitis herself is described as having brown skin, and the blackness of her hair is fetishized, as in the poem “La Chevelure.” These exoticized descriptions of women in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* bring to mind the ways in which Louÿs spoke of the real-life women who inspired the story and character. While working on the new poems that found their way into the second edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Louÿs expressed his fascination with Zohra bent Brahim’s complexion in a letter to Debussy saying, “you cannot imagine how brown she is, you see; it’s a pretty sight, on the white sheets, a body of a woman in chocolate.”¹⁴ Describing Meryem Bent Ali, the first muse to inspire *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Louÿs wrote:

Meryem is the prettiest, most gracious, and most delicate being that I have ever seen. She is surprisingly a petite Javanese... but she is also American Indian, and at times the

¹¹ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 207. (« non pas la Grèce classique... mais une Grèce orientalisée »)

¹² Stephen Downes, “Names, Chords, and the ‘Pale Princess’ in Debussy’s Musical Language of Love,” in *The Muse as Eros: Music, Erotic Fantasy and Male Creativity in the Romantic and Modern Imagination*, 168-193 (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2006), 169.

¹³ Quoted in Goujon, *Une vie secrète*, 143. (« je me suis attaché à donner au livre un caractère mois hellénique qu’asiatique »)

¹⁴ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 191. (« il portait sur elle ce qu’on pourrait appeler un ‘regard colonial’, la considérant avant tout comme un instrument de plaisir »)

Virgin Mary, and also a Tyrian courtesan, under her jewels which are the same as those in ancient tomb: the diadem, the golden margoulette, and the silver periscelis.

She is all that; unfortunately, it is impossible to take this little animal into a civilized village as it is to present a panther into a tidy living room...¹⁵

The description of Meryem Bent Ali as a “Tyrian courtesan” no doubt conjures the image of Bilitis at the end of her life, a successful courtesan adorned in expensive jewels, but the labeling of an Algerian woman as both “Javanese” and “American Indian” implies a stock racial Other. Perhaps most disturbing are Louÿs’ description of Meryem as an uncivilized animal, which perpetuates harmful stereotypes of non-Western cultures as barbaric and animalistic. According to Goujon, Louÿs’ attitude towards Zorah bent Brahim, Meryem bent Ali, and the other young Algerian girls he met in Algeria reveal “what might be called a ‘colonial gaze,’ considering [them] above all as an instrument of pleasure.”¹⁶

In the quote regarding Meryem bent Ali, we see not only Louÿs’ colonial mindset that resulted in the exoticism within *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, but we also see a propensity to depict women as archetypes of femininity, such as his description of Meryem Bent Ali as simultaneously a racial Other, the Virgin Mary, and a courtesan. Similarly, in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Bilitis embodies archetypal representations of women (particularly regarding sexuality) that are common to Western literature. The poems themselves are, in fact, divided into three sections that correspond to the three archetypes that Bilitis most clearly embodies: the virgin, the lesbian, and the “whore.” In the first section, titled “Bucoliques en Pamphylie” (“Bucolics in

¹⁵ Quoted in Fathi Ghlamallah, *Pierre Louÿs: Arabe et amoureux* (Paris: Librairie A.G. Nizet, 1992), 29. (« Meryem est l'être le plus joli, le plus gracieux, le plus délicat que j'aie encore vu. Elle est étonnamment petite javanaise... Mais elle est aussi Indienne d'Amérique, et par moments Vierge Marie, et encore courtisane tyrienne, sous ses bijoux qui sont les mêmes que ceux des tombeaux antiques : le diadème, la margoulette d'or et les périscelis d'argent. Elle est tout cela ; malheureusement il est tout aussi impossible de traîner ce petit animal dans un ville civilisée que de présenter une panthère dans un salon bien rangé »)

¹⁶ Goujon, *Une vie secrète*, 191. (« Tu ne peux pas imaginer comme elle est brune, vois-tu ; et c'est joli, sur les draps blancs, un corps de femme en chocolat »)

Pamphylia”), Bilitis recounts her youth and childhood, highlighting her role as the innocent virgin. This section also introduces her first love, a shepherd named Lykas, and her first sexual encounter with him marks the ending of her childhood and the beginning of her sexual awakening. This is followed by “Élégies à Mytilène” (“Elegies in Mytilene”) in which Bilitis embodies a lesbian archetype, detailing her life on the isle of Lesbos and her passionate love for another woman named Mnasidika. The final section, “Épigrammes dans l’île de Chypre” (“Epigrams in the Island of Cyprus”), follows the final years of Bilitis’ life as she begins a new career as a courtesan. In the sections below, each section of the poetry collection will be discussed in order to reveal the intricacies of how Bilitis comes to represent these three different archetypes and highlight the issues of gender and sexuality related to these various representations.

Bilitis as Virgin: Youth, Innocence, and Sexual Awakening

In “Bucoliques en Pamphylie,” the protagonist is introduced as a young girl living in Pamphylia. While her age is not specified, it is suggested that Bilitis is at the age of puberty as she often refers to herself as a child while also taking note of her changing body. In poems like “Les Comparaisons” (“Comparisons”), for instance, Bilitis acknowledges that “the new body of young girls are covered with flowers like the earth,” and her friends compare their growing breasts.¹⁷ In “Impatience,” Bilitis confides to her friend her dissatisfaction with her slow maturity:

¹⁷ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 52. (« le corps nouveau des jeunes filles se couvre de fleurs comme la terre »)

Alas! I am only a child; the young men do not look at me. When shall I have a young girl's breasts like yours that will swell my dress and tempt kisses?¹⁸

As Bilitis' lamentations in "Impatience" reveal, her maturing body also brings about a newfound interest in men, something that both intrigues and repulses her. In "Le Passant" ("The Passerby"), Bilitis shouts and cries when a passing man blows her a kiss, and yet in "Les Confidences" ("Confidences"), she listens eagerly as her newly-married friend recounts the secrets of her wedding night.

While the earliest poems in this section are a series of anecdotes of her youth that reinforce a newfound interest in love and sex, once we reach the twenty-fourth poem titled "Lykas," the focus of "Bucoliques en Pamphylie" shifts to Bilitis' relationship with her first lover.¹⁹ Lykas is introduced to us as a shepherd "who guards his father's flocks under the shadowy hills of the Tauros" and is "as beautiful as Adonis."²⁰ He entices Bilitis and the other girls of her village by playing the flute, and in fact, the first time that Bilitis finds herself alone with Lykas in "La Flûte" ("The Flute"), he invites her to sit on his lap while he teaches her to play. While this initial scene of flirtation is innocent, their following encounters become increasingly sexual, such as in the following poems "La Chevelure" ("The Hair") in which Lykas first professes an erotic dream that he had about Bilitis, and "La Coupe" ("The Cup") where he molds a cup by spreading clay onto Bilitis' bare breast.

¹⁸ Ibid., 51. (« Hélas ! je ne suis qu'une enfant ; les jeunes hommes ne me regardent pas. Quand aurai-je comme toi des seins de jeune fille qui gonflent la robe et tentent le baiser ? »)

¹⁹ For the remainder of this document, the ordering and numbering of the poems will be based on the order of poems in the second edition of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as this edition (and all other subsequent editions) includes the additional poems written after the publication of the first edition. The numbering of poems also incorporates the "untranslated" poems, which are not included in the actual text, but their titles are represented in the collection's table of contents.

²⁰ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 63. (« qui garde les troupeaux de son père sur les pentes du Tauros ombreux » ; « beau comme Adônis ! »)

Bilitis eventually loses her virginity to Lykas, though the act is most certainly nonconsensual. Beginning with “Les Remords” (“Remorse”), Bilitis recounts Lykas raping her as she slept alone in the forest. She explains how she struggled against him, and afterward was left alone to “stifle [her] sobs in the grass.”²¹ Details of the act are reiterated again in the following poem, “Le Sommeil interrompu” (“Interrupted Sleep”), and in “La Laveuse” (“The Washerwoman”), Bilitis reveals her sadness and shame when she attempts to hide the evidence of her lost virginity.

The inclusion of rape in the narrative of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is perhaps another method of creating a believable ancient Greek setting considering the prevalence of sexual violence in ancient Greek myths, which famously includes Zeus’ many violent pursuits of women (Leda, Io, and Europa, to name a few) and the insatiable desires of satyrs towards nymphs and mortal women. The victims of sexual violence in ancient Greek myth often end in tragedy, with the victim attempting to escape rape or avoiding the shame of being violated through death or transformation. In *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, however, the rape of Bilitis does not lead to her tragic end, but rather her sexual awakening. In the poem “Bilitis,” which appears directly after the poems in which Bilitis expresses shame toward losing her virginity, Bilitis unabashedly proclaims a newfound confidence in her body and sexuality. In the poems that follow, the repulsion that she felt towards Lykas during and after his attack is gone, and it is instead replaced with a physical desire for him, which can be seen in the description of the couple’s intimate moments in poems such as “La Petite Maison” and “La Nuit.”

There have been a variety of responses to Louÿs’ treatment of sexual violence in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. Some scholars have attributed Bilitis’ new sexual confidence after the rape

²¹ Ibid., 73. (« j’étouffe mes cris dans l’herbe »)

as a means of taking back the power that was stripped from her;²² instead of remaining a mere instrument of pleasure for Lykas, she begins to take initiative in their sexual relationship. On the other hand, other scholars have commented on the mishandling of rape in the story as Bilitis' sudden sexual awakening afterward treats sexual violence as inconsequential and, in a sense, a positive catalyst for character growth. Emily Kilpatrick, for instance, describes Louÿs' inclusion of sexual violence as fetishistic and "constitut[ing] little more than an extended, and often disturbing, rape fantasy."²³

Despite the notion that sexual violence results in Bilitis' sexual awakening, this pivotal moment nonetheless moves her relationship with Lykas in a new direction that ultimately leads to its end. In the final poems of the section, Bilitis decides to leave Lykas and her homeland behind. In the penultimate poem, "Berceuse" ("Lullaby"), it is revealed that Bilitis bore a child to Lykas, who she decides to leave behind in Pamphylia.²⁴ In "Le Tombeau des Naïades" ("The Tomb of the Naiads"), the final poem of "Bucoliques en Pamphylie," Bilitis trudges through the snow on the journey away from her homeland, effectively leaving her childhood behind.

The Lesbian *Idylle*

At the beginning of the second section, "Élégies à Mytilène," Bilitis arrives in Mytilene, the capital city of the island of Lesbos. In the biographical preface, it is determined that at this time "[Bilitis] was barely sixteen years old, according to the conjectures of M. Heim,"²⁵ and in

²² For example, Pamela Feo's exploration of Rita Strohl's *Bilitis* and, in particular, the setting of the poem "Bilitis." Pamela Feo, "Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis," (Master's Thesis, Tufts University, 2006), 79-81.

²³ Emily Kilpatrick, *French Art Song: History of a New Music, 1870-1914* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 297.

²⁴ The daughter is only mentioned once more throughout the poetry collection in the poem titled "La Métamorphose" ("Metamorphosis").

²⁵ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 32. (« Elle avait à peine seize ans, selon les conjectures de M. Heim... »)

the first poem of the new section, “Au vaisseau” (“To the Ship”), Bilitis reinforces her lost childhood as, after arriving in Lesbos, she watches the ship return to “the country where the virgin is friend to the nymph.”²⁶

Soon after her arrival in Lesbos, Bilitis is confronted by an unfamiliar cultural norm of the country in which she has arrived: lesbianism. After one of her first nights in Mytilene, Bilitis wakes to find a woman in her bed, to which she expresses confusion, saying “to which country have I come, and what is this isle where one hears about love like this?”²⁷ She then conjectures that the woman is Sappho, the historical poetess known for her homoerotic poems. After this initial interaction, Bilitis continues to encounter lesbianism in subsequent poems, such as when she meets Kysé and Glôttis, two “little girls” who are in a romantic relationship. In the poem titled “Les Conseils” (“Counsels”), they take Bilitis into their home, and when they are visited by a woman named Syllikhmas, she mentors Bilitis in the joys of “the honey of a woman’s caress.”²⁸ Expanding on the joys of lesbianism, Syllikhmas says:

Man is violent and lazy. You know him, without a doubt. Hate him. He has a flat chest, rough skin, short hair, hairy arms. But women are all beautiful.

Only women know love; stay with us, Bilitis, stay. And if you have an ardent soul, you will see your beauty in a mirror on the bodies of your female lovers.²⁹

This poem, particularly the phrase “only women know love,” gives further insight into the beliefs espoused by Louÿs regarding sexuality. Louÿs believed women to be superior lovers, well-versed in the art of love. In his novel *Aphrodite*, Louÿs expands on this point, saying “from

²⁶ Ibid., 87. (« au pays où la vierge est l’amie des nymphes »)

²⁷ Ibid., 88. (« Dans quel pays suis-je venue, et quelle est cette île-ci où l’on entend ainsi l’amour? »)

²⁸ Ibid., 90. (« le miel des caresses de la femme »)

²⁹ Ibid., 90. (« L’homme est violent et paresseux. Tu le connais, sans doute. Hais-le. Il a la poitrine plate, la peau rude, les cheveux ras, les bras velus. Mais les femmes sont toutes belles. / « Les femmes seules savent aimer ; reste avec nous, Bilitis, reste. Et si tu as une âme ardente, tu verras ta beauté comme dans un miroir sur le corps de tes amoureuses » »)

head to toe, [woman] is made uniquely, marvelously, for love. She alone knows love. She alone knows how to be loved.”³⁰ Louÿs revered the love between women and featured lesbian couples in several of his works, including *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and *Aphrodite*. In addition to his infatuation with lesbian love and sexuality, Louÿs stated that his inclusion and depiction of lesbians in his works were a reaction to the negative portrayals in literature at the time. In a letter to his brother Georges, he wrote, “until now, lesbians were represented as *femme fatales* or vicious women. [*Les Chansons de Bilitis*] is the first time that someone writes an *idylle* on the subject.”³¹

As traditional sex roles began to be challenged in the 1800’s, new depictions of women as wild seductresses, destructive *femme fatales*, and lesbians became a popular literary trope. Depictions of lesbians generally fell into common stereotypes that illustrated them as aggressive, domineering, or dangerous. Examples include Gautier’s cross-dressing Mademoiselle de Maupin and Baudelaire’s animalistic “damned women,” who are described as being “like pensive cattle.”³² In a popular example outside of France, Sheridan le Fanu’s *Carmilla*, whose title character is a vampire who becomes obsessed with the female object of her affection, illustrates Arno Karlen’s observation that lesbianism was often depicted as “a kind of female monstrosity” in 19th-century literature.³³ Instead of falling into these typical portrayals of lesbians, Louÿs sought to approach the subject differently, creating lesbian characters who are free from being aggressive or monstrous. According to Pamela Feo, “lesbianism is a prevalent

³⁰ Pierre Louÿs, *Aphrodite: mœurs antiques* (Paris: Mercure de France, 1896), 137. (« Des pieds à la tête elle est faite uniquement, merveilleusement, pour l’amour. Elle seule sait aimer. Elle seule sait être aimée »)

³¹ Quoted in Goujon, *Une vie secrète*, 142. (« Jusqu’ici les lesbiennes étaient représentées comme des femmes fatales ou vicieuses. C’est la première fois qu’on écrit une idylle sur ce sujet-là »)

³² Charles Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard et Librairie générale française, 1965), 132. (« comme un bétail pensif »)

³³ Arno Karlen, “The Witch Reborn,” in *Sex and Homosexuality*, 199-212 (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1971), 203.

theme in *Bilitis* and its treatment is unprecedented: the lesbians in his work are not portrayed as bad or crazy.”³⁴

While *Les Chansons de Bilitis* features a number of lesbian characters, the most prominently featured lesbian relationship is Bilitis’ relationship with Mnasidika, the focus of “Élégies à Mytilène.” Not long after meeting Kysé and Glôttis, Bilitis meets a woman named Mnasidika who lives alone with her widowed mother.³⁵ Finding solace in her new acquaintance, Mnasidika follows Bilitis home, and the two soon begin a physical relationship. Their passion for one another is so strong that they soon partake in a marriage ceremony, as depicted in “Les Noces” (“The Wedding”). In comparison to Bilitis’ first relationship, which was burdened by a power imbalance and the looming reality of sexual violence, the beginning of Bilitis and Mnasidika’s relationship is both tender and passionate, and a number of poems in “Élégies” explicitly depict their physical love, such as the poems “Le Désir” (“Desire”), “Les Seins de Mnasidika” (“Mnasidika’s Breasts”), and “Tendresses” (“Tendernesses”). Despite the passionate beginning of the relationship, Bilitis’ love morphs into obsession, and the relationship becomes burdened by Bilitis’ jealousy and possessiveness. An early overt display of Bilitis’ jealousy is found in the poem “Les Yeux” (“The Eyes”) in which Bilitis warns Mnasidika, “do not cease to look at me! Or I will prick you with my needle and you will only see the terrible night.”³⁶ Bilitis’ possessiveness eventually leads to the end of their relationship when Mnasidika does in fact leave Bilitis, presumably for another woman.

³⁴ Feo, “Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis,” 45.

³⁵ The name “Mnasidika” derives from the poetry of Sappho, particularly the poem labeled “Lobel-Page 82a” which reads “Mnasidika is more beautifully formed than even soft Gyrimno” (Translation by Willis Barnstone, *The Complete Poems of Sappho* [Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2006], 94).

³⁶ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 120. (« ne cessez pas de me regarder ! ou je vous trouverai avec mon aiguille et vous ne verrez plus que la nuit terrible »)

Throughout “Élégies à Mytilène,” the depiction of Bilitis and Mnasidika’s relationship centers on both sensual physical love and the realities of a failing relationship, and Louÿs’ consideration in creating a realistic lesbian relationship supposedly free of typical lesbian stereotypes seems to live up to his lesbian idyll. However, his lesbian representation is not without fault. For instance, Bilitis and Mnasidika’s relationship often relies on a heteronormative model, such as when “they parody heterosexual wedlock with a marriage ceremony and mimic parenthood with a doll they regard as their child.”³⁷ In addition, in the poem “L’Objet” (“The Object”), Bilitis suggests that, despite earlier explicit depictions of their moments of physical intimacy, Bilitis still considers Mnasidika a virgin because she has never been penetrated by a man (or any phallic “object”). There is also an undeniable power dynamic between the two women, with Bilitis serving at times as a seducer or possessor toward Mnasidika and other times as a mother figure to her. Louÿs believed this type of power dynamic to be typical of lesbian relationships, as seen in a letter to his brother Georges in which he wrote, “always one of the two has for the other (in these sorts of households) an attitude of protection and infinite pity. The weaker one is considered like a little child that needs to be protected and looked after.”³⁸

Louÿs’ depiction of the relationship also can be considered voyeuristic, particularly in consideration of the sheer amount and explicit nature of poems depicting Bilitis and Mnasidika’s love making, especially when compared to the depictions of Bilitis’ physical relations with men. The poems also at times seem especially written for a male audience, such as the subtle teasing in the last verse of “Pénombre” (“Penumbra”):

³⁷ Gretchen Schultz, “Daughters of Bilitis: Literary Genealogy and Lesbian Authenticity,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7, 3 (2001): 379.

³⁸ From a letter dated 12 December 1894. Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 312. (« Toujours l’une des deux a pour l’autre (dans ces sortes de ménages) une attitude de protection et de pitié infinies. La plus faible est considérée comme un petit enfant qu’il faut préserver et soigner »)

Nothing in the world, not even the lamp, saw us that night. Which of us was loved, only she and I can say. But the men will never know.³⁹

Regarding this verse, Gretchen Schultz points out the voyeuristic sentiments saying, “nothing or no one [saw them], that is, but Louÿs’s male readers peering with him inside the bedroom and under the covers, sniffing around the lesbian bed for a whiff of the scent of a woman.”⁴⁰

It is also difficult to not view Louÿs’ glorification of lesbian relationships as fetishistic when compared to his views on male homosexuality, which he outwardly shunned. While his abhorrence of male homosexuality was manifest in his personal life (e.g., in his breaking off his friendship with Oscar Wilde due to the latter’s homosexuality), he also allowed his aversion to emerge in his writing. For instance, in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, particularly the poem “À un égaré” (“To One Who is Astray”), Bilitis says to a homosexual man, “you are sick, oh Kléôn, but a woman will heal you.”⁴¹ In *Aphrodite*, the protagonist reveals similar sentiments, saying:

If an amorous couple is composed of two women, it is perfect; if there is only one woman, it is half as good; if there are none, it is purely idiotic.⁴²

While the issues discussed above draw attention to the problematic aspects to Louÿs’ representation of lesbian relationships, in the overarching narrative of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Mnasidika is undeniably Bilitis’ most important relationship, and the ending of the relationship has a profound effect on Bilitis. At the end of “Élégies,” Bilitis is left completely distraught after the loss of her lover, and though she attempts to drown her sorrows by taking other mistresses, she is unable to escape her despair. In the last poem of the section titled “Chant funèbre”

³⁹ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 105. (« Rien au monde, pas même la lampe, ne nous a vues cette nuit-là. Laquelle de nous fut aimée, elle seule et moi le pourrions dire. Mais les hommes n’en sauront rien »)

⁴⁰ Schultz, “Daughters of Bilitis,” 383.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 163. (« Tu es malade, ô Kléôn, mais une femme te peut guérir »)

⁴² Pierre Louÿs, *Aphrodite*, 137. (« 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 »)

(“Funeral Song”), Bilitis, overwhelmed with grief for the love that she has lost, calls for Mytilenian muses to sing a funeral song for her. No longer willing to live without her lost love, she says, “this is the tenth autumn that I have watched die on this plain. It is time for me to also disappear.”⁴³ She soon after leaves Lesbos to begin a new life on the isle of Cyprus, but the memories of Mnasidika will continue to haunt her.

The Tragic Courtesan

In the final section of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Épigrammes dans l’île de Chypre,” Bilitis once again leaves her life behind to begin anew on the island of Cyprus. There, she begins working as a courtesan in the temple of Astarté, the Phoenician goddess of fertility who is also associated with Aphrodite.⁴⁴ In her new role, Bilitis finds a new sense of empowerment, and she leaves behind her past experiences with love and heartbreak to pursue pleasure and wealth; in “Je chante ma chair et ma vie” (“I Sing of my Flesh and my Life”), Bilitis commands herself “savor daily joys and short-lived passions. Do not leave any joys unknown to regret on your day of death.”⁴⁵

For Louÿs, the courtesan is a cherished archetype whom he incorporates in several of his works. His courtesans, including Bilitis, as well as Chrysis in *Aphrodite*, are unapologetic about their sexuality, and rather than being demonized for their profession, they are revered, a concept that harkens back to Louÿs’ views on sexuality in the ancient world. For instance, in “Vie de Bilitis,” Louÿs speaks of the respect given to the courtesans of Cyprus:

It was there [in Cyprus] that Bilitis recommended her life for the third time, in a way that will be more difficult to admit without recalling again how love was a sacred thing for

⁴³ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 133. (« Celui-ci est le dixième automne que j’ai vu mourir sur cette plaine. Il est temps aussi que je disparaisse »)

⁴⁴ The connection between Astarté and Aphrodite is explored further in chapter 7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 144. (« Savoure la jouissance quotidienne et les passions sans lendemain. Ne laisse pas une joie inconnue aux regrets du jour de ta mort »)

antique people. The courtesans of Amathus were not, like ours, fallen creatures, exiled from all worldly society; they were girls from the best families of the city.⁴⁶

In *Aphrodite*, courtesans are similarly revered for their profession, and in the novel's preface, Louÿs expresses that his goal in writing a story centering on a courtesan is to represent the profession "with all the frankness, the ardor, and the pride of every human being that has a vocation and who holds in society a place freely chosen."⁴⁷

During her time as a courtesan, Bilitis finds a newfound personal power from her profession, taking on numerous lovers and gaining riches and recognition for her beauty and expertise. In addition, she develops new friendships with her fellow courtesans, and with her former experience in love, she becomes a mentor figure for the younger women. Despite her success, Bilitis becomes increasingly plagued by the passing of time. As she puts it, "the only dishonor is to grow old," and she often comments on her dissatisfaction with her aging body.⁴⁸ In addition, Bilitis is haunted by the memories of her past, particularly recollections of Lykas and Mnasidika. For instance, in "Mélancolie," a forest sojourn with one of her clients reminds her of the times in which she had "followed *him* into the wood," recalling the happy, pastoral memories shared with Lykas.⁴⁹ Similarly, the scene of two women dancing together in "Le Souvenir de Mnasidika" ("The Memory of Mnasidika") conjures memories of the passion that Bilitis once shared with Mnasidika.

⁴⁶ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 34. (« Ce fut là que Bilitis recommença pour la troisième fois de sa vie, et d'une façon qu'il me sera plus difficile de faire admettre sans rappeler encore à quel point l'amour était chose sante chez les peuples antiques. Les courtisanes d'Amathonte n'étaient pas, comme les nôtres, des créatures en déchéance, exilées de toute société mondaine ; c'étaient des filles issues des meilleures familles de la cité »)

⁴⁷ Louÿs, *Aphrodite*, v. (« Courtisane, elle le sera avec la franchise, l'ardeur, et aussi la fierté de tout être humain qui a vocation et qui tient dans la société une place librement choisie »)

⁴⁸ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 156. (« le seul opprobre est de vieillir »)

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 176. (« je suivais dans le bois celui »)

Overcome with melancholy as she confronts her waning youth and the haunting of her former passions, Bilitis resigns herself to her impending death. In the final two verses of “Le Dernier amant” (“The Last Lover”), Bilitis gives the last pieces of herself to her final client:

My last lover, it will be you, I know it. Here is my mouth, for which a nation grew pale with desire. Here is my hair, the same hair of which Sappho the Great sang.

I will collect in your favor all that remains of my lost youth. I will burn my memories themselves. I give to you Lykas’ flute, Mnasidika’s belt.⁵⁰

In the final poem of “Épigrammes dans l’île de Chypre” titled “La Mort véritable” (“True Death”), Bilitis laments the loss of her youth and beauty, and she announces that, because she is no longer beautiful, “no one will ever love [her] anymore.”⁵¹ She then shaves her hair as an offering to her goddess and prepares to die. The last line of the poem states that “this is the final verse of the pious Bilitis.”⁵²

Bilitis’ Tomb and the Fetishization of Death

The poetry collection ends in Bilitis’ death, as her final poem is followed by an epilogue titled “Le Tombeau de Bilitis” (“The Tomb of Bilitis”), which includes the three epitaphs written upon Bilitis’ tomb. Each of the epitaphs is written from Bilitis’ perspective, offering a summary of her life and blessings for those who pass by her tomb. The second and third epitaphs in particular reflect on her life and reputation, offering a glimpse into Bilitis’ thoughts from beyond the grave. For instance, in the second epitaph, Bilitis defends her occupation as a courtesan to any passersby who may judge her, saying “if I have been a courtesan, what is to blame? Is it not

⁵⁰ Ibid., 185. (« Mon dernier amant, ce sera toi, je le sais. Voici ma bouche, pour laquelle un peuple pâli de désir. Voici mes cheveux, les mêmes cheveux que Psappha la Grande a chantés. / Je recueillerai en ta faveur tout ce qu’il m’est resté de ma jeunesse perdue. Je brûlerai les souvenirs eux-mêmes. Je te donnerai la flûte de Lykas, la ceinture de Mnasidika. »)

⁵¹ Ibid., 188. (« On ne m’aimera plus »)

⁵² Ibid., 188. (« Ceci est le dernier vers de la pieuse Bilitis »)

my duty as a woman?”⁵³ In the final line of the second epitaph, there is a hint of cynicism, perhaps in regard to her own heartbreak, as she offers thanks and a wish to her visitors: “in gratitude for you who have stopped, I wish you this destiny: may you be loved, but not love.”⁵⁴ In the third and final epitaph, the mood shifts, and Bilitis seems to look back fondly on her life from beyond the grave in the final verse for one last time:

And now, on the pale prairies of the asphodel, I walk, an impalpable shadow, and the memory of my terrestrial life is the joy of my life in the underworld.⁵⁵

While Bilitis’ death is the obvious conclusion to a set of poems that narrates the trajectory of her life, her death is emphasized in a way in which it becomes more than just a predictable ending. As the previous sections of the collection correspond to archetypes of female characters that are common in Western art and literature, “Le Tombeau de Bilitis,” corresponds to the trope of the “dead woman.” The figure of the dead or dying woman is featured frequently in art and literature, with the deaths of female characters, who are often young and beautiful, being drawn out or emphasized for optimal emotional effect. Edgar Allan Poe, whose macabre works often feature dying woman, famously states in his essay *The Philosophy of Composition*, “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”⁵⁶

Several scholars have commented on the pervasiveness of the correlation between women in death in art, such as Elisabeth Bronfen who includes an entire chapter to the analysis of Poe’s statement on the subject in her monograph *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic*.⁵⁷ Catherine Clément, in her famous work *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*,

⁵³ Ibid., 192. (« Si j’ai été courtisane, quoi de blâmable ? N’était-ce pas mon devoir de femme ? »)

⁵⁴ Ibid. (« En gratitude, à toi qui t’es arrête, je te souhaite ce destin : Puisses-tu être aimé, ne pas aimer »)

⁵⁵ Ibid., 193. (« Et maintenant, sur les pales prairies d’asphodèles, je me promène, ombre impalpable, et le souvenir de ma vie terrestre est la joie de ma vie souterraine »)

⁵⁶ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” *Graham’s Magazine* 28, 4 (1846): 164.

⁵⁷ Elisabeth Bronfen, “The ‘Most’ Poetic Topic,” in *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic*, 59-75 (Manchester University Press, 1992).

discusses the trope of the dead woman in opera, a genre that is notorious for fetishizing the death of its female characters:

Dead women, dead so often. There are those who die disemboweled, like Lulu at the sacrificial knife of Jack the Ripper, in a cruddy attic of smoggy London; there are those who die for having embodied too well the false identity of a marionette-woman or for having simply affirmed that they are not there where the men are looking for them... Those who die of nothing, just like that—of fear, or fright, or sadness, or anxiety. Those who die poisoned, gently; those who are choked; those who fold in on themselves peacefully. Violent death, lyrical deaths, gentle deaths, talkative or silent deaths... You could easily draw up a list of them.⁵⁸

The correlation between death and femininity is not only evidenced by the prevalence of dead or dying women, but also in the representation of woman *as* death. In “Women and Symbolism: Imagery and Theory,” which explores decadent and Symbolist artists’ fascination with female archetypes that correspond with women’s sexuality including the virgin, the mother, or the *femme fatale*, Gundrun Schubert notes that “the image of woman as giver of life... has its counterpart in the abundance of works at this period which use female imagery in close association with death.”⁵⁹ Examples include female characters (and their sexuality) being catalysts for death, such as Salome, or figures that embody death itself, which can be found in Flaubert’s *La Tentation de Saint Antoine* or Rachilde’s *Madame la Mort*. At the conclusion of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, in which Bilitis speaks from beyond the grave through the epitaphs written on her tomb, she too comes to embody death.

While the correlation between death and femininity in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is apparent in “Le Tombeau de Bilitis,” a closer look at the story’s preface, which details the supposed excavation of Bilitis’ tomb by Professor G. Heim, reveals another means by which women and

⁵⁸ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 47.

⁵⁹ Gundrun Schubert, “Women and Symbolism: Imagery and Theory,” *The Oxford Art Journal* (April 1980), 29.

death correspond: the sexualization of the dead woman.⁶⁰ Bilitis' tomb is described as being discovered underground at a site "on the side of an ancient road, not far from the ruins of Amathus."⁶¹ Her tomb had been left completely untouched until the moment in which Heim "penetrated it through a narrow well filled with earth,"⁶² and inside, Bilitis' songs (inscribed on the walls of the tomb) and her sarcophagus are discovered. The reader is given the visual impression of the sarcophagus in which she lies:

It was there that the friend of Mnasidika rested, in a large terra-cotta coffin, under a lid sculpted by a delicate sculptor that had created in clay the face of a dead woman: the hair was painted black, the eyes half closed and elongated with pencil as if she were alive, and the cheek barely softened by a light smile born from the lines of the mouth. Nothing will ever say what those lips were, at once clear and round, soft and fine, united one to the other, as if intoxicated by joining.⁶³

Bilitis thus not only expresses the erotic through her verses, but also through her death with the penetration of her tomb and the emphasis on the beauty of her death mask, which conjures images of the voluptuousness of her lips. The captivating descriptions allude that Bilitis maintains her beauty and seductiveness even in death, and through the beauty of both her discovered corpse and her verses, the exotic and sensual mysteries of the ancient world are preserved. In the original publication of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Louÿs included an epigraph to "Le Tombeau de Bilitis" from John Keats' "Ode to a Grecian Urn" that perhaps best symbolizes the legacy of Bilitis' supposed existence:

⁶⁰ It is worth noting that Louÿs' sexualization of dead women is perhaps even more apparent in *Aphrodite*. At the end of the novel, the protagonist is sentenced to death, and her corpse is stripped naked and posed suggestively to serve as a model for a sculpture.

⁶¹ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 36. (« sur les bords d'une route antique, non loin des ruines d'Amathonte »)

⁶² Ibid., 36. (« M. Heim y pénétra par un puits étroit comblé de terre »)

⁶³ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 36-37. (« C'était là que reposait l'amie de Mnasidika, dans un grand cercueil de terre cuite, sous un couvercle modelé par un statuaire délicat qui avait figuré dans l'argile le visage de la morte : les cheveux étaient peints en noir, les yeux à demi fermes et prolongés au crayon comme si elle eut été vivant, et la joue à peine attendrie par un sourire léger qui naissait des lignes de la bouche. Rien ne dira jamais ce qu'étaient ces lèvres, à la fois nettes et rebordées, molles et fines, unies l'une à l'autre, et comme enivrées de se joindre »)

"Beauty is truth, truth beauty,—that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know."⁶⁴

The exploration of the setting, narrative, and characterization in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* highlights the complexities of Bilitis' story, and the multifaceted aspect of her character combined with the ambiguities of the poems allow for a variety of interpretations. Issues of gender and sexuality are inherent to a text centered on a female character and her experience with sex, and in subsequent chapters, these issues will be explored further through the lens of the poetry collection's musical interpretations. The chapters that follow will analyze four song cycles based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, each of which corresponds to a particular part of Bilitis' story and highlights a particular issue of gender and/or sexuality. In the following chapter, my analysis of the first musical interpretation, Claude Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, brings to light subtle musical choices that provide the means for highlighting the gendered power dynamic between Bilitis and her first lover, Lykas.

⁶⁴ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis: traduites du grec pour la première fois par P.L.* (Paris: Librairie de l'Art indépendant, 1895), 125.

CHAPTER 4

POWER DYNAMICS IN CLAUDE DEBUSSY'S *TROIS CHANSONS DE BILITIS*

Claude Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* is certainly the most recognized musical setting of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. The song cycle is still regularly performed by recitalists today, serving as a staple of mezzo soprano repertoire, and, in addition, the vast majority of scholarly works on the songs inspired by Louÿs' collection center around Debussy's setting. Thus, other musical settings of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* seem to exist in the shadow of Debussyan influence. In the concluding paragraphs of "Bilitis après Debussy," Federico Lazzaro poetically summarizes the immortality of Debussy's setting by metaphorically linking it to the final epitaph on Bilitis' tomb:

Bilitis, as she herself affirms in the epitaph closing Louÿs' collection, is intrinsically polymorphic: "I grew up in the land of the nymphs; I lived on the island of friends; I died on the island of Kypris." Several composers wanted to take her to their island. But it seems, however, that it is uniquely thanks to the island visited with Debussy that, for the music lovers of today, "[her] name is illustrious and [her] monument rubbed with oil."¹

The lasting success of *Trois chansons de Bilitis* is perhaps a result of Debussy's close friendship and collaboration with the poet himself. As discussed in chapter two, Debussy's three-song collection arose from his initial reverence for his friend's poetry which led to a back-and-forth collaboration with Louÿs to determine which songs Debussy would set to music. The

¹ Federico Lazzaro, "Bilitis après Debussy. Hommage, influence, prise de distance?" *Revue musicale OICRM* 2, 1 (2014), 187. (« Bilitis, comme elle-même l'affirme dans l'épithaphe closant le recueil de Louÿs, est intrinsèquement polymorphe : « J'ai grandi sur la terre des nymphes ; j'ai vécu sur l'île des amies ; je suis morte sur l'île de Kypris ». Plusieurs compositeurs ont voulu la porter sur leur île. Mais il semblerait, cependant, que c'est uniquement grâce à l'île visitée avec Debussy que, pour les musicophiles d'aujourd'hui, « [son] nom est illustre et [sa] stèle frottée d'huile » »)

resulting work reveals a similar aesthetic between composer and poet as Debussy's harmonic language, which is known for its ambiguous tonalities, modal inflections, and sensuousness, seems to be the perfect sonic landscape for Louÿs' archaic setting and erotic text. In addition, Debussy's recitative-like setting of Louÿs' free verse allows the singer to truly embody Bilitis in the recitation of her verses. As Katherine Bergeron describes, "uttered by a realistic Bilitis, the verses [of *Trois chansons*] appeared in all their irregular rustic purity... the phrases notated as Bilitis herself might have described them."²

Another successful aspect of Debussy's setting is the narrative trajectory of the three songs when performed as a unit. The song cycle captures pivotal moments in Bilitis' relationship with her first lover, Lykas, which include initial innocent flirtations in "La Flûte de Pan," an increasing erotic attraction in "La Chevelure," and Bilitis' weariness in "Le Tombeau des Nâïades" after the relationship has come to an end. The archaic setting in which this romance takes place is evoked through modality, musical illustrations that suggest the pastoral, languid and chromatic sensuality, and a harmonic ambiguity that evokes the mysterious, ambiguous text that teases the audience with suggestion rather than detail. While Debussy's setting may entice the listener with its capturing of a seemingly simple love story set within a sensual, arcadian backdrop, a closer listen reveals darker truths that are present in the overarching story.

A closer look at the love story between Bilitis and Lykas in the first section of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* reveals that the relationship is tainted by a power imbalance and sexual violence. Throughout "Bucoliques en Pamphylie," Bilitis is presented as innocent and virginal, and Lykas upends her innocence with his pervasive desire. Bilitis' innocence and Lykas' seduction create an undeniable power imbalance that places the protagonist in a position of

² Katherine Bergeron, *Voice Lessons: French Mélodie in the Belle Époque* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 164.

vulnerability. Within the context of the poetry collection's narrative, this power imbalance results in Lykas' eventual rape of Bilitis, which, as explored in the previous chapter, ultimately serves as her "sexual awakening." While Debussy's choice of poems does not explicitly depict Bilitis' subjection to Lykas or the sexual violence that takes place in the larger narrative, his music setting, when explored through a modern, feminist lens, can be interpreted as providing musical clues that reinforce the power imbalance and hint to the threat of Lykas' violence.

This chapter will explore the musical choices throughout *Trois chansons de Bilitis* that highlight the gendered power dynamics inherent in the text. The musical illustration of these power dynamics manifests differently in each song, and thus I will analyze each of the three songs in detail. My musical analysis will include discussions of the musical characterizations of Bilitis as innocent and vulnerable, the marked differences between Bilitis' voice and the voices of the male characters present in the text, musical motives that represent Lykas' seduction and desire, and musical clues throughout the cycle that can be interpreted as foreshadowing Lykas' act of sexual violence.

The Syrinx as Oppressive Phallic Desire in "La Flûte de Pan"

The opening song of Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* is a setting of "La Flûte," the 30th poem in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. The poem captures the first time in which Bilitis is alone with Lykas, and in the scene, Bilitis sits upon Lykas' lap as he teaches her to play the pan flute. As the night goes on, the two become physically closer, culminating in their lips meeting upon the flute. While this scene marks the first physical contact between Bilitis and Lykas, aspects of the poem maintain Bilitis' virginal image, such as her trepidation toward their closeness and the threat of her mother's scolding.

Table 4.1 Translation of “La Flûte de Pan”

La Flûte de Pan	The Pan Flute
<p>Pour le jour des Hyacinthies, il m’a donné une syrinx faite de roseaux bien taillés, unis avec la blanche cire qui est douce à mes lèvres comme <i>le</i> [original text: du] miel.</p>	<p>For the day of Hyacinth, he gave me a syrinx made of well-cut reeds, united with white wax that is sweet to my lips like honey.</p>
<p>Il m’apprend à jouer assise sur ses genoux ; mais je suis un peu tremblante. Il en joue après moi, si doucement que je l’entends à peine.</p>	<p>He teaches me to play, seated on his lap; but I am a little trembling. He plays after me, so softly that I can barely hear it.</p>
<p>Nous n’avons rien à nous dire, tant nous sommes près l’un de l’autre ; mais nos chansons veulent se répondre, et tour à tour nos bouches s’unissent sur la flûte.</p>	<p>We have nothing to say to one another, we are so close to one another; but our songs want to respond, and little by little our mouths unite on the flute.</p>
<p>Il est tard, voici le chant des grenouilles vertes qui commence avec la nuit. Ma mère ne croira jamais que je suis restée si longtemps à chercher ma ceinture perdue.</p>	<p>It is late, here is the song of the green frogs that begins with the night. My mother will never believe that I stayed so long looking for my lost belt.</p>

Debussy’s setting immediately illustrates the pastoral setting and subtle eroticism of the scene. In the opening two measures (seen in Example 4.1), after an initial fifth descent from D to G in the bass, the right hand of the piano plays a soprano-range ascending scale beginning on B that rises to an A#, creating an undeniable tension as the leading tone is not resolved upward; rather, the scale languidly descends back to its starting pitch. The E# gives the ascending scale a Lydian character, and according to Michael Klein, the raised fourth introduces the Oriental, ancient Greek setting as it “speaks of anywhere but here in France: the Saidian orient, the Far East, the mythological islands of Greece.”³

³ Michael Klein, “Debussy’s *L’île joyeuse* as Territorial Assemblage,” *19th Century Music* 31, 1 (2001): 35.

This opening motive is accompanied by what Stephen Downes describes as “the seductive dissonant sound of a ninth chord,”⁴ and after a series of chords that follow, the accompaniment comes to a standstill. The voice of Bilitis emerges in a bare vocal melody, introducing the inanimate subject of the poem: “for the day of Hyacinth, he gave me a *syrinx*....” The opening Lydian gesture is thus revealed to be an imitation of a scalar passage played on Lykas’ pan flute, and the motive will be a returning figure throughout the song. This musical representation of Lykas’ instrument, which is constructed of phallic reeds, is a metaphor for his sexual desire, and its repetitive iteration throughout the song creates an undercurrent of his seduction of Bilitis. For Debussy, the evocation of the Pan flute is a common musical figure of the erotic, e.g., Eros’ seduction of Diane in his unfinished cantata *Diane au bois* and the languid opening line of *Prélude à l’après-midi d’un faune*.⁵

⁴ Stephen Downes, “Names, Chords, and the ‘Pale Princess’ in Debussy’s Musical Language of Love,” in *The Muse as Eros: Music, Erotic Fantasy and Male Creativity in the Romantic and Modern Imagination*, 168-193 (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2006), 169.

⁵ Downes, “Debussy’s Musical Language of Love,” 169.

Lent et sans rigueur de rythme

doux et soutenu

p

Pour le jour des Hy-a - cin - thi-es il m'a don-né u-ne sy -

Example 4.1: “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 1-4

Regarding the erotic metaphor within the text, Stephen Rumph points out that, throughout the poem, “Bilitis surrenders herself increasingly to the power of the syrinx.”⁶ In the first verse, Bilitis’ desire for the instrument is revealed by insinuating phrases such as “*unis avec la blanche cire*” (“*united with white wax*”) and “*douce à mes lèvres comme le miel*” (“*sweet to my lips like honey*”). In the second and third verses, Bilitis and Lykas both play the flute, first as a back-and-forth dialogue, and finally together as their lips “*s’unissent sur la flute*” (“*unite on the flute*”). Debussy’s setting further highlights Bilitis’ surrendering to Lykas’ desire through the reiteration of the flute motive, which first occurs

⁶ Stephen Rumph, “Debussy’s *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*: Song, Opera, and the Death of the Subject,” *The Journal of Musicology* 12, 4 (1994), 467.

as the song's opening and then immediately afterward as Bilitis' begins to speak, which can be seen in measure 4 of Example 4.1. In the musical space between verses two and three, the motive sounds again, signaling an increase in seduction as the couple's musical dialogue ends with a kiss. At the end of the song, the flute motive returns for the last time as the song's final, fading thought, revealing Lykas' success in luring Bilitis to reciprocate his desire. Although Lykas' flute successfully awakens Bilitis' desire, there is no indication within this scene that the couple physically united more than a mere kiss (except perhaps for the poem's final line, which hints of Bilitis "losing her belt" but otherwise leaves the physicality of this shared moment altogether ambiguous).

Debussy's emphasis on the symbol of the flute, which is specifically described by Bilitis as a "syrinx," is indicative of another metaphor: the mythological tale of Syrinx, a virginal nymph who, attempting to save herself from the amorous advances of Pan, seeks solace from the water nymphs and is subsequently turned into the reeds from which Pan constructs the first pan flute. This metaphor effectively foreshadows the loss of Bilitis' innocence as she is eventually raped by Lykas in "Les Remords" and "Le Sommeil interrompu" (poems 34 and 35, respectively). As Rumph suggests, the invocation of Syrinx reminds us that Bilitis eventually "assumes the position of the nymph sublimated into phallic object" and that the "the symbol of the syrinx suggests that she too risks being reduced to a mere instrument of Lykas' pleasure."⁷ The prevalence of the flute motive thus becomes not just an image of Lykas' desire, but a reminder of the power play between the two lovers: Bilitis is the naïve nymph who is eventually defiled by her lover.

⁷ Rumph, "Debussy's *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*," 466-467.

Despite this foreboding metaphor, the tone of Debussy's song does not indicate Bilitis' eventual ill fate at the hands of Lykas. Instead, the erotically charged scene between Bilitis and Lykas is set within a pleasant pastoral backdrop that helps characterize Bilitis' youth. In fact, while the presence of the flute is predominantly a symbol of Lykas' seduction, it also helps establish the pastoral setting; according to William Gibbons, "the most significant pastoral topos in this poem is the presence of the syrinx, an instrument with strong idyllic associations."⁸ The pastoral is a prevailing theme throughout "Bucoliques en Pamphylie," and it is especially prevalent in the poems of Bilitis' young childhood in which she spends her days playing in the meadows and forests with other young girls, visiting the streams to speak with the nymphs and eventually visiting the "slopes of shadowy Tauros" to catch a glimpse of the young shepherd, Lykas.⁹ The pastoral setting thus becomes a symbol of her youth, and the end of her childhood is marked by the transition from summery, lively springs and meadows to the death and chill of winter, a narrative element that will be explored further in the analysis of Debussy's setting of "Le Tombeau des Naïades." In the preface to *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, which gives a brief biographical overview of Bilitis' life from the perspective of "the translator," the end of Bilitis' childhood is equated with "the end of her pastoral life."¹⁰

Other musical choices further emphasize Bilitis' youth, particularly those that illustrate her innocent, girlish excitement towards her first experience with reciprocated flirtation. While Bilitis sits upon Lykas' lap, she acknowledges that she is "un peu tremblante" ("a little trembling") as this is the first time in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* that she has shared an intimate

⁸ William Gibbons, "Debussy as Storyteller: Narrative Expansion in the *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*," *Current Musicology* 85 (2008), 13.

⁹ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis, suivi de Pervigilium Mortis, avec divers textes inédits*, edited and annotated by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 63. (« les pentes du Tauros ombreux »)

¹⁰ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 32. (« La fin de son existence pastorale ... »)

moment with a man. This trembling and nervousness prevail throughout the moment they innocently play the flute together, and this is represented by the quick repetitive triplets that are buried in the middle voice of the piano accompaniment as though Bilitis attempts to keep her nerves at bay (Example 4.2). This nervousness is interrupted when the flute motive returns in measure 12, and the following section devolves into lush chromaticism in preparation for the most erotic moment of the poem.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system (measures 8-11) shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The piano part features repetitive triplets in the middle voice. The lyrics are: "noux; mais je suis un peutrem-blante. Il en joue a-prés". The second system (measures 12-15) continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment. The piano part continues with repetitive triplets. The lyrics are: "moi, si dou-ce-ment que je l'en-tends à pei - ne. très dim. pp rit." The dynamic markings *pp* and *rit.* are present.

Example 4.2: “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 8-11

In measure 16, beginning on the word “bouche” (“mouth”), the dynamic drops to *pianissimo* and there is a ritard of the tempo, emphasizing the sensual anticipation of the

moment when their lips prepare to meet (Example 4.3). On the word “flûte,” the moment is broken as the previous tempo returns and a new sextuplet figure emerges in the accompaniment. Here, it is as though Bilitis, after being lost in desire, awakens from the depths of seduction to recognize her surroundings. The pastoral mood returns as Bilitis takes note of the singing of the nighttime frogs (represented by the mimetic lilting figure in the bassline of the piano in Example 4.4), which signals how late the night has become. At the closing of the song, Bilitis exclaims breathlessly, *presque sans voix* (almost speechless), that her mother will surely chastise her for her tardiness, a fact that reminds us that she is still an adolescent under the watchful eye of her mother. While her final words reveal her anticipation of her mother’s scolding, her final thought, the dreamy remembrance of her intimate moment with Lykas, is revealed in a final iteration of the flute motive that gently fades away into the same open-ended chord progression from the song’s initial piano introduction.

The image displays a musical score for the piece "La Flûte de Pan" (Example 4.3), specifically measures 16-17. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the treble clef, with lyrics: "tour nos bou - ches s'u - nis - sent sur la flû - te." The piano accompaniment is in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The right hand features a sextuplet figure, and the left hand features a triplet figure. Dynamics include *pp*, *rit.*, and *[a tempo]*. The score is in a key signature of two sharps (D major) and a common time signature.

Example 4.3: “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 16-17



Example 4.4: “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 22-24

Throughout the song, Lykas’ desire is reinforced through the constant iteration of the flute motive, and the musical illustrations of Bilitis’ excitement and nervousness reveal her inexperience with reciprocated sexuality. In addition, the pastoral setting of the arcadian land of nymphs and satyrs correlates with Bilitis’ childhood in “Bucoliques en Pamphylie,” reminding the listener of her youth and innocence. It is thus that Debussy’s setting of “La Flûte de Pan” emphasizes the power play that is at work in Louÿs’ poem: Lykas is the seducer, Bilitis is the one who is seduced.

Power Imbalance through Oppositional Voicing in “La Chevelure”

The subtle power dynamic that is established in “La Flûte de Pan” becomes overt in the second song, “La Chevelure,” the poem that immediately follows “La Flûte de Pan” in Louÿs’ collection. In this poem, Bilitis recounts a moment in which Lykas reveals an erotic dream that he had about her, and this dream is recounted through Lykas’ own dialogue. Considering that Lykas’ words are framed by Bilitis’ perspective, the final verse expresses Bilitis’ reaction to the dream, which hints at her vulnerability and trepidation.

Table 4.2 Translation of “La Chevelure”

La Chevelure	The Hair
<p>Il m’a dit: « Cette nuit, j’ai rêvé. J’avais ta chevelure autour de mon cou. J’avais tes cheveux comme un collier noir autour de ma nuque et sur ma poitrine.</p>	<p>He said to me: “Tonight, I dreamed. I had your hair around my neck. I had your hair like a black necklace around my neck and on my chest.</p>
<p>« Je les caressais ; et c’étaient les miens ; et nous étions liés pour toujours ainsi, par la même chevelure la bouche sur la bouche, ainsi que deux lauriers n’ont souvent qu’une racine.</p>	<p>“I caressed it; and it was mine; and we were united forever thus, by the same hair, mouth on mouth, like two laurels are often of one root.</p>
<p>« Et peu à peu, il m’a semblé tant nos membres étaient confondus, que je devenais toi-même ou que tu entras en moi comme mon songe. »</p>	<p>“And little by little, it seemed to me, that our limbs were tangled, that I became you or that you entered into me like my dream.”</p>
<p>Quand il eut achevé, il mit doucement ses mains sur mes épaules, et il me regarda d’un regard si tendre, que je baissai les yeux avec un frisson.</p>	<p>When he was finished, he softly put his hands on my shoulders, and he looked at me with a look so tender, that I lowered my eyes with a shudder.</p>

The song begins with repetitive, falling thirds that descend chromatically with each iteration (Example 4.5). In observing the top and bottom note of each pairing of thirds, two compound, descending chromatic lines are distinguished. This chromatic descent, which is often associated with sensuality (such as the famous “Habanera” from *Carmen*), takes on a sinister quality with the added dissonant seconds. When the voice emerges in measure 2, the lower chromatic line continues in the voice, and Bilitis utters only a short phrase (“He said to me”) in an unsettling descent of a minor second. Throughout this opening, the thin texture of the accompaniment and quiet, low utterance in the voice reveal to the listener Bilitis’ vulnerability as she begins to recount the words that Lykas spoke to her.

Assez lent

p

Il m'adit:

p très expressif

p très expressif et passionnément concentré

Cet - te nuit, j'airè - vé.

Example 4.5: “La Chevelure,” mm. 1-4

Lykas’ voice then emerges to take over the narration, and there is an abrupt shift in the musical mood. As seen in example 4.5, a tonality of Gb is established, even though some chromatic fragments remain in the middle voices of the piano texture. This establishment of tonality and forward motion with the syncopated chords in the piano thrust the listener into Lykas’ erotic dream world. Over the next four measures, the piano accompaniment is grounded by a steady bass ostinato while oscillating between Gb9 and Eb11, two chords that, in the context of Debussy’s style, allude to the erotic. Downes claims that Debussy’s use of extended harmonies, especially the ninth chord, is another tool that the composer often uses to represent sensuality as the lush yet ambiguous tonality creates the sense of “veiled eroticism” akin to the

works of Symbolists such as Mallarmé.¹¹ He expands on this concept, saying, “Debussy’s languorous, voluptuous, fetishized ninth chords which subvert the control of tonal progression, disrupt the dominant mode of organization and thus highlight sensuous materiality.”¹² Within the harmonic stasis of sensual, lush harmonies, Lykas basks in his desire.

As Lykas’ desire for Bilitis builds and the two figures within the dream become closer, the heightening of erotic tension is expressed in the gradual increase in tempo and dynamics. The tempo at the beginning of Lykas’ dream is *moins lent* (less slow) than Bilitis’ opening phrase, and when he begins to speak, further expressive markings indicate *très expressif et passionnément concentré* (very expressive and passionately focused). As Lykas expands on how Bilitis’ hair wrapped around him, the tempo picks up with the marking *augmentant peu à peu* (growing little by little) and the dynamic level builds in a slow crescendo (Example 4.6). The breathless energy that is created through rhythmic syncopation, a growing tempo, and dynamic fluctuation combined with the lush extended harmonies and anchoring of a tonal center reveal the strength of Lykas’ desire.

¹¹ Downes, “Debussy’s Musical Language of Love,” 173.

¹² *Ibid.*, 185. In chapter 6 of this document, the concept of “fetishized” extended harmonies will be explored further in the context of Georges Dandelot’s musical style.

augmentant peu à peu

J'a - vais tes che - veux comme un col - lier

noir au-tour de ma nuque et sur ma poi-tri - ne.

Example 4.6: “La Chevelure,” mm. 7-9

In measure 13, the momentum accumulated in the previous section retracts by reverting to “Tempo 1” and a *piano* dynamic as Lykas seems to attempt to contain his excitement; however, in measure 15, he can no longer contain the force of his desire. Here, Debussy gives the tempo marking *en pressant peu à peu et en augmentant* (pressing little by little and increasing), and the momentum builds quicker than it has thus far until it explodes into the carefully coordinated musical climax in measure 18 when Bilitis, in a markedly unusual phrase, “enters into” Lykas (Example 4.7). This culmination of erotic energy quickly diminishes with a decrescendo as Lykas’ dream comes to an end, and the dream world slyly fades back to reality

with a tie carrying over an E^b and F[#] into measure 20. Bilitis' point of view thus returns with the same falling chromatic motive from the song's opening.

Example 4.7: “La Chevelure,” mm. 17-20

As we now leave Lykas' dream world and return to Bilitis' present reality in the poem, her perspective is characterized by the return of the original “Tempo 1” and *piano* dynamic. Bilitis' voice returns in measure 21, assuring the end of the dream while simultaneously suggesting Lykas' sexual release with an utterance of “quand il eut achevé” (“when he had finished”). She recounts the moments after Lykas' confession, and as she speaks, the dynamic

remains mostly at a *pianissimo* level, and the texture of the piano accompaniment lightens, creating a sense of Bilitis’ vulnerability when Lykas touches her shoulders and looks at her. In measure 25, Bilitis utters her final phrase, and a quick succession of dissonant chords is immediately thwarted when the last syllable of “frisson” (“shiver”) sounds without accompaniment. We then hear a final, fragmented iteration of the descending third motive, and the piece ends with an unexpectedly consonant Gb major chord (Example 4.8).

The image shows a musical score for Example 4.8, titled "La Chevelure," measures 25-27. The score is in French and consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in French and reads: "sai les yeux a-vec un fris-son." The piano accompaniment features a series of dissonant chords followed by a final Gb major chord. The tempo is marked "Très lent" and the dynamics are marked "pp".

Example 4.8: “La Chevelure,” mm. 25-27

In reviewing the musical characterizations of the two characters present in the scene, the oppositional voicing not only provides two different perspectives, but it also highlights the power imbalance between Bilitis and Lykas. The lively expressive qualities in Lykas’ voice, which correspond to his passion and desire, are a stark contrast from the stagnant, bare voicing of Bilitis, which in turn characterizes her as vulnerable. When Lykas speaks, the building momentum in tempo and ascending vocal melody reveal the strength and intensification of his desire for Bilitis. In contrast, when Bilitis speaks, her quiet and low vocal utterances express her

trepidation, and the chromaticism and dissonance present in the piano accompaniment conveys her unease at Lykas' sinister seduction. Like the first song, Bilitis is characterized as inexperienced with and nervous at the thought of sex, while Lykas is characterized as the seducer.

In addition to the contrast between the ways in which Bilitis' voice differs from that of Lykas, there is also another contrasting image within the song: the "real" Bilitis vs. the Bilitis of Lykas' dream. The musical characterization of Bilitis during her moments of dialogue depicts her as quiet, vulnerable, perhaps even ashamed of Lykas' unapologetic eroticism, and this is a stark contrast from the *femme fatale*-like figure of the dream. In Lykas' fantasy, Bilitis takes sexual control as, at the culmination of the dream, it is *she* who enters into *him*. Throughout the dream, until the moment of climax, Bilitis' exotic, black hair is used as a tool of seduction, taking on the phallic power that was held by the flute in the first song.

While the subject of "La Chevelure" has a direct correlation to the black hair of Louÿs' "exotic" mistresses, the use of hair as an erotic object falls in line with the historical link between hair and sexuality. Due to the associations of loose hair with animalistic images of fur or a mane and the ability of hair to evoke the sense of touch and smell, long and unconfined hair remains a popular symbol of, especially female, sexuality. In addition to Louÿs' use of hair as a symbol of eroticism, the image inspired other 19th-century French writers of sensual texts such as Baudelaire, who decades earlier used the wildness of hair as a sexual image in his own "La Chevelure." In "Mélisande's Hair, or the Trouble in Allemonde," Katherine Bergeron explores this concept through Mallarmé's Mélisande, another mysterious figure of sensual, feminine inspiration for Debussy. Speaking on Mélisande's strange and "wild" nature, especially as she relates to her new husband Golaud, Bergeron says:

His kingdom within is ruled, in other words, by something unruly, the uncontrollable Mélisande having changed the course of Golaud's orderly and civilized life. Indeed, the unruliness of her nature is conveniently symbolized by the one physical attribute that causes her to stand apart from the other figures in the play: her long and luxuriant hair. To be sure, very long hair always exhibits a life of its own, a wildness that has to be tamed. Unbound, it is like the domesticated animal released to its natural habitat, an unmistakable mark of sexual freedom.¹³

Like Mélisande, whose unbound hair not only conjures the image of wildness but also wakes the “animal instincts” in both Golaud and his brother Pelléas, Bilitis' hair “offers us a potent vision of the pleasures to be discovered in the lover's unbound hair.”¹⁴ Bergeron additionally explores musical connections to Mélisande's tool of seduction with the seductive power of the Bilitis of Lykas' dream.¹⁵ In measure 7 of “La Chevelure,” as Lykas describes the way in which the Bilitis's hair spread around his neck and chest “comme un collier noir” (“like a black necklace”), a chromatic motive emerges (A—A \flat —G \sharp —B—F \sharp) in both the piano accompaniment and the vocal line on the text “j'avais tes cheveux” (“I had your hair”) (see Figure 4.6). This motive is also found in act III, scene I of *Pelléas et Mélisande* when Pelléas begs Mélisande to release her unbound hair out of the window, and in response, she utters “je suis affreuse ainsi” (“I am awful like this”). At this moment, the chromatic motive appears, and it returns again during the moments in which Pelléas begs for the touch of her hand. The motive thus reiterates the wildness of Mélisande's hair that makes her appear “awful” and untamed while simultaneously provoking Pelléas' lust. The use of the motive in “La Chevelure” has a similar effect, creating the image of a wild seductress whose hair entangles Lykas in desire.

¹³ Katherine Bergeron, “Mélisande's Hair, or the Trouble in Allemonde: A Postmodern Allegory at the Opéra-Comique,” in *Siren Songs: Representations of Gender and Sexuality in Opera*, 160-185 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 168.

¹⁴ Bergeron, “Mélisande's Hair,” 169.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 175-177.

While the Bilitis of Lykas' dream is an exotic seducer whose hair serves as an object of eroticism, the Bilitis who recounts Lykas' dream shudders in timidity at his confession. These two contrasting images of Bilitis exemplify the common representations of womanhood in Western literature and art, symbolizing "the traditional Western dichotomy between proper and improper constructions of female sexuality, between the virgin and the whore."¹⁶ In the context of Lykas' dream, the latter serves as a vessel of Lykas' own desire, her wildness representative of the sexual awakening that the true Bilitis has yet to discover.

After the events of "La Chevelure," Bilitis does, in fact, experience a sexual awakening after losing her virginity, though the loss of her innocence results from sexual violence at the hands of Lykas. Given this context, the power dynamic between Lykas and Bilitis in "La Chevelure" becomes particularly eerie. In addition to this power imbalance being illustrated through oppositional voicing, there are also musical clues that foreshadow Lykas' eventual rape of Bilitis. As mentioned earlier, the final G \flat major chord seems out of place after returning to the chromatic, unsettling atmosphere of Bilitis' point of view. However, in observing this final moment in context to the structural background of the piece, this final chord becomes an important key to not only the previously discussed characterizations, but to the contextual meaning that is lost in Debussy's choice of poems.

In an overview of the song's structural background, we find our first moment of G \flat tonality at the beginning of Lykas' dream. We can trace the trajectory of harmonic function to the climax in measure 18 in which the G \sharp 7 chord (enharmonically spelled as A \flat 7) serves a predominant function (ii7) in G \flat major. In the following measure, there is an E \sharp 7 chord that is

¹⁶ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), 56.

left unresolved as it fades into the motive that characterizes the return of Bilitis' voice. Considering that the return to Bilitis' reality is characteristically tonally ambiguous, a retroactive analysis of the final G \flat major chord at the end of the piece reveals that the "unresolved" E \sharp 7 chord (enharmonically spelled as F \flat 7) is finally "resolved" in the song's final measure in a vii \flat 7—I movement. This lack of resolution until the song's ending becomes especially interesting when a revisiting of the dominant functioning chord in measure 19 reveals that it is, in fact, the Tristan Chord, the exemplar of prolonged erotic tension. In the case of Bilitis and Lykas, however, this prolonged tension and culmination in *Liebestod* represents something far more sinister. Thus, the prolongation of Lykas' sexual tension through Bilitis' final dialogue, in which she rejects seduction by "lower[ing] her eyes with a shudder," and the subsequent release in the song's final measure foreshadows that, in the end, Lykas' desire will be fulfilled.

Dismantling Innocence in "Le Tombeau des Nāïades"

The last song of Debussy's set is both narratively and sonically far-removed from the first two. While "La Flûte de Pan" and "La Chevelure" are the 30th and 31st poems in the collection, "Le Tombeau des Nāïades" is the 46th poem and final poem in "Bucoliques en Pamphylie." By this point, the relationship between Bilitis and Lykas has ended, and because of the large narrative jump between "La Chevelure" and "Le Tombeau," many of the details surrounding the ending of the relationship are not explicit in Debussy's setting. In the poem, Louÿs depicts Bilitis trudging through the snow as she has left Lykas, their child, and her homeland behind. The emphasis on the winter setting creates a cyclical return to a nature scene, although the lively, pastoral setting that characterized "La Flûte de Pan" has morphed into a frozen winter landscape, a shift that mirrors the state of Bilitis and Lykas' relationship. The once blossoming relationship

has not only ended, but it is also tainted by the act of sexual violence that occurred after the recounting of Lykas’ erotic dream in “La Chevelure.”

In “Le Tombeau des Nāiads,” as Bilitis is on her journey away from home, she encounters an unnamed man who is simply referred to as “he.” While Bilitis has thus far often referred to Lykas as “he,” even using a similar phrase “Le Tombeau des Nāiades” to begin dialogue (“il m’a dit” [“he said to me”]) in “La Chevelure,” placing this poem in its narrative context suggest that it is not Lykas who speaks, but rather a stranger that she encounters on her path. They exchange a brief dialogue, and through this final scene of “Bucoliques en Pamphylie,” the man reinforces the end of Bilitis’ childhood as he explains that the satyrs and nymphs, symbols of Bilitis’ youth, are now dead.

Table 4.3 Translation of “Le Tombeau des Nāiades”

Le Tombeau des Nāiades	The Tomb of the Naiads
<p>Le long du bois couvert de givre, je marchais ; mes cheveux devant ma bouche se fleurissaient de petits glaçons, et mes sandales étaient lourdes de neige fangeuse et tassée.</p>	<p>Along the forest covered with frost, I walked; my hair in front of my mouth bloomed with little icicles, and my sandals were heavy with muddy and packed snow.</p>
<p>Il me dit: « Que cherches-tu ? » « Je suis la trace du satyre. Ses petits pas fourchus alternent comme des trous dans un manteau blanc. » Il me dit: « Les satyres sont morts.</p>	<p>He said to me: “What are you looking for?” “I am following the satyr. His little hooves alternate like tears in a white coat.” He said to me: “The satyrs are dead.</p>
<p>« Les satyres et les nymphes aussi. Depuis trente ans il n’a pas fait un hiver aussi terrible. La trace que tu vois est celle d’un bouc. Mais restons ici, où est leur tombeau. »</p>	<p>“The satyrs and the nymphs also. For thirty years there has not been a winter so terrible. The tracks that you see are those of a goat. But let us stay here, where their tomb is.”</p>
<p>Et avec le fer de sa houe il cassa la glace de la source où jadis riaient les nāiades. Il prenait de grands morceaux froids, et, les soulevant vers le ciel pâle, il regardait au travers.</p>	<p>And with the iron of his hoe he broke the ice at the source of the spring where the naiads once laughed. He took the large, cold morsels of ice, and, lifting them to the pale sky, he looked through them.</p>

Debussy's setting of the poem begins with an ascending Phrygian tetrachord (G#—A—B—C#) over a G# ϕ 7 chord, and the clashing seconds and tritones sounding throughout the first measure immediately create the harsh, frosty setting (Example 4.9). The sixteenth-note rhythmic pattern in the top line of the accompaniment repeats not only throughout the song's opening, but throughout the entire piece, creating a cyclical motion that illustrates both the swirling snow and the relentlessness of Bilitis' travel. When Bilitis begins to speak in measure 2, the vocal line, marked *doux et las* (soft and weary), reflects her mental and physical exhaustion in rhythmic and pitched monotony. The clashing harmonies continue as Bilitis describes the details of her weary state, and at the end of the first verse, the vocal line takes on the melancholic Phrygian quality that characterized the song's opening gesture.

The image shows a musical score for the first four measures of Debussy's "Le Tombeau des Naiades". The score is in G major (one sharp) and common time. It consists of two systems. The first system shows the piano accompaniment starting in measure 1, marked "Très lent". The right hand has a repeating sixteenth-note pattern, and the left hand has a Phrygian tetrachord (G#-A-B-C#) over a G# ϕ 7 chord. The second system shows the vocal line starting in measure 2, marked "p doux et las". The lyrics are "Le long du bois cou-vert de gi-vre, je mar-chais;". The piano accompaniment continues with the same sixteenth-note pattern and Phrygian tetrachord.

Example 4.9: "Le Tombeau des Naiades," mm. 1-4

In measure 9, Bilitis' lonely trudge is interrupted by a dialogue with the stranger she meets on her path. The man asks Bilitis, "que cherches-tu" ("what are you looking for"), and Bilitis' response conveys an unexpected childlike optimism as she explains that she is following the tracks of a satyr, imaginatively likening the satyr's tracks to holes in a white coat. This moment of childlike naiveté is quickly diminished however when, in measure 13, the stranger responds, "the satyrs are dead." He continues to dismantle optimism by acknowledging the death of the water nymphs, a symbol of virginity, and he draws attention to the harsh winter that blankets Pamphylia. Despite the ambiguity of who exactly the man in this scene is, the opposition between the two characters is clear: Bilitis is a young girl whose innocence is once again destroyed by a man.

This power dynamic between Bilitis and the unnamed man is reflected in the musical setting (Example 4.10). At the beginning of Bilitis' response in measure 11, the mood shifts from the bleakness of the songs opening to an optimistic G major tonality; in addition, the vocal line becomes much more animated and higher in the voice, expressing a child-like excitement as Bilitis searches for the mythological satyr. When the man responds in measure 13, his utterance is spoken on a monotone C, and the harmony shifts to a C major tonality. Considering that modulations to the subdominant key area are often associated with nostalgia or a venture into an idyllic past,¹⁷ the man's condescending response can be read as mocking of Bilitis' naivety; while the satyrs and other mythological creatures existed in Bilitis' past, in the present moment (in which Bilitis' once romanticized first relationship has ended after being marred by sexual violence), they are dead.

¹⁷ For example, Michael Klein explores the subdominant key area as a signifier of the past in his analysis of Chopin's Fourth Ballade. Michael Klein, "Chopin's Fourth Ballade as Musical Narrative," *Music Theory Spectrum* 26, 1 (2004): 23-56.

Il me dit: "Quecher-ches - tu!"

"Je suis la tra - ce du sa - ty - re. Ses pe - tits

pas four-chus al - ter - nent com-me destrous dans un man - teau

blanc." Il medit: "Lessa-ty - res sont morts."

Example 4.10: "Le Tombeau des Naïades," mm. 9-14

As the man continues to shatter Bilitis’ innocent worldview, noting the reality of the terrible winter and the death of not only the satyrs, but the nymphs as well, the harmony continuously shifts, moving jarringly away from the G major tonality that characterized Bilitis’ innocence. The man finalizes his point by saying, “the tracks that you see are those of a goat,” and the phrase ends with alternating diminished chords. The tension created here then explodes into the harshness of the octatonic scale in measure 20 (Example 4.11), and, according to Allen Forte, in Debussy’s music, “the octatonic space is often reserved for the most moving or unexpected textual-poetic expressions.”¹⁸ Thus, the condescending reminder that the tracks in the snow are created from an ordinary goat, not the mythical satyr, is the final strike on Bilitis’ naive worldview.

The image shows a musical score for two staves. The top staff is a vocal line with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). It contains the word "bouc." in measure 19. The bottom staff is a piano accompaniment with a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) and a key signature of one sharp. It is marked "mf" in measure 19 and "très dim." in measure 20. The piano part in measure 20 features a prominent octatonic scale in the right hand.

Example 4.11: “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 19-20

After this final blow, the man suggests that the two stop to rest by the frozen spring, the “tomb” of the water nymphs. In measure 22, there is a strange turn of events when the man takes his hoe and breaks the ice at the source of the spring “where the naiads once laughed.” This moment at first seems inconsequential, but in context of the overarching narrative, it reiterates

¹⁸ Allen Forte, “Debussy and the Octatonic,” *Music Analysis* 10, 1/2 (1991): 137.

Bilitis' loss of innocence and the sexual violence that she has faced. As mentioned previously, nymphs are a constant symbol throughout "Bucoliques en Pamphylie" that relates to Bilitis' sense of childlike wonder. Additionally, the image of nymphs relates to the specific mythological tale of Syrinx, which, as mentioned in "La Flûte de Pan," relates to Bilitis' own plight in regard to sexual violence. In the tale, when Syrinx attempts to find solace from Pan's sexual advances, she is helped by the water nymphs who disguise her by transforming her into reeds; however, this is unsuccessful as Pan simply uses her disguised form as the material for his pan pipe. In "Le Tombeau des Naiades," "Pan" has already effectively captured "Syrinx" and transformed her into an object of his pleasure, and the death of the water nymphs is reminiscent of the fact that the hope of finding solace is lost.

In addition, the frozen spring becomes a symbol of the loss of Bilitis' virginity—she has been violated, the once sensual relationship she experienced with Lykas has now ended, and "the vaginal opening, once a spring of procreative life, has become a frozen tomb."¹⁹ The stranger's aggressive act of breaking the ice with his hoe reiterates the violence Bilitis experienced by "reenact[ing] Lykas' violation of her hymen."²⁰ Musically, this violent moment is created when, in measure 22, a chromatic ascent in the piano moves both hands into a higher register, signifying the beginning of the piece's climax (Example 4.12). The voice ascends in pitch as well, conveying Bilitis crying out as she recounts the man breaking the ice with his hoe. The last word of the phrase, "naiades," ascends a minor 3rd to a *forte* F#, the highest pitch and dynamic level of the song, and then falls a minor 6th. The desperate exclamation not only alludes to Bilitis' cry during the moment in which she herself was violated, but it is also a last plea to the naiads, the last attempt to hold on to her innocence.

¹⁹ Rumph, "Debussy's *Trois Chansons de Bilitis*," 479.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 479.

beau." Et a-vec le fer de sa houë il cas-sa la gla-ce de la source où ja -

-dis ri-aient les Na - ia - des.

Example 4.12: “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 22-25

Following Bilitis’ cry, the vocal melody begins to fall, and the following scene that is described is unsettling in its ambiguity, both musically and textually, as the man takes one of the broken chunks of ice and holds it toward the sky to peer through it. Textually, this act reflects another power imbalance, this time between Bilitis and the male stranger. The symbol of Bilitis’ innocence, her virginity, has been lost, and in the context of Symbolist poetry, “to illuminate a symbol empties it of mystery and renders it helpless to penetration.”²¹ No longer a virgin, the mystery of her sexuality has been revealed, and as the man holds up the ice, representing her lost

²¹ Ibid., 479.

innocence, she is once more she is at the mercy of a man penetrating her as he peers through the broken shard.

After her final cry to the naiads, Bilitis recounts the moment in which the ice is lifted to the sky in a hushed, *piano* dynamic. On the final phrase, “au travers” (“through it”), the vocal melody diminuendos on the final syllable, and the ascent of the left hand of the piano accompaniment into the treble register reflects the opacity of the broken shard of ice (Example 4.13). In the following measure, the melancholic tetrachord pattern from the beginning of the piece returns, though now with a minor quality instead of Phrygian and harmonized by an ambiguous F#(b13) chord. In the last measure of the song, the final rising figure, according to Gibbons, “occurs in a higher register for the first time, suggesting the register of the ‘syrinx’ motive from ‘La Flûte de Pan.’”²² The final fleeting remembrance of Lykas is accompanied by a bleak resolution to a final D#m7 chord in first inversion, and the song’s final cadence to a first inversion chord is unsettling in its uncertainty and ambiguity, reflecting the vulnerability and desolation felt by Bilitis as the loss of her innocence is exposed.

²² Gibbons, “Debussy as Storyteller,” 22.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the piece "Le Tombeau des Naiades" by Debussy. The first system features a vocal line with a whole note "vers." and a piano accompaniment with a forte (f) dynamic. The second system shows a piano solo with dynamics ranging from sf to p, including a "retenu" marking and a crescendo/decrescendo hairpin.

Example 4.13: “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” mm. 29-32

The illustration of the ill-fated relationship between Bilitis and Lykas in Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis* exemplifies the ways in which gendered power dynamics can be captured in a musical setting. Each of the three songs convey Bilitis’ subjection to men: in “La Flûte de Pan,” she is at the mercy of Lykas’ seduction by way of the pan flute, and in “La Chevelure,” the oppositional setting of her voice against Lykas’ reveals her vulnerability and his power. In “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” it is no longer Lykas who holds power over Bilitis, but an unnamed man who shatters the last bit of innocence that she clings to. The musical hints of the nonconsensual loss of Bilitis’ virginity at the conclusion of the song cycle reaffirms her state of vulnerability, further highlighting the power imbalance between her and Lykas.

While Debussy's choice of poems does not explicitly reveal the act of sexual violence that hovers over Bilitis and Lykas' relationship, the modern listener, with an understanding of the poetry collection's overarching narrative, can interpret musical allusions to Bilitis' vulnerability and the ever-present threat of Lykas' desire that eventually leads to rape. In the following chapter, Lykas' sexual assault of Bilitis will be examined in closer detail as, at the same time in which Debussy was constructing his *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, Rita Strohl was writing a song cycle that unambiguously portrays Bilitis' experience with sexual violence.

CHAPTER 5

A NARRATIVE OF SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN RITA STROHL'S *BILITIS*

Since its first publication, Rita Strohl's 12-song cycle *Bilitis* has been compared to and overshadowed by Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis*. For instance, while numerous recordings currently exist of Debussy's three-song setting, there are only two available recordings (released only recently) of Strohl's *Bilitis*.¹ In addition, despite the success of Strohl's song cycle in the early decades of the 20th century, the ubiquitousness of Debussy's cycle led critics to assume his influence on Strohl's *Bilitis* songs, to which Strohl later responded that "they were not informed in any way by the burgeoning *debussysme*."² While Strohl attempted to separate her work from the influence of Debussy, a comparison to Debussy's setting is not unfounded. Not only were the two settings published within a year of one another, the two settings convey the same portion of *Bilitis*' story: the beginning and end of her first sexual relationship. They even share some of the same texts as both composers set the poems "La Flûte" and "La Chevelure." Strohl herself acknowledged the comparison while elaborating on their differences saying, "from another perspective, [the song cycles are] the performance of the same love poem, in two manifestly different interpretations."³

¹ Rita Strohl, *Rita Strohl: Douze Chants de Bilitis*, performed by Anne Bertin-Hugault and Marianne Croux (Hortus, 2022); Rita Strohl, *Rita Strohl, Volume 1: Musique Vocale*, performed by Elsa Dreisig and Romain Louveau (La Boite à Pépites, 2023).

² Quoted and translated in Emily Kilpatrick, *French Art Song: History of a New Music, 1870-1914* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2022), 295.

³ Quoted and translated in Kilpatrick, *French Art Song*, 295.

Recently, scholars and performers have begun to take notice of Strohl's *Bilitis*, and the song cycle has begun to receive praise in its own right. Strohl's cycle has been especially recognized for its possible feminist themes, especially when compared to Debussy's. For instance, Emily Kilpatrick points out how "Strohl's cycle offers a narrative that is potentially both performable and powerful" due to its elevation of Bilitis' voice in her own story, while Debussy's set "cast[s] Bilitis mostly as a mouthpiece for Lykas: recounting what he did and said, she herself is largely silent."⁴ Similarly, Pamela Feo labels *Bilitis* as a "woman's song cycle," concluding that, "the choice of poems creates a female's story from the protagonist's experiences, remaining in Bilitis' point of view."⁵ Although Strohl, like Debussy, centers her song cycle on Bilitis' relationship with Lykas, her setting of twelve songs provides many more details to the relationship, and perhaps the most striking and powerful difference is Strohl's decision to include poems that explicitly depict the often overlooked but important issue at the heart of Bilitis' first relationship: Lykas' rape of Bilitis.

This chapter will explore how Rita Strohl's *Bilitis* incorporates the theme of sexual violence in her musical interpretation of Bilitis and Lykas' relationship. In a comparison to the more well-known cycle by Debussy, which never explicitly reveals Bilitis' rape at the hands of Lykas, Rita Strohl's song cycle includes poems that unambiguously depict the act. In addition, she explicitly highlights the horror of sexual violence through the dramatic musical setting of the poems in which the act takes place, and in the songs that follow, she explores the effects of sexual trauma on Bilitis' character through the revisiting and altering of musical ideas established earlier in the cycle. By unashamedly depicting the horrific act of sexual violence and its resulting trauma, Strohl provides a musical interpretation of Louÿs' poetry that treats rape not

⁴ Ibid., 300, 298.

⁵ Pamela L. Feo, "Rita Strohl and Her Chansons de Bilitis" (Master's Thesis, Tufts University, 2006), 58.

as a mere plot point, but as a violent act that should not be ignored or limited in significance to its role in Bilitis' story.

Text and Music in *Bilitis*, Vol. I

Rita Strohl's song cycle is a setting of twelve poems from the first section of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, and the connecting narrative theme is the progression of Bilitis and Lykas' relationship. In the publication of the song cycle, the twelve songs were divided into two volumes, with songs 1-5 being included in Volume I, and songs 6-12 featured in Volume II. While it is unclear whether it was intentional, the songs in each volume coincide with a different focus in regard to the relationship between Bilitis and Lykas, with Volume I centering on their first meeting and early flirtations and the focus of Volume II resting on the loss of Bilitis' virginity and the subsequent changes to her character and relationship with Lykas. Considering that Volume II begins with Lykas' rape of Bilitis, this chapter will merely provide a brief discussion of the songs in Volume I while each of the songs in Volume II will be discussed in detail.

The cycle begins with a setting of "Lykas," the 24th poem in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* in which Bilitis first mentions her soon-to-be lover. The choice to begin the cycle with "Lykas" establishes the focus of the cycle's narrative, skipping over the early poems in "Bucoliques en Pamphylie" that portray Bilitis' early childhood before meeting Lykas. Strohl's setting of the first impression of the handsome shepherd is set against a pastoral backdrop created through the 6/8 time signature and E major tonality, a key which returns throughout the cycle as a representation of pastoral bliss. After the introduction to the protagonist's love interest, the songs that follow afterward offer vignettes of Bilitis' girlish infatuation with him. In "La Partie

d'osselets" ("Game of Dice"), Bilitis and another unnamed girl (who is similarly smitten with the young shepherd), engage in a game of dice to win his favor. In "La Quenouille" ("The Distaff"), Bilitis finds solace in her distaff, confessing her feelings for Lykas to her inanimate confidante. The musical settings of each of these poems are playful and illustrative; the clacking of dice in "La Partie d'osselets" is reiterated through jarring grace notes and staccato articulation in the piano, and the repetitive sextuplets in the accompaniment of "La Quenouille" creates the spinning motion of the distaff in which "one is reminded of Schubert's depiction of the spinning wheel in *Gretchen am Spinnrade*."⁶

The fourth song of the cycle, "La Flûte de Pan," is a setting of the same poem that serves as the opening to Debussy's song cycle. Strohl's setting of the poem begins similarly with a scalar passage that represents the pan flute, though the 6-note scale is a dreamlike whole-tone pattern beginning on E \flat and ending on C \sharp (Example 5.1). This is followed by two ascending tritones (B—F and E \flat —A). Unlike Debussy's modal flute motive, which immediately transports the listener to the world of antiquity, Strohl's whole-tone motive creates a nebulous lack of tonality that evokes a dreamlike trance. After this initial opening, however, the piano plays an A \flat major chord, and the voice proceeds with the opening vocal line in A \flat major, establishing a key. As the piece unfolds, it modulates through a series of tonal centers, and the melody is colored with chromaticism and modality. By the end of the piece, Bilitis once again finds herself in a nebulous tonality, and according to Feo, the ambiguity of the ending reveals that because of Lykas' successful seduction, "Bilitis has forgotten where she comes from and we are left floating as she never reaches the home key."⁷

⁶ Feo, "Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis," 65.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 79.

Un peu Lent ♩=76

The image shows a musical score for a piece titled "Un peu Lent" with a tempo marking of ♩=76. The score is in 3/4 time and features a flute motive in the right hand and piano accompaniment in the left hand. The key signature has three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The flute part begins with a melodic line that includes a triplet of eighth notes. The piano accompaniment starts with a series of chords and includes dynamics markings of *mf* and *p*. The score is presented in a standard musical notation format with a grand staff.

Example 5.1: Flute motive in “La Flûte de Pan,” mm. 1-5

It is not until “La Chevelure,” another poem previously discussed in reference to Debussy’ setting, that the relationship ventures away from innocent flirtations as Lykas reveals his explicit sexual fantasies about Bilitis. From the song’s beginning, there are noticeable differences from Debussy’s setting. For instance, there is a lack of oppositional voicing as the opening D7 chord prolongs throughout Bilitis’ first utterance (“Il m’a dit” [“He said to me”]) into Lykas’ opening phrase, and Lykas’ monologue is less inflected with chromaticism. However, in the song’s final verse, when Bilitis’ voice returns, there is a noticeable shift in mood as the key switches from G major to A minor and the texture becomes much lighter. As Bilitis utters her final line (“avec un frisson”), the piece modulates to C major, and the shift from A minor to its relative major seems to suggest a positive reaction to Lykas’ confession. However, as will be discussed later in reference to, “Bilitis,” the ninth song of the cycle, C major ultimately becomes associated with Bilitis’ vulnerability and her attempt to feign confidence in the face of Lykas’ oppression.

While the five songs in Volume I capture the early portion of Bilitis and Lykas’ relationship before physical sexual contact beyond a mere kiss, the songs collected in Volume II arguably center around the forceful loss of Bilitis’ virginity. Songs 6 through 8 capture the

moments before, during, and directly after the rape. Afterward, songs 9 through 12 explore its effect on Bilitis’ character and her relationship with Lykas, ultimately culminating in the moment in which she leaves behind not only Lykas, but also the child she bore to him.

“Roses dans la nuit:” Calm Before the Storm

The sixth song in Strohl’s cycle, “Roses dans la nuit” (“Roses in the Night”), captures Bilitis’ romanticization of her relationship with Lykas. Throughout the poem, Bilitis recounts the moments in which she and Lykas would venture into the forest to visit their secret place, a “bush of mysterious roses” whose scent is intoxicating. Here, Bilitis is comfortable with Lykas, and the description of the nocturnal, forest scene is both calm and enchanting.

Table 5.1 Translation of “Roses dans la nuit”

Roses dans la nuit	Roses in the Night
Des que la nuit monte au ciel, le monde est à nous, et aux dieux. Nous allons des champs à la source, des bois obscurs au clairières, où nous mènent nos pieds nus.	As soon as the night climbs to the sky, the world is ours, and the gods’. We come from the fields to the source, the shadowy woods to the clearings, where our naked feet take us.
Les petites étoiles brillent assez pour les petites ombres que nous sommes. Quelquefois, sous les branches basses, nous trouvons des biches endormies.	The little stars shine enough for the little shadows that we are. Sometimes, under the low branches, we find sleeping deer.
Mais plus charmant la nuit que toute autre chose, il est un lieu connu de nous seules et qui nous attire à travers la forêt : un buisson de roses mystérieuses.	But more charming at night than any other thing, Is a place known only to us that attracts us through the forest: a bush of mysterious roses.
Car rien n’est divin sur la terre à l’égale du parfum des roses dans la nuit. Comment se fait-il qu’au temps où j’étais seule je ne m’en sentais pas enivrée ?	For nothing is as divine on the Earth as the scent of roses in the night. How is it that at the time where I found myself alone, I didn’t feel intoxicated?

In the song's opening, Strohl immediately establishes the song's mood with the performance marking that reads *avec un grand sentiment de calme et de douceur nocturne* (with a grand sentiment of calm and nocturnal sweetness). The song begins with an opening arpeggiated figure in the accompaniment, and the lilting movement and high register of the line are illustrative of the “little stars” shining through the forest canopy while the Eb major tonality and slow tempo establishes the pleasant and calm moment shared between the two lovers (Example 5.2). Throughout the remainder of the cycle, this motive will reappear several times as an important indicator of Bilitis' memory of this moment and the reverence she feels for Lykas before their relationship is marred by violence.

Lent. ♩ = 88
Avec un grand sentiment de calme et de douceur nocturne.

Example 5.2: “Roses dans la nuit,” m. 1

The lilting melody in the accompaniment remains until the end of the second verse, though the following section (which modulates briefly to Db major), maintains the sense of romantic serenity with a sweeping melody above block chords. In measure 31, on the text “un buisson de roses mystérieuses” (“a mysterious rose bush”), the accompaniment pattern shifts dramatically into a series of ascending arpeggios in which each chord shifts harmonically down a half-step, creating a nebulous tonality that evokes the mystery (and sensuality) of the roses. In

the following section, the accompaniment continues to play arpeggiated chords, though now rooted firmly in Ab, and the sweeping motion of the chords and the fluctuating rhythm evoke the intoxicating, wafting scent of the roses.

In measures 37-38, the momentum slows, and the harmony comes to rest on an Eb7 chord (Example 5.3). Rather than resolving expectedly to Ab, the tonality shifts abruptly to B major in measure 39. This abrupt shift is the first instance in “Roses dans la nuit” in which the romantic scene is interrupted, and it signals a shift in the mood as Bilitis retrospectively contemplates the memory by saying, “how is it at the time where I found myself alone, I didn’t feel intoxicated?” This phrase is vague as it does not acknowledge a specific moment in which she found herself alone, and it seems to possibly serve as a simple expression of Bilitis’ reverence for Lykas by saying that it is only with him that the roses have an intoxicating effect. However, the image of Bilitis alone in the forest that is conjured by this phrase takes on a sinister quality when placed in the context of the following song, “Les Remords” (“Remorse”).⁸ The narrative of “Les Remords” makes it clear that Bilitis was raped by Lykas while she was sleeping alone in the forest, and the mentioning of her alone at the end of “Roses dans la nuit” sets the scene for what is to come. In addition, while the roses’ inability to intoxicate seems to refer to Lykas as being the true source of Bilitis’ intoxication, it also foreshadows how Bilitis’ romanticized view of this moment, and Lykas, will soon come to an end the next time she finds herself alone in the forest.

⁸ “Les Remords” also follows directly after “Roses dans la nuit” in the poetry collection.

ro - ses dans la nuit. Com-

mf

Red. *

- ment se fait -

a tempo

Red. *

- il qu'au temps où j'é - tais

(Red.) *

seu - - - le

p

Red. * *Red.* *

Example 5.3: "Roses dans la nuit," mm. 37-42

Strohl's musical setting of this moment subtly suggests the sinister foreshadowing undertones of Bilitis' final utterance. At the onset of the final phrase, the sudden shift from the A \flat major tonality to the ascending B major arpeggios completely removes Bilitis from her blissful moment with Lykas. The new tonality holds out until measure 42, in which the vocal line takes an unexpected turn from B \natural to B \flat on the first syllable of the word "seule" ("alone"), which is harmonized by a E \flat minor chord in the piano. The word's final syllable moves again in a lowered half-step motion to A \natural , which is harmonized by an A $^{\circ}7$ chord. The unusual harmonic movement from B—E \flat m—A $^{\circ}7$ combined with the descending chromaticism of the vocal line effectively emphasizes the word "seule" and suggests that there is something sinister about this particular word, foreshadowing the danger that Bilitis will face when she begins the next song in the state of being *alone*.

After this moment of uncertainty and sinister foreshadowing, the piece returns once again to the blissful nighttime scene with the return to the home key in measure 43. At the conclusion of the poem's final phrase, the lilting motive from the song's beginning returns, the final recollection of this pleasant memory that occurs directly before Bilitis experiences traumatic sexual violence (Example 5.4).

Example 5.4: “Roses dans la nuit,” mm. 46-50

The Rape of Bilitis

The following song, “Les Remords,” takes a dramatic shift in tone from “Roses dans la nuit.” It is here that Bilitis recounts the moment in which she was raped by Lykas. She expresses details about the act, including her resistance against him and the defeated and violated state she is left in afterward.

Table 5.2 Translation of “Les Remords”

<p>Les Remords</p> <p>D’abord je n’ai pas répondu, et j’avais la honte sur les joues, et les battements de mon cœur faisaient mal à mes seins.</p>	<p>Remorse</p> <p>At first I did not respond, I had shame on my cheeks, and the beating of my heart hurt my breast.</p>
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Puis j'ai résisté, j'ai dit : « Non . Non. » J'ai tourné la tête en arrière et le baiser n'a pas franchi mes lèvres, ni l'amour mes genoux serrés.	Then I resisted, I said: "No. No." I turned my head and the kiss did not cross my lips, nor did love spread my tightly-locked knees.
Alors il m'a demandé pardon, il m'a embrassé les cheveux, j'ai senti son haleine brûlante, et il est parti... Maintenant, je suis seule.	Then he asked for my pardon, he kissed my hair, I felt his burning breath, and he left... Now I am alone.
Je regarde la place vide, le bois désert, la terre foulée. Et je mords mes poings jusqu'au sang et j'étouffe mes cris dans l'herbe.	I look at the empty place, the deserted wood, the trampled earth. And I bite my fists until they bleed, and I stifle my cries in the grass.

Lykas' rape of Bilitis is explicitly illustrated through Strohl's dramatic musical setting. The piece opens with a short piano introduction in C# minor (Example 5.5), the relative minor of the key that first introduced us to Lykas in the first song of the cycle, a choice that Feo interprets as "a cruel parody of [Bilitis'] former pastoral happiness as it mocks her for naively believing in it."⁹ The introduction's quick tempo, consistent sixteenth-note figures, rising chromatic notes, and dramatic, quick crescendo performed *avec une agitation haletante et passionnée* (with breathless and passionate agitation) firmly establish the *tempesta* style that is typically incorporated to evoke the terror of cataclysmic natural events. Thus, Lykas' violence is likened to a storm, which further enhances the parody of Lykas' former charmingly pastoral associations, and Bilitis finds herself in a state of terror at the mercy of Lykas' dangerous force.

⁹ Feo, "Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis," 75.

Vite. $\text{♩} = 144.$
Avec une agitation heletante et passionnée

Example 5.5: “Les Remords,” mm. 1-4

The agitated accompaniment continues as Bilitis’ voice emerges, mirroring her anxiety and the pounding of her heart. She begins to resist Lykas’ advances, and her three utterances of “non” are emphasized through accents, a crescendo into a *forte* dynamic, and vocal line the continuously rises to land on an elongated E on the word’s final iteration (Example 5.6). The vocal line continues to crescendo in dynamics and pitch until it reaches a high A on the second syllable of “franchi” (“cross”) emphasizing the desperation with which Bilitis attempts to avoid Lykas’ kiss crossing her lips.

Example 5.6: “Les Remords,” mm. 22-28

The sixteenth-note accompaniment figure comes to an end in measure 47, signaling the end of Lykas' assault. Movement stills in measure 52 as the tempo becomes "moins vite" ("less slow") and the dynamic drops to *piano*. Bilitis recites in a monotone fashion how Lykas "asked for her pardon," and the stillness of the line suggests her moment of shock. The tempo picks up again however in measure 55 as Lykas touches her hair and she feels his breath, and the anxiety of once again feeling his touch is created through the syncopated accompaniment and chromatic movement. The anxious momentum ceases when Lykas leaves, and when Bilitis is finally alone, she expresses her defeat in a languid vocal line underlined by an E \flat minor tonality, the parallel minor to the major key that characterized the unblemished memory of "Roses dans la nuit."

When she is left alone, panic soon sets in again as the tempestuous accompaniment from the beginning returns at the start of the final verse. As the final verse is recited, the vocal line ascends quickly, rising to the climactic moment on the word "cris" ("cry") that is emphasized through a *fortissimo* dynamic on a high A in measure 99 (Example 5.7). Bilitis' whirlwind of emotions continues to spiral as she "stifles her sobs in the grass," and the piece ends with the accompaniment figure increasing in tempo and rising chromatically in pitch until reaching a *fortissimo* D minor chord that is then punctuated by a final C# minor chord.

et j'é touf - fe mes cris

dans l'her - be..

ff

più f

cresc.

subito

ff

p

Example 5.7: "Les Remords," mm. 97-103

cresc.

ff sec.

f

Example 5.8: "Les Remords," mm. 108-113

The song that follows afterward, “Le Sommeil interrompu” (“Interrupted Sleep”), depicts the same event again through Bilitis’ perspective, though this time providing several new details. For instance, while “Les Remords” begins with Bilitis’ immediate reaction to Lykas’ assault, “Le Sommeil interrompu” begins with the moments before the event, detailing how Bilitis had fallen asleep in the forest only to “awake with a scream.” In addition, while “Les Remords” ends after Lykas has left Bilitis once more alone in the forest, the following song seemingly ends in the middle of the act, revealing how Bilitis dissociates from her reality by praying to Kypris.¹⁰

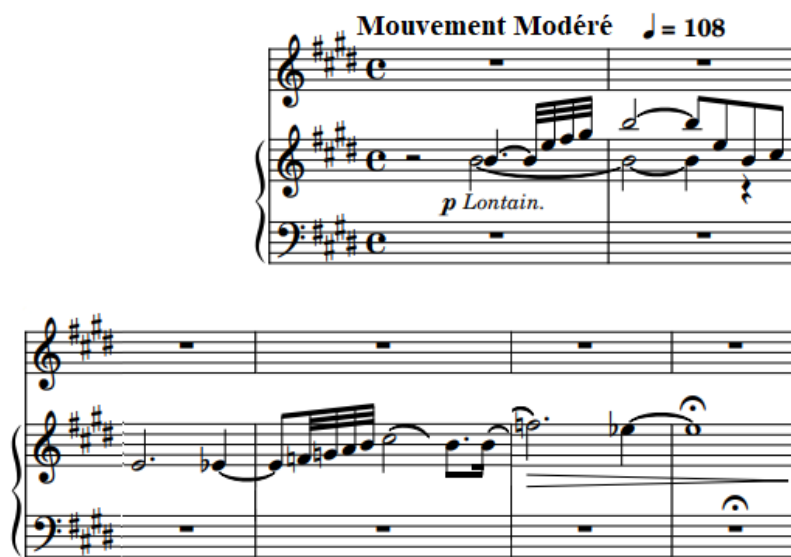
Table 5.3 Translation of “Le Sommeil interrompu”

Le Sommeil interrompu	Interrupted Sleep
<p>Toute seule je m’étais endormie, comme une perdrix dans la bruyère. Le vent léger, le bruit des eaux, la douceur de la nuit m’avaient retenue là.</p>	<p>All alone I was asleep, like a partridge in the heather. The light wind, the sound of water, the sweetness of the night had kept me there.</p>
<p>Je me suis endormie, imprudente, et je me suis réveillée en criant, et j’ai lutté, et j’ai pleuré ; mais déjà il était trop tard. Et que peuvent les mains d’une enfant ?</p>	<p>I fell asleep, imprudent, and I awoke with a scream, and I struggled, and I cried; but it was already too late. And what can a child’s hands do?</p>
<p>Il ne me quitta pas. Au contraire, plus tendrement dans ses bras, il me serra contre lui et je ne vis plus au monde ni la terre ni les arbres mais seulement la lueur de ses yeux.</p>	<p>He didn’t leave me. On the contrary, more tenderly in his arms, he held me against him and I did not see the world anymore, nor the earth nor the trees but only the light of his eyes.</p>
<p>À toi, Kypris victorieuse, je consacre ces offrandes encore mouillées de rosée, vestiges des douleurs de la vierge, témoin de mon sommeil et de ma résistance.</p>	<p>To you, Kypris victorious, I consecrate these offerings still wet with dew, vestiges of the sorrows of a virgin, witness my sleep and my resistance.</p>

The six-measure piano introduction (Example 5.9) serves as a thematic prelude foreshadowing what is to come, while also echoing what has come before. The opening phrase

¹⁰ Kypris (Cypris) is another title for Aphrodite that refers to her associations with Cyprus.

returns to the peaceful E major that characterized Lykas’ initial introduction in the opening song of the cycle. In measure 3, the tonic pitch shifts downward to Eb, the key that characterized the romantic moments in “Roses dans la nuit” before the assault, and the phrase that follows is an exact iteration of Lykas’ whole-tone flute motive from the fourth song in the cycle, “La Flûte de Pan.” Here, like Debussy, Strohl’s flute motive serves as a symbol of the oppressive phallus, and the motive’s whole tone quality, which is often associated with dreams, is revealed to be indicative of Lykas’ desire imposing itself on a sleeping and vulnerable Bilitis, rousing her from sleep with violence.



Example 5.9: “Le Sommeil interrompu,” mm. 1-6

When Bilitis begins to speak in measure 7, E major returns, and the initial phrase is recited in a calm manner that captures Bilitis’ peaceful moments before the assault. The woodland setting is created through the sweeping, chromatically ascending passages in the accompaniment that mimic “the light wind,” and the unfurling, sextuplet figures that allude to

“the sound of water.” This peaceful moment is thwarted in measure 18, however, as the accompaniment begins to play disjointed chords in the right hand that alternate between ascending octaves in the left, creating a creeping motion that alerts the listener to Lykas’ impending appearance (Example 5.10). Bilitis is soon awoken from her slumber, and as she wakes to realize that she is in danger, the vocal line becomes frantic, ascending quickly to a high B \flat in on the final syllable of “criant” (“scream”).

The musical score for Example 5.10, "Le Sommeil interrompu," mm. 18-25, is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 18-20) features a vocal line starting with "Je me suis en-dor-" and a piano accompaniment marked "sempre p". The second system (measures 21-23) shows the vocal line with "- mi - e, im-pru-den - te, et je me" and the piano accompaniment with "un poco cresc. serrez le mouvement" and "più cresc.". The third system (measures 24-25) shows the vocal line with "suis ré-veil-lée en cri - ant, -" and the piano accompaniment with "f" and triplets. The key signature changes to B-flat major (two flats) in the final system.

Example 5.10: “Le Sommeil interrompu,” mm. 18-25

As in the preceding song, the accompaniment begins to play tempestuous sixteenth-note figures as Bilitis struggles against Lykas, which can be seen in measures 28-31 in Example 5.11. However, unlike the breathless and quick moving text setting of “Les Remords,” the depiction of Bilitis’ struggle as she exclaims “et j’ai lutté, et j’ai pleuré” (“and I struggled, and I cried”) is represented by long-held notes in the high register of the voice, recreating her screams. In measure 32 (Example 5.11), the sixteenth-note rhythm in the accompaniment shifts to a triplet figure that continues the sense of frantic momentum. This buildup culminates as Bilitis realizes that her struggles are in vain, and the vocal line ascends to a high A as she utters that it is “trop tard” (“too late”) to save herself. Having relinquished her struggles, the vocal line falls, and the anxious triplet figures culminate in measure 53 on a fortissimo G#°7 chord (Example 5.12). Here, the movement stills as a florid, descending piano melody emerges, falling to a C# in measure 58.

Musical score for "Le Sommeil interrompu," mm. 28-35. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "j'ai lut - té, et j'ai pleu - ré;". The piano accompaniment includes triplets and a "dim." (diminuendo) marking. The system starts at measure 15.

Example 5.11: "Le Sommeil interrompu," mm. 28-35

Musical score for "Le Sommeil interrompu," mm. 53-58. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. It features a piano accompaniment with triplets and a "ff" (fortissimo) marking. The lyrics "retenez peu a peu" are written above the piano line, with a "dim." (diminuendo) marking below it. The system starts at measure 8.

Figure 5.12 "Le Sommeil interrompu," mm. 53-58

Having returned to a *piano* dynamic, a rolling F major chord in the bass register emerges, creating a sense of calm in the midst of violence. In the following section, the tempo and dynamics gradually pick up as Bilitis recounts how Lykas would not leave her afterward, and how the world disappeared until all she could see was the “light of his eyes.” In measure 79 (Example 5.13), the beginning of the final verse, a tonal shift as a preceding F# major arpeggio leads into a modulation to B major, and, according to Feo, this transition to the dominant of the pastoral E major suggests that “Bilitis has been taken away from that innocence and can no longer go back.”¹¹ The tonality remains firmly in B major for the remainder of the piece, and while Feo suggests this change of tonality to be indicative of the loss of Bilitis’ innocence, the rejection of the previous chromatically inflected anxieties and bare accompaniment seem to transport Bilitis into a newfound state of torpor. It is here that Bilitis begins to pray to Aphrodite, and the bare, triadic accompaniment is reminiscent of a hymn of praise. In the context of the violent fluctuations that preceded this moment, the juxtaposition of this sudden shift in texture and tonality creates the uncanniness of Bilitis’ dissociated state. While Lykas is still holding on to her, Bilitis briefly escapes her suffering by turning her mind toward her goddess, grasping for optimism by choosing to view her violently stolen virginity not as a symbol of her helplessness and vulnerability, but as a sacred offering.

¹¹ Feo, “Rita Strohl and her Chansons de Bilitis,” 79.

a tempo, un peu plus Lent.

mf

toi, Ky-pris vic-to-ri - eu - se, je con - sa - cre ces of - fran - des en -

mf

-co-remouil-léesde ro - sé - e, ves - ti-gesdesdou-leurs de la vier - ge, té -

più f

-moins de monsom-meil et de maré-sis - tan - ce.

p

vcc

p

sf

p

sfz

p

pp

Example 5.13: “Le Sommeil interrompu,” mm. 79-92

“Bilitis:” Sexual Awakening or Trauma Response?

After recounting the horrible act of rape in “Les Remords” and “Le Sommeil interrompu,” the following song, “Bilitis,” reveals one way in which she is changed by sexual violence. After having lost her virginity, Bilitis announces a newfound confidence in her sexuality, and she expresses pride in her body and empowerment in nudity. In addition, she finds power in sex, commanding her lover, “prends-moi comme je suis” (“take me as I am”).

Table 5.4 Translation of “Bilitis”

<p>Bilitis</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Moi je ne saurais vivre que nue. Mon amant, prends-moi comme je suis : sans robe ni bijoux ni sandales, voici Bilitis toute seule.</p> <p>Mes cheveux sont noirs de leur noir et me lèvres rouges de leur rouge. Mes boucles flottent autour de moi, libres et rondes comme des plumes.</p> <p>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.</p>	<p>Bilitis</p> <p>A woman envelops herself in white wool. Another dresses herself in silk and gold. Another covers herself with flowers, with green leaves and grapes.</p> <p>Me, I can only live naked. My lover, take me as I am: without robe nor jewel nor sandals, here is Bilitis alone.</p> <p>My hair is black with its blackness and my lips are red with their redness. My curls float around me, free and round like feathers.</p> <p>Take me as my mother made me in a night of love long ago, and if I please you thus, do not forget to tell me.</p>
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As discussed in chapter 3, this moment seems to suggest that Bilitis has experienced a “sexual awakening” after the forceful taking of her virginity, a concept that, while problematic, is not an unfamiliar trope. In discussing Strohl’s interpretation of the poem in her thesis on the composer and song cycle, Pamela Feo does not deny the idea of “Bilitis” representing the protagonist’s sexual awakening; rather, she views Strohl’s setting not as a gross fetishization of

sexual assault, but as a true moment of empowerment. She says, “[Bilitis] has been stripped down to her naked vulnerability, but there is an empowerment that comes from recognizing the essence of her character.”¹² While Feo provides convincing evidence for this interpretation, it can also be argued that there are musical elements that point to Strohl’s interpretation being not a declaration of Bilitis’ newfound empowerment, but as an example of Bilitis’ direct response to sexual trauma.

The song begins with a monophonic piano introduction that hints at Bilitis’ state of mind before she utters a word (Example 5.14). The beginning performance markings indicate a quick moving passage that is *vif, gai et leger* (lively, gay and light), yet it is also labeled as *capricieux* (capricious), indicating a fluctuation of emotions. After an ascending scale starting on G, the melody devolves into a series of leaps between the pitches D and A. Combined with the lilting 6/8 time signature, this arpeggiated motif appears to be a distortion of the beginning motif from “Roses dans la nuit,” which can be revisited in Example 5.2. This distortion of the motive that once represented Bilitis’ pleasant, unblemished moment with her lover reveals that the reverence that she once held for Lykas has been corrupted. In measure 5, a leap from A overshoots D to land on F, and after extending the pitch for the whole measure, it languidly falls a half-step to E. Over the next 6 measures, a sequence is created of falling arpeggios followed by an upward leap that, after a moment, falls down a step, a movement that suggests a series of defeated or pained sighs. The final note of the sequence, G, is extended on a tremolo, and in measure 15, the note explodes upward into a whole tone scale that ascends two octaves. At earlier points in the cycle, the whole tone scale had been used predominantly in the context of Lykas’ flute motive, the indicator of his desire (see Example 5.1). However, while his desire has previously been

¹² Ibid., 79.

contained within the 6-note ascending scale of the flute, it is now unleashed from its confines, mirroring Lykas' unrestrained domination of Bilitis in the previous two songs.

The musical score is presented in three systems. The first system is titled "Vif, gai et Leger. (♩ = 160)" and includes markings *p*, *capricieux*, *ten. un poco cresc.*, and *gracientemente*. The second system includes *expressif* and *retenez un peu*. The third system includes *dim.* and *retenez*. The piano part features a prominent six-note ascending scale in the right hand.

Example 5.14: "Bilitis," mm. 1-16

The opening gesture in the piano ends on a C major chord, establishing the key in which Bilitis begins her recitation in the following measure. When the vocal line emerges, it is completely unaccompanied, and in fact, other than the C major chord in measure 17 and a final

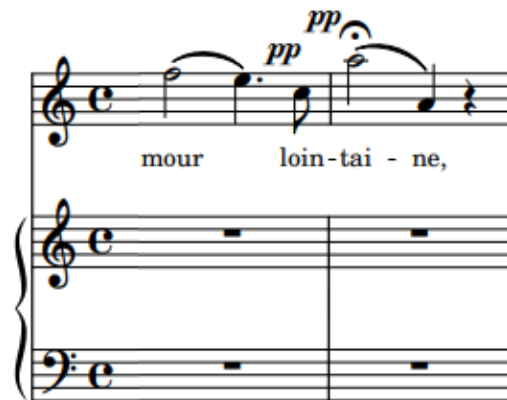
cadence at the end of the piece, “Bilitis” remains completely in a monophonic texture. The naked texture imitates how she herself is nude, and though her words suggest that she is content with her nudity, the references to Lykas in the song’s introduction in the piano remind the listener that it was in fact Lykas who has stripped her bare. For the entire presentation of the text, the vocal line has no accompaniment to cling to, thus creating a sense that Bilitis is not only nude, but completely vulnerable.

The vocal part begins with a simple melody in the style of recitative as Bilitis describes women who dress themselves in a variety of styles to cover their bodies. As Bilitis says “moi je ne saurais vivre que nue” (“me, I must live forever nude”), the descending figure beginning and ending on G and an F# in the melody suggest G major, emphasizing Bilitis as different from the other, more modest women that she describes. At the end of the second verse, in which the text proclaims strongly “here is Bilitis” in a *fortissimo* dynamic, the vocal line outlines a D minor chord, giving a minor inflection to Bilitis’ statement that seems to undermine her confidence. The phrase ends with a melodic ascent that finalizes on the word “seule,” a word that has previously been emphasized in “Roses dans la nuit” and “Les Remords,” and it is similarly emphasized here through its elongation on a fermata, reminding us again of Bilitis’ vulnerable, alone state (Example 5.15).

The musical score for Example 5.15 consists of three staves. The top staff is a vocal line in treble clef, starting with a forte (*f*) dynamic. It begins with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note G4, then a descending eighth-note figure: F#4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3. This is followed by a half note G3 with a fermata. The lyrics are: "voi- -ci Bi-li-tis tou-te seu - le". The middle and bottom staves are piano accompaniment in grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The piano part is mostly rests, with some faint markings in the bass clef.

Example 5.15: “Bilitis,” mm. 29-31

At the arrival of the song’s final verse, the melody at first appears to return to the material of the first verse. However, there is a marked difference on the final word of the phrase “prends-moi telle que ma mère m’a faite dans une nuit d’amour lointaine” (“take me as my mother made me in a night of love long ago”). On the final word, “lointaine” (translated to “distant” or “long ago”), the initial C5 ascends a sixth to A5 before descending an octave (Example 5.16). The word is additionally marked through its *pianissimo* dynamic, which is difficult to sing on such a high vocal pitch. Given the romanticized description of her own mother’s sexual encounter as “a night of love” and the distancing of time through the final phrase “long ago,” the sense of longing that is created through the large leaps, *pianissimo* dynamic, and rhythmic extension through the fermata is perhaps indicative of Bilitis’ desire to return through time and experience her own romanticized love, a love that does not involve sexual violence.



Example 5.16: “Bilitis,” mm. 42-43

The piece ends with a return to the melody in the piano that opened the song, though there are a few changes (Example 5.17). Initially, the melody begins on C, and the leaps that make up the motive similar to “Roses dans la nuit” consist of the pitches C and G, keeping the

melody rooted in the C major tonality that characterized most of the vocal section. Moreover, the sigh motifs that characterized the first piano section have now lost their sighing quality as the stepwise descents now fall a third, blending into the falling arpeggios that outline an A minor chord in measures 52-53 and a C major chord in measures 54-55. These changes suggest that perhaps Bilitis' C major proclamations have in fact assisted her in moving on from, or at least mask, the earlier recollections of violence as heard in the song's initial piano introduction. In measure 58, the ascending whole tone scale plays out once again, this time ascending an additional octave. The whole-tone scale ascends to F[♯], which is harmonized by an F major chord in the bass that resolves in a plagal motion to a C major chord in the song's final measure. In the final moments of the song, the interrupting whole tone scale acknowledges that Bilitis is unable to shake the image of Lykas' unbridled desire; however, the final cadence in C major suggests that Bilitis' newfound confidence, while not entirely convincing, perhaps shows promise for some degree of healing.

Example 5.17: "Bilitis," mm. 48-60

To Forget the Memory of You: A Journey of Healing

In the two songs that follow “Bilitis,” it is suggested that Bilitis and Lykas begin to reconcile their relationship. In “Le Serment” (“The Vow”), we hear Lykas’ voice for the second time as he proclaims grand gestures of his dedication to Bilitis. In both the poetry collection and Strohl’s cycle, this is the penultimate poem in which we will see Bilitis and Lykas together before she leaves him, and his grand proclamations suggest a final attempt to receive Bilitis’ forgiveness; as Feo points out, while his words express profound dedication, there is a hint of manipulation as “the rhetoric of repetitions suggests that he is reciting a carefully crafted story rather than speaking in earnest.”¹³ Similarly to the first time in which we heard Lykas speak in “La Chevelure,” the poem ends with Bilitis’ reaction to Lykas’ speech, and while she appears elated by his affectionate words, her enthusiasm is undeniably exaggerated.

Table 5.5 Translation of “Le Serment”

Le Serment	The Vow
« Lorsque l’eau des fleuves remontera jusqu’aux sommets couvert de neige ; lorsqu’on sèmera l’orge et le blé dans les sillons mouvants de la mer ;	“When the water of the rivers rises to the summits covered with snow; when one sows barley and wheat in the moving furrows of the sea;
« Lorsque les pins naîtront des lacs et les nénufars des rochers, lorsque le soleil deviendra noir, lorsque la lune tombera sur l’herbe ;	“When the pines are born from the lakes and the water lilies from the rocks, when the sun becomes black, when the moon falls on the grass;
« Alors, mais alors seulement, je prendrai une autre femme, et je t’oublierai, Bilitis, âme de ma vie, cœur de mon cœur. »	“Then, but only then, I will take another woman, and I will forget you, Bilitis, soul of my life, heart of my heart.”
Il me l’a dit, il me l’a dit ! Que m’importe le reste du monde ! Où es-tu, bonheur insensé qui te compares à mon bonheur !	He said it to me, he said it to me! What matters the rest of the world to me! Where are you, foolish happiness that compares to my happiness!

¹³ Ibid., 82.

The song begins in E major, which harkens again to the pastoral happiness Bilitis felt upon Lykas' first introduction. Lykas' profession of love is imbued with pastoral imagery, pointing to impossible events in nature (the waters rising above the mountains, trees and flowers growing out of the sea and rocks, the moon falling to the earth, etc.) as metaphors for his supposedly never-ending love for Bilitis. In addition, illustrative techniques are used to convey the various nature images, such as the rolling arpeggios in the accompaniment on the word "mer" ("sea") or the ascending figure that coincides with the image of lilies sprouting forth from the rocks. Lykas' use of nature imagery in his profession of loyalty and the reiteration of the pastoral through the musical setting provides Lykas with the illusion of innocence and sincerity, manipulating Bilitis to remember the time when his character was unblemished.

Other than the few moments of previously mentioned musical illustration, the accompaniment during Lykas' recitation is bare, consisting of consonant block chords that underline the vocal melody. The emphasis on clarity of text once again provides Lykas with the semblance of sincerity, as though he wants to make sure each word is heard. While the accompaniment underscoring Lykas' dialogue is modest, the musical texture shifts dramatically for Bilitis' response. The meter switches to a lilting 6/8, mimicking Bilitis' excitement that is expressed *avec un élan joyeux et passionné* (with a joyful and passionate impulse), and the key modulates to F# major. While the momentum of Bilitis' joy is expressed through the moving triplets in the accompaniment, the vocal line is similarly enthusiastic; this is evident the initial repeated phrase "il me l'a dit" ("he said it to me") being punctuated by leaps, and also in the final iteration ascending from B4 to G#5, the highest pitch in the song. The poetic repetition of "il me

l'a dit" suggests that Bilitis is "convinc[ing] herself that he was speaking the truth," a fact that is accentuated through the passionate outcries.¹⁴

This sense of optimism toward Lykas continues in the penultimate song of the cycle, "La Nuit" ("Night"). Here, it seems as though their relationship has taken on a new dynamic as Bilitis proudly states that it is now *she* who seeks *him*. As in "Bilitis," she expresses that she is confident in her ability to seduce, and it seems as though she has left the memories of Lykas' abuse in the past as she happily seeks him out for a night of lovemaking.

Table 5.6 Translation of "La Nuit"

La Nuit	Night
C'est moi maintenant qui le recherche. Chaque nuit, très doucement, je quitte la maison et je vais par une longue route jusqu'à sa prairie, le regarder dormir.	It is now I who seeks him. Each night, very softly, I leave the house and I go on the long route to his meadow, to watch him sleep.
Quelque fois je reste longtemps sans parler, heureuse de le voir seulement, et j'approche mes lèvres des siennes, pour ne baiser que son haleine.	Sometimes I stay for a long time without speaking, happy just to see him, and I bring my lips towards his, to kiss only his breath.
Puis tout à coup je m'étends sur lui. Il se réveille dans mes bras, et il ne peut plus se relever car je lutte ! Il renonce, et rit, et m'étreint. Ainsi nous jouons dans la nuit.	Then suddenly I stretch out upon him. He wakes in my arms, and he cannot rise because I resist him! He relinquishes, laughs, and embraces me. Thus we play in the night.
...Première aube, ô clarté méchante, toi déjà ! En quel antre toujours nocturne, sur quelle prairie souterraine pourrons-nous si longtemps aimer, que nous perdions ton souvenir...	... First of dawn, o wicked clarity, you again! In what lair always nocturnal, on which underground meadow can we love for so long, that we forget the memory of you...

Bilitis' nighttime journey to find Lykas calls to mind their previous nightly venture into the forest in "Roses dans la nuit," and the connection is apparent through the return to the key of

¹⁴ Ibid., 82.

E♭ major. However, there is a marked difference between Bilitis' mindset in the two scenes; in "Roses dans la nuit," Bilitis romanticizes their time together, making no direct reference to sex while innocently taking note of the beckoning scent of roses. Now, Bilitis and Lykas' relationship has become physical, and she appears to have gained power in their sexual dynamic. In verses two and three, Bilitis describes how she approaches a sleeping Lykas only to wake him with her kisses and embrace. She mentions how when he wakes, he cannot rise due to her embrace. Though Lykas ultimately consents to her touch, the language used to describe how Bilitis sneaks upon him is extraordinarily similar to previous descriptions of how he once approached a sleeping Bilitis with nefarious intention.

The musical setting similarly calls to mind elements of the songs in which the sexual assault takes place. In measure 17, when the second verse begins, the accompaniment shifts from fluctuating rhythms to syncopated chords in the high register of the piano. As the singer utters the phrase "j'approche mes lèvres des siennes" ("I bring my lips towards his"), the texture of the syncopated figures grows in intensity, mimicking Bilitis' slow approach towards him (Example 5.18). The momentum stops as Bilitis lays herself on top of him, and in measure 34, in which Bilitis finishes the phrase "il se réveille dans mes bras" ("he wakes in my arms"), the accompaniment explodes into quick-moving sixteenth-note patterns that are rhythmically similar to the accompaniment figure at the beginning of "Les Remords" (Example 5.19) In addition, the vocal line leaps up to a high B♭ on the word "bras," calling to mind the similar way in which the vocal line in "Le sommeil interrompu" ascended to B♭ at the moment in which Bilitis awoke "en criant" ("with a scream").

Très-doux.

et j'ap-pro-ches les lèvres des siennes,

sempre pp

Example 5.18: “La Nuit,” mm. 23-25

Vite. (♩ = 160)

Il se réveille dans mes bras,

cresc.

Example 5.19: “La Nuit,” mm. 33-34

While Bilitis’ describes this scene as a playful moment, the inability to distance the relationship from rape, as seen in Bilitis’ subversion of the power dynamic by imposing nonconsensual acts onto Lykas and the musical allusions to the assault, further reveals that it is impossible for the relationship to move on from sexual violence. As a result of this, the relationship will soon come to an end, as this is the final poem in “Bucoliques en Pamphylie” that we see Bilitis and Lykas together. A pivotal musical moment in Strohl’s setting that foreshadows Bilitis’ decision to leave Lykas comes at the end of the song during the final phrase

of the poem, “que nous perdions ton souvenir” (“that we will forget your memory”). In the context of the poem, this phrase is in reference to the arrival of the dawn which has interrupted their night of lovemaking. However, Strohl’s musical setting reveals a double meaning; it is also in reference to the fleeting memory of Lykas as, after this final moment of them together, Bilitis will leave Lykas and her homeland of Pamphylia behind.

In measure 86, on the word “ton” (“your”), a familiar melody emerges: the lilting piano introduction from “Roses dans la nuit” that represents the unblemished and romantic moment that they shared before Lykas’ assault of Bilitis (Example 5.20). For six measures, “ton souvenir” (“your memory”) is extended through tied whole notes in the vocal line while the piano plays a rhythmically augmented version of the opening motive of “Roses dans la nuit” in its original key. The languid, augmented rhythm suggests the haziness of memory, and the motive in its original form (unlike the distorted form in “Bilitis”) suggests Bilitis’ revisiting of the memory without being plagued by anxiety. She has now accepted that this moment exists only in memory, and the fact that she can revisit this memory without it being distorted by trauma reveals that there is promise for Bilitis to heal; when she leaves Lykas behind, she may be able to look back on the relationship and remember not only the traumatic memories of sexual violence, but also the happy memories of her first experience with love.

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and the beginning of the piano accompaniment. The vocal line has the lyrics "ton sou - ven -" and continues with "- nir." The piano accompaniment features triplets and a dynamic marking of *p*. The tempo/mood is marked *Très-doux* and *dim.*

Example 5.20: “La Nuit,” mm. 85-92

For the final song in the cycle, Rita Strohl did not choose to set the final poem of Bilitis’ youth, “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” which illustrates Bilitis’ weary journey away from her homeland after she leaves Lykas. Instead, the final song in *Bilitis* is “Berceuse,” a lullaby that Bilitis sings to the daughter she bore to Lykas. The fact that Bilitis and Lykas’ physical relationship resulted in the birth of a daughter is easily overlooked as the child is rarely mentioned. In “Bucoliques en Pamphylie,” this is the only instance in which Bilitis mentions her child, and after she leaves both Lykas and their daughter behind, she is only mentioned once more in the poem “La Métamorphose” (“Metamorphosis”) in which Bilitis laments, “oh

Pannychis, my child, in what hands have I left you? How, oh unhappy one, have I abandoned you?”¹⁵

Table 5.7 Translation of “Berceuse”

Berceuse	Lullaby
Dors : j’ai demandé à Sardes tes jouets, et tes vêtements à Babylone. Dors, tu es fille de Bilitis et d’un roi du soleil levant.	Sleep: I asked in Sardis for your toys, and your clothes in Babylon. Sleep, you are the daughter of Bilitis and a king of the rising sun.
Les bois, ce sont les palais qu’on bâtit pour toi seule et que je t’ai donnés. Les troncs des pins, ce sont les colonnes ; les hautes branches, ce sont les voûtes.	The woods, they are the palaces that we built for you alone and that I gave to you. The trunks of the pines, they are the columns; the high branches, they are the vaults.
Dors. Pour qu’il ne t’éveille pas, je vendrais le soleil à la mer. Le vent des ailes de la colombe est moins léger que ton haleine.	Sleep. So that it will not wake you, I will sell the sun to the sea. The wind of the wings of the dove is lighter than your breath.
Fille de moi, chair de ma chair, tu diras quand tu ouvriras les yeux, si tu veux la plaine ou la ville ou la montagne ou la lune, ou le cortège blanc des dieux.	Daughter of mine, flesh of my flesh, you will say when you open your eyes, if you want the plain or the village or the mountain or the moon, or the white procession of the gods.

While the focus of each of the previous songs in the cycle has been centered on Lykas, Strohl’s choice to end her cycle with a lullaby to their daughter distances her from Lykas, focusing solely on the relationship between mother and daughter that will soon be severed. The musical setting of this song—which is a standard lullaby with a triple meter, rocking ostinato, soft dynamics, and slow tempo—is also far removed from the earlier songs in the cycle, separating Bilitis further from her earlier memories with the child’s father. The key of D \flat major

¹⁵ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis, suivi de Pervigilium Mortis, avec divers textes inédits*, edited and annotated by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 97. (« Ô Pannychis, mon enfant, en quelles main t’ai-je laissée ? Comment, ô malheureuse, t’ai-je abandonnée ? »)

holds no other significant connections throughout the cycle, and additionally, there are no familiar motives that suggest recollections to earlier moments with Lykas. The text itself similarly avoids mentioning Lykas, only referring briefly to him as a nameless “king of the rising sun.” While the ending of “La Nuit” suggests the possibility of Bilitis leaving memories of Lykas in the past, this final song in the cycle reveals that she has at last turned away from her abusive lover. In addition, it also highlights the often-overlooked relationship between mother and daughter that will unfortunately be forgotten in the remainder of Bilitis’ story.

As explored in this chapter, Rita Strohl’s *Bilitis* is not only a musical tale of the relationship between Bilitis and her first lover Lykas, but it also highlights important issues of sexual violence that are overlooked in the much more well-known setting of the same poetry by Claude Debussy. In her setting, Strohl not only illustrates the act of sexual violence that takes place, but also explores the resulting trauma on Bilitis’ character, acknowledging that the sexual violence Bilitis faces is an unfortunate yet important moment in the young protagonist’s development that should not be treated lightly or forgotten. This emphasis on violence towards women and the trauma it inflicts on the protagonist adds a feminist perspective to Louÿs’ narrative, especially given that *Les Chansons de Bilitis* has been criticized for its inclusion of sexual assault as a mere sexual fantasy.

Additionally, Rita Strohl’s *Bilitis* highlights the prevalence of sexual violence in literature and the resulting inclusion of violence against women in musical narratives. This is particularly ubiquitous in opera, a fact that has been observed and explored by feminist scholars, with notable works on the subject including the seminal work by Catherine Clément, *Opera; or the Undoing of Women*,¹⁶ and the various writings of Susan McClary. In light of the shifting discussions of

¹⁶ Catherine Clément, *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*, translated by Betsy Wing (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

sexual violence in the late 2010's, there has been more recent scholarship on the subject, such as the colloquy published in the *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, entitled "Sexual Violence in Opera: Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Production as Resistance,"¹⁷ or Margaret Cormier's very recent book on the subject, *Rape at the Opera: Staging Sexual Violence*.¹⁸ While these existing conversations on sexual violence in music bring awareness to the ways in which violence against women is represented in music, these discussions focus predominately on opera and often center on issues regarding staging or libretti. Like many operatic stories, Strohl's *Bilitis* depicts a tragic female figure subjected to male violence, though her depiction of sexual violence is expressed merely through the medium of song. Considering the lack of scholarship on sexual violence in the more intimate genre of song, the analysis of *Bilitis* in this chapter is an example of how this critical lens can be employed beyond opera.

While Rita Strohl's song cycle succinctly illustrates Bilitis' first relationship and the theme of sexual violence found therein, the narrative expressed throughout the work captures only one aspect of Bilitis' story. After the protagonist leaves Lykas, their child, and Pamphylia behind, she ventures to Lesbos where she encounters a new sexual culture that glorifies the love between women. There, Bilitis takes on a new lover, a woman named Mnasidika. While Strohl and Debussy avoid the themes of homoeroticism that *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is predominately known for through their focus on Bilitis' initial heterosexual relationship, composer Georges Dandelot emphasizes lesbianism in his *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*, a collection of four songs that are centered entirely on Bilitis' relationship with Mnasidika. The following chapter will explore Dandelot's Bilitis songs by focusing especially on his depiction of the erotic nature of Bilitis and

¹⁷ Susan Cusick, Monica A. Hershberger, et. al., "Sexual Violence in Opera: Scholarship, Pedagogy, and Production as Resistance," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 71, 1 (2018).

¹⁸ Margaret Cormier, *Rape at the Opera: Staging Sexual Violence* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2024).

Mnasidika's relationship and the ways in which musical eroticism in *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* highlights the problematic representation of lesbians in Louÿs' poetry.

CHAPTER 6

LESBIAN LOVE AND MUSICAL EROTICISM IN GEORGES DANDELLOT'S *QUATRE CHANSONS DE BILITIS*

While *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is little known today, those who do speak on the work often center on its inclusion of lesbianism. From the overt depiction of lesbian relationships in “Élégies à Mytilène,” Bilitis’ alleged connections with Sappho, and the poetry collection’s subsequent associations with lesbian groups such as The Daughters of Bilitis, the name Bilitis has become synonymous with lesbianism. Despite this, as we’ve explored in previous chapters, the most well-known musical interpretation of the poems, Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, is centered on Bilitis’ heterosexual relationship with Lykas; in fact, many of the composers to have written songs based on Louÿs’ text shied away from poems in the second part of Bilitis’ story, and almost none set any of the myriad of poems that explicitly depict Bilitis and Mnasidika’s physical relationship.¹ This fact is precisely what makes Georges Dandelot’s *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* unique as his four songs not only focus on the relationship between Bilitis and Mnasidika, but they also depict explicit moments of physical intimacy between the two women.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Georges Dandelot’s output of Bilitis songs includes fifteen songs altogether that are published in three collections: *Six chansons de Bilitis* (1929), *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* (1931), and *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* (1933). The earliest collection draws similarities to the song cycles of Debussy and Strohl as it centers solely on events in “Bucoliques

¹ See Appendix for a list of vocal works based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis*.

en Pamphylie;” however, while the collection captures important moments in the relationship between Bilitis and Lykas through the setting of “Le Sommeil interrompu” and “La Nuit,” it mostly includes poems unrelated to Lykas, such as poems that capture the innocence of Bilitis’ childhood (“Le Passant,” “Les Contes,” and “Les Petites enfants”) and the final lullaby to her daughter before leaving Pamphylia behind (“Berceuse”). Given the collection of seemingly disparate themes and the fact that the songs are not ordered chronologically, Dandelot’s *Six chansons de Bilitis* seem less of a musical narrative and more of a collection of vignettes depicting moments from Bilitis’ youth.² The *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* similarly does not seem to follow a narrative as it includes not only glimpses of Bilitis’ youthful innocence (“Le Réveil” and “La Quenouille”), but also three scenes from her life as a courtesan (“Conversation,” “Chanson,” and “Pluie au matin”).

In contrast to his earliest collections of Bilitis songs, Dandelot’s *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* is not only a chronological setting of four poems from “Élégies à Mytilène,” but it is also centered around a particular theme: Bilitis’ relationship with Mnasidika. Dandelot’s collection focuses especially on the intimate moments between the two women, and the first three songs become increasingly erotic. In “La Dormeuse” (“The Sleeper”), Bilitis watches Mnasidika as she sleeps, taking note of her soft breaths and the sweat that beads on her skin. Subsequently, in “Le Baiser” (“The Kiss”), Bilitis teases Mnasidika with the promise of physical pleasure. Their intimacy then moves beyond mere promises of kisses in “L’Étreinte éperdue” (“Mad Embrace”)

² According to Federico Lazzaro, a connecting thread in this collection of songs is the relationship between a mother and daughter. This can be found in the depictions of Bilitis’ relationship with her own mother, her relationship with her daughter, and her relationship to the children in her village. This theme also draws parallels to the ways in which Bilitis and Mnasidika’s romantic relationship often takes on a mother/daughter dynamic (see chapter 3). Federico Lazzaro, “Bilitis après Debussy. Hommage, influence, prise de distance?” *Revue musicale OICRM* 2, 1 (2014): 159-190.

as Bilitis commands Mnasidika, “étreins-moi comme je t’étreins” (“embrace me as I embrace you”).

As evident from the poetic choices, a prominent theme in Dandelot’s setting is the eroticism that prevails throughout *Les Chansons de Bilitis* and, especially, the poems in “Élégies à Mytilène” that center on Bilitis’ relationship with Mnasidika. This chapter will explore the topic of musical eroticism and the various compositional methods that Dandelot utilizes to emphasize and illustrate eroticism in *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*, which include harmonic ambiguity to suspend momentum and emphasize sensuality, hypnotic motifs that allude to seduction, and the musical illustration of the dichotomy between pleasure and pain. Considering that the four-song setting centers around a lesbian relationship, I will also discuss lesbian representation in the work, showing that while Dandelot’s negation of the traditional gendered and heteronormative syntax of erotic music suggests a queer narrative, his use of the previously listed techniques of musical eroticism highlights problematic aspects of Louÿs’ depiction of lesbians in his poems. In the conclusion to this chapter, I will also offer an analysis of the final song, “Scène” (“Scene”), which further expands on the characterization of lesbians in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* through its emphasis on dialogue and negation of overt eroticism.

Defining Musical Eroticism: Tradition and Disruption

Since the establishment of tonality, the concepts of tension and resolution have been linked to the musical illustration of desire. Musical tension is created through harmonic prolongation, dissonance, and the need for resolution while the release of that tension is fulfilled through harmonic resolution, and these concepts of tension and release correlate with the human experience of longing or desire and the eventual fulfillment of that desire. As Susan McClary

elaborates in the introduction to *Feminine Endings*, “tonality itself—with its process of instilling expectations and subsequently withholding promised fulfillment until climax—is the principal musical means during the period from 1600 to 1900 for arousing and channeling desire.”³

McClary draws attention in particular to the use of this erotic syntax in the music of German composers, saying “tonal compositions ranging from Bach organ fugues to Brahms symphonies whip up torrents of libidinal energy that are variously thwarted or permitted to gush,” and she has also famously critiqued the withholding of the cadence before the recapitulation in first movement of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony as representative of male sexual aggression, calling it “one of the most horrifyingly violent episodes in the history of music.”⁴

Given this German tradition of withholding and fulfilling desire through harmonic progression as described by McClary, it is no wonder then that the concept of musical eroticism is often discussed in the context of German composer Richard Wagner. The operas of Wagner are known for their exploitation of erotic tension through the withholding of resolution, which is perhaps most famously seen in *Tristan und Isolde*. This erotic tension is first felt in the work’s opening measure with the “Tristan Chord,” which Stephen Downes, among others, has called “the most frequently nominated representative of erotically charged late nineteenth-century chromatic music;” in fact, this tension is prolonged throughout the entire opera until the climax of Isolde’s *Liebtestod*.⁵

In the wake of Wagnerian eroticism, a new style of musical eroticism emerged in French music of the *fin-de-siècle*, particularly through the work of Claude Debussy. Debussy’s unique,

³ Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1991), 12.

⁴ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 128.

⁵ Stephen Downes, “Names, Chords, and the ‘Pale Princess’ in Debussy’s Musical Language of Love,” in *The Muse as Eros: Music, Erotic Fantasy and Male Creativity in the Romantic and Modern Imagination*, 168-193 (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2006), 174.

“Impressionistic” style is characterized by his rejection of traditional harmonic structure in favor of sound and color, a sentiment that is succinctly expressed in his often-quoted phrase, “there is no theory. You merely have to listen. Pleasure is the law.”⁶ Debussy’s emphasis on the sense of sound draws parallels to the Symbolist writers, who emphasized the senses through the sounds of the words themselves rather than their syntax and meaning. In “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” Julie McQuinn connects Debussy’s music to the writing of Mallarmé:

Mallarmé’s disruption of syntax disables the usual modes of relating to words, forcing the reader or listener to focus on other aspects—on the sounds themselves, to flounder a little in the uncoded, physical world of the senses. Debussy is much like Mallarmé in this way; he disrupts the usual musical syntax.⁷

Elaborating on the disruption of the codes of musical eroticism based on tension and release, McQuinn posits that “it is the rejection of these codes that enables [Debussy’s] own form of eroticism, an eroticism of uncertainty, of ambiguity, of excitement, of freedom.”⁸ While this style of musical eroticism is not only free of adherence to the rules of tension and release, it also negates the gendered and heterosexual contexts in which traditional modes of musical eroticism are situated. For instance, gendered language is often used to describe tension and release, such as cadences ending on a strong beat being described as “masculine” while cadences that fall on weak beat are described as “feminine.”⁹ In addition, the adherence to tonal structures in the Schenkerian model of musical analysis, which is centered on the concepts of prolongation and resolution, is entrenched in a heterosexual, reproductive mindset. For instance, Schenker often

⁶ This quote derives from a conversation had between Debussy and his former teacher Ernest Giraud that was transcribed by Maurice Emmanuel. A translation of the conversation can be found in Edward Lockspeiser, *Debussy: His Life and Mind*, volume I (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1962), 204-208.

⁷ Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, 117-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 122.

⁸ McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” 122.

⁹ McClary, *Feminine Endings*, 9.

emphasizes the “biological aspect of music” and likens musical movement to “the procreative urge of a living being.”¹⁰

Given the rejection of the established syntax of musical eroticism in the music of Claude Debussy, it can be asserted that his erotic music unearths possibilities for the queering of musical eroticism. In revisiting McQuinn’s explanation of Debussy’s style of musical eroticism as “an eroticism of uncertainty, of ambiguity, of excitement, of freedom,” her description draws similarities to notable queer studies scholar Eve Sedgwick’s defining of “queer” as “the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically.”¹¹ Through this lens, the possibilities and ambiguities of the erotic music of Debussy and other French composers of the late-19th and early-20th centuries thus allow for new modes of expressing gender and sexuality as they are not bound to the heteronormative and gendered codes of traditional musical eroticism.¹²

Given that Georges Dandelot’s *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* leans heavily into the ambiguities of the erotic musical language of his precursors,¹³ it would appear to be an especially fitting example of the queering of musical eroticism considering its depiction of a lesbian

¹⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*, 12.

¹¹ Eve Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 7.

¹² Early scholarship on the queering of music and musical eroticism can be found in Phillip Brett, Gary Thomas, and Elizabeth Wood, eds., *Queering the Pitch: The New Gay and Lesbian Musicology* (New York: Routledge, 1994). For recent publication on the subject, see Gavin S. K. Lee, ed., *Queer Ear: Remaking Music Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

¹³ According to Lazzaro, Dandelot’s *Bilitis* songs show direct and obvious influence from Debussy’s song cycle to the point that they can be considered a “translation” of Debussy’s interpretation. Lazzaro describes this by saying, “at the origin of the story of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, Pierre Louÿs pretended to be the translator of an imaginary poetess; 20 years later, Georges Dandelot, in signing a fake Debussy, would continue this game of mirrors where real models, invented models, personal creation, exploitation and jokes merge and confuse us.” Lazzaro, “*Bilitis après Debussy*,” 186. (« à l’origine de l’histoire des *Chansons de Bilitis*, Pierre Louÿs se prétendait le traducteur d’une imaginaire poétesse ; 20 ans après, Georges Dandelot, en signant du faux Debussy, poursuivrait ce jeu de miroirs où modèles réels, modèles inventés, création personnelle, exploitation et blagues se confondent et nous confondent »)

relationship. However, a closer analysis of the musical techniques used to illustrate the intimate moments between Bilitis and Mnasidika highlights problematic aspects of lesbian representation in Louÿs' poems. For instance, in "La Dormeuse," the use of lush extended harmonies certainly negates the traditional, heterosexual syntax of musical eroticism, but it also signifies the stillness of the moment in which Bilitis fetishizes Mnasidika's sleeping body; this moment not only foreshadows Bilitis' obsession with Mnasidika that will become increasingly dangerous in later songs, but it also reflects the sense of voyeurism that is inherent to the inclusion of lesbianism in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*.

Fetishization of the Sleeping Woman in "La Dormeuse"

"La Dormeuse," the opening song of Dandelot's *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*, is a setting of a scene from "Élégies à Mytilène" in which Bilitis watches her lover Mnasidika sleep. At this point in the poetry collection's narrative, Bilitis and Mnasidika have an established relationship, and "La Dormeuse" occurs in the midst of the numerous depictions of their moments of intimacy. For instance, in the preceding poem, "Pénombre" ("Penumbra"), Bilitis alludes to a moment with Mnasidika under the sheets, saying "nothing in the world, not even the lamp, had seen us that night;"¹⁴ in the following poem, "Le Baiser," Bilitis explicitly details how she will please Mnasidika with her kisses. While the moment in "La Dormeuse" in which Bilitis watches a sleeping Mnasidika is not inherently erotic, its placement between these two moments of intimacy suggests a moment of repose from their love-making; in addition, Bilitis' description of

¹⁴ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis, suivi de Pervigilium Mortis, avec divers textes inédits*, edited and annotated by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 105. (« Rien au monde, pas même la lampe, ne nous a vues cette nuit-là »)

Mnasidika is undeniably sexual, drawing attention to her undone hair, the sweat on her skin, and her feverish cheeks that seem to allude to the exhaustion of their previous intimacy.

Table 6.1 Translation of “La Dormeuse”

La Dormeuse	The Sleeper
Elle dort dans ses cheveux défaits, les mains mêlées derrière la nuque. Rêve-t-elle ? Sa bouche est ouverte ; elle respire doucement.	She sleeps with her hair undone, entwined hands behind her neck. Does she dream? Her mouth is open; she breathes softly.
Avec un peu de cygne blanc, j’essuie, mais sans l’éveiller, la sueur de ses bras la fièvre de ses joues. Ses paupières fermées sont deux fleurs bleues.	With a bit of white down, I wipe, without waking her, the sweat from her arms, the fever from her cheeks. Her closed eyelids are two blue flowers.
[Tout doucement je vais me lever ; j’irai puiser l’eau, traire la vache et demander du feu aux voisins. Je veux être frisée et vêtue quand elle ouvrira les yeux.]	[Slowly I will get up; I will go to draw water, milk the cow and ask the neighbors for a light. I want to be curled and dressed when she opens her eyes.]
Sommeil, demeure encore longtemps entre ses beaux cils recourbés et continue la nuit heureuse par un songe de bon augure.	Sleep, remain for a long time between those beautiful, curved eyelashes, and carry on the beautiful night with a dream of good omen.

As Bilitis indulges in the beauty of her sleeping lover, Dandelot’s musical setting, which consists of a languid, seemingly intoxicated vocal line floating above thickly textured chords, mimics this dreamy indulgence. In the first moments of the song, the listener is introduced to Dandelot’s lush harmonic language as, in the first three measures, the harmony oscillates between an Em9 chord followed by a C13(b9) (Example 6.1). In measure 2, the vocal line emerges in the midst of the languorous harmonies, and on the final word of the phrase, “nuque” (“neck”), the harmony shifts away from the stillness of the moment to a Bm9(#11) chord, drawing attention to Mnasidika’s neck. As Bilitis contemplates the subject of Mnasidika’s dreams, asking “rêve-t-elle” (“what does she dream?”), the harmony shifts between Fm(M7) and

Db9(#11) until creeping upward to F#m(M7) on the image of Mnasidika’s open mouth. In measure 7, the moment stills again in relation to Mnasidika’s soft exhalations as the harmony returns to a similar progression from the song’s opening, though now oscillating between Gm9 and Eb13(b9).

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for measures 1-4. The tempo is marked 'Assez lent' with a quarter note equal to 63. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The piano part features complex, extended harmonies. The lyrics are: 'El-le dort dans ses che-veux dé-faits, les mains mê-lées der-rière la'. The second system shows measures 5-8. The lyrics are: 'nu-que Rê-ve-t'elle? Sa bouche est ou-ver-te; el-le res-pi-redou-ce-ment...'. The piano accompaniment continues with similar complex harmonies.

Example 6.1: “La Dormeuse,” mm. 1-8

Dandelot’s creation of harmonic ambiguity through extended harmonies that cannot be assigned to a single key or chord progression within a key places the listener in moments of sensuous sound bound only by lush sonorities. As mentioned earlier, Dandelot’s use of harmonic ambiguity to denote sensuality and eroticism is a technique that draws comparisons to his precursors, particularly Claude Debussy. In addition to the previously discussed explorations of

Debussy's erotic music by Julie McQuinn, Stephen Downes further explores the topic in "Names, Chords, and the 'Pale Princess' in Debussy's Musical Language of Love" by listing and defining specific compositional devices with which Debussy musically illustrates eroticism.

According to Downes, these techniques include:

the evocation of the flute of Eros, the arabesque, unfoldings of the sensuously privileged, fetishized moment, the mysteriously unknowable beauty of seductive dissonance, and secret, unnamable figures of inspiration.¹⁵

One of the most striking and perplexing elements listed here is that of the "fetishized moment." According to Downes, these moments are often created through the use of a "fetishized sound object," a sonic event that, "depending on context and treatment, may intensify the erotic drive or momentarily suspend momentum in ambiguous sensuous sound."¹⁶ In the music of Debussy, the most prominent of these sound objects is the ninth chord, which Debussy himself referred to as the "naughty ninth,"¹⁷ and in his own setting of the songs of Bilitis, subtle sensuality is initially established with the opening gesture of Lykas' flute sounding "over the seductive dissonant sound of a ninth chord."¹⁸ Dandelot's "La Dormeuse" opens with a sensuous minor ninth, and the oscillation between Em9 and C13(b9) further suspends momentum, lingering in the sensuality of the moment while Bilitis passively observes and fetishizes her sleeping lover. The suspension of momentum is not only emphasized through the sensual stasis of Dandelot's musical language, but it is also highlighted through the omission of

¹⁵ Downes, "Debussy's Musical Language of Love," 173. Many of these attributes catalogued by Downes can be found in Debussy's own musical setting of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*. For instance, the character of Bilitis herself in the context of the ambiguity of Debussy's poetic choices is a figure of mysterious feminine sensuality, a "secret, unnamable figure of inspiration" common to Debussy's musical settings, e.g., *Mélisande* and "la fille aux cheveux de lin." One of the most recognizable features of Debussy's *Trois chansons* is its initial evocation of the flute in its opening arabesque, and throughout all the songs, sensuality is expressed sonically through "seductive dissonance" and harmonic ambiguity.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

¹⁷ Quoted and translated in McQuinn, "Exploring the Erotic in Debussy's Music," 122.

¹⁸ Downes, "Debussy's Musical Language of Love," 169.

the third verse of Louÿs' poem. By removing the verse in which Bilitis leaves the scene to fetch water and dress herself, Bilitis remains in her moment of gazing at the visual image of Mnasidika's sleeping form.

While Bilitis remains a mostly passive observer throughout the song, indulging in the erotic image of her sleeping lover, in the second verse, Bilitis becomes an active participant in the scene as she gently trails the sweat of Mnasidika's body with a feather. In measure 10, a countermelody in the piano emerges, breaking the stasis of the scene as Bilitis reaches out to touch Mnasidika (Example 6.2). The countermelody itself is seductive, creating a circular motion in its repetition that mirrors the soft swirls of the feather on Mnasidika's skin. In measure 16, the countermelody ceases, and we return to Bilitis' passive observation as she compares Mnasidika's sleepy eyelids to "two blue flowers." Here, the harmonic rhythm slows, and the progression of close-position dominant 9(#11) chords seductively descend by a half step in each iteration (Example 6.3). In measure 20, the same material from the song's opening measures returns, once again creating the stillness of the moment as Bilitis merely observes. As the song fades away on the final oscillation between Em9 and C13(b9), we are left suspended in the fetishized moment without resolution as Bilitis silently watches Mnasidika, wishing for sleep to "remain for a longtime between those beautiful, curved eyelashes."

Un peu de mouvt. *mp*

A-vec un peu de cy-gne

mp

Example 6.2: “La Dormeuse,” mm. 10-11

p

Ses pau-piè-res fer - mées sont deux fleurs bleues. Som

I Tempo *très doux*

pp

Example 6.3: “La Dormeuse,” mm. 16-20

The description of these moments of suspended momentum in “La Dormeuse” as *fetishized* moments is particularly fitting given the poetic context. In this still and intimate moment, Bilitis becomes a voyeur, watching Mnasidika without her knowledge and making her an erotic object through the sexualization of her body. This fetishization of a sleeping woman is not unique to *Les Chansons de Bilitis*: it is, in fact, a common motif in Western literature and art. Depicted in fairy tales, mythological stories, literature, and numerous visual artworks, the passive position of the sleeping woman allows the observer to freely objectify and fetishize the

female body. Sandrine Aragon, who succinctly summarizes the many instances of exploiting sleeping women in art, literature, and real life, has commented on the prevalence of the motif in

French literature:

Penetrating the intimacy of feminine spaces is at the heart of many masculine fantasies in literature of the 17th and 18th centuries. In the works of Crébillon, Prévost, or Marivaux, a number of heroes dream of seeing without being seen and of a double sacrilege: to penetrate the bedroom, the place of intimacy for the woman, then into the body absorbed by sleep. The vulnerability and “absorption” of the sleeping body fascinate the voyeur, desirous of interfering in this completeness, without worrying about the reaction of the objectified woman.¹⁹

In the case of “La Dormeuse,” the exploitation of Mnasidika’s vulnerability is not perpetrated by man, but rather by her female lover. However, as evident from the teasing of the work’s male readers in “Pénombre,” the poem that directly precedes “La Dormeuse,” Bilitis’ voyeurism toward Mnasidika mirrors Louÿs’ own fetishization of lesbians and the way in which he and his intended male audience penetrate the intimate space of a lesbian relationship.

Hypnotic Seduction in “Le Baiser”

Through Dandelot’s musical setting of “La Dormeuse,” the listener is suspended in the stillness of lush harmonies, embodying the voyeurism of Bilitis’ quiet observation and fetishization of her sleeping lover. While Bilitis remains a mostly passive observer, in the following song, “Le Baiser,” the sexual relationship between the two women moves from mere sexualization to active seduction. In the poem, Bilitis expresses her ardent desire for Mnasidika

¹⁹ Sandrine Aragon, “Notre littérature, avec ses « belles endormies », fait-elle l’apologie du viol ?” *The Conversation*, 13 October 2024 (Accessed 30 November 2024). (« Pénétrer dans l’intimité des espaces féminins est au cœur de bien des fantasmes masculins dans la littérature du XVIIe comme du XVIIIe. Dans les œuvres de Crébillon, Prévost ou Marivaux, nombre de héros rêvent de voir sans être vus et d’un double sacrilège : pénétrer dans la chambre, lieu de l’intimité de la femme, puis dans le corps absorbé par le sommeil. La vulnérabilité comme « l’absorbement » du corps dormant fascinent le voyeur, désireux de s’immiscer dans cette complétude, sans se soucier de la réaction de la femme objectifiée »)

while promising that she will physically pleasure her. Speaking in the future tense, Bilitis explicitly describes to Mnasidika the ways in which she will kiss her.

Table 6.2 Translation of “Le Baiser”

Le Baiser	The Kiss
<p>Je baiserais d’un bout à l’autre les longues ailes noires de ta nuque, ô doux oiseau, colombe prise, dont le cœur bondit sous ma main.</p>	<p>I will kiss from one end to the other the long black wings of your neck, o sweet bird, caught dove, whose heart leaps under my hand!</p>
<p>Je prendrai ta bouche dans ma bouche comme un enfant prend le sein de sa mère. Frissonne ! ... car le baiser pénètre profondément et suffirait à l’amour.</p>	<p>I will take your mouth in my mouth like a child takes its mother’s breast. Shiver! For the kiss penetrates profoundly and would suffice for love.</p>
<p>Je promènerai ma langue légère sur tes bras, autour de ton cou, et je ferai tourner sur tes côtes chatouilleuses la caresse étirante des ongles.</p>	<p>I will trail my light tongue on your arms, around your neck, and I will spin on your ticklish ribs the caress of my nails.</p>
<p>Écoute bruire en ton oreille toute la rumeur de la mer... Mnasidika ! ton regard me fait mal. J’enfermerai dans mon baiser tes paupières brûlantes comme des lèvres.</p>	<p>Listen to the noise in your ear, all the noise of the sea... Mnasidika, your gaze makes me ill. I will lock with my kiss your eyelids which burn like lips.</p>

Like the first song, Dandelot’s harmonic language in “Le Baiser” is ambiguous with respect to tonality. In the opening measure, the oscillation between G and C in the bass line appears to create a dominant—tonic movement, which is exacerbated by the dominant quality of the opening G7 chord in the left hand (Example 6.4). However, G7 moves instead to an F minor chord in first inversion, thwarting the dominant pull toward resolution. A similar movement occurs in the first two beats of measure 2 as the harmony shifts from Bb7 to Ab in first inversion, and the rest of the measure follows a progression of three consecutive dominant 7 chords: Bb7,

D \flat 7, and E7. This movement returns to the G \flat 7 in measure 3, continuing the cycle of ambiguous non-resolution.

Modéré ♩ = 84

The musical score consists of two systems. The first system is in common time (C) and contains two measures. The second system is in 2/4 time and contains two measures. The piano part in both systems features a consistent sixteenth-note accompaniment in the left hand. The right hand plays arpeggiated chords. In the second system, the right hand includes the instruction '(cédez à peine)'.

Example 6.4: “Le Baiser,” 1-2

Despite the harmonic ambiguity, the mood created in “Le Baiser” is quite different from the stillness of “La Dormeuse,” and this is predominantly due to the constant quick-moving passages in the accompaniment. The repeating sixteenth-note patterns in the piano, as shown in Example 6.4, continue throughout the duration of the piece, and while the left hand outlines arpeggiated chords, the right hand provides additional dissonant harmonies and a melodic figure whose constant fluctuations in pitch create a circular or wavelike motion that persists throughout

the piece. When the voice emerges in measure 3, the swelling right hand and vocal line move together in this dizzying motion (Example 6.5).

The image displays a musical score for the piece "Le Baiser" by Dandelot, specifically measures 3 through 6. The score is presented in two systems. The first system includes a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and features a melodic line with a descending whole-step passage. The piano accompaniment consists of a right hand with a constant swell and a left hand with a steady eighth-note pattern. The second system continues the vocal line and piano accompaniment, marked with a crescendo (*cresc.*). The lyrics are: "Je bai - se - rai d'un bout à l'au - tres lon-gues ai-les noi - res de ta nuque, ô doux oi - seau, co - lom - be pri - se, dont le coeur_ bon".

Example 6.5: “Le Baiser,” 3-6

Combined with the harmonic ambiguity, the dizzying effect created by the constant swell of the right hand of the piano and the vocal melody invoke a sense of hypnosis, which corresponds with Bilitis’ role as seducer. The hypnotic effect of Dandelot’s musical setting pairs well with how Bilitis entices Mnasidika with the promise of pleasure, beckoning her to succumb to “all the noise of the sea.” In addition, the melody, which often takes on a whole-tone quality with its descending whole-step passages, transports the scene into a dreamlike illusion, mimicking the intoxicated state of being under hypnosis.

While the melody oftentimes takes on a whole-tone character that creates a dreamlike atmosphere, in measure 15, the dream soundscape becomes more apparent as both hands of the piano shift an octave into a higher, lighter register, and the melody takes on a true whole-tone quality that utilizes the WT0 collection (Example 6.6). In addition, the piano accompaniment, with the exception of a G \sharp and E \flat placed on inconspicuous beats in the left-hand, similarly utilizes the pitches of WT0. The shift into this dream state takes place between the second and third verses, suggesting the “profound penetration” of the kiss that has transported the two women into the depths of pleasure. Bilitis continues her teasing as the vocal line emerges in measure 16, expressing how she will trail her tongue along Mnasidika’s arms. At the mention of the physical act of Bilitis tongue moving to Mnasidika’s neck, the dream world is left behind as we are thrust back into Bilitis’ act of seduction. On the downbeat of measure 18 (the word “cou” [“neck”]), Bilitis’ passion and seduction become more intense, which is expressed through the quickening rhythm of the vocal line and the four-note motive whose repetitive motion evokes the physical act of Bilitis’ nails “spinning” on Mnasidika’s skin.

Je pro - mè - ne - rai ma lan - guelé -

-gè - re sur tes bras, au - tour de ton cou, et je fe - rai tour - ner sur tes cô - tes cha - touil -

- leu - ses la - res - seé - ti - ran - te des on - gles.

Example 6.6: “Le Baiser,” 15-20

At the beginning of the song’s final verse, the hypnotic effect of the song’s opening verse returns. As Bilitis calls out to Mnasidika, the ascent in the vocal line reflects the spilling out of her passion, and the dizzying effect of the musical setting additionally coincides with Bilitis’ own “illness” under Mnasidika’s gaze (a point that will be expanded on further in the discussion of “L’Étreinte éperdue”). In the final phrase of the vocal line, the melody descends in whole tone

increments, as though drunkenly falling into the state of hypnosis. The piano accompaniment then fades away into the upper range of the instrument, lingering finally on a mystifying dissonance.

Throughout “Le Baiser,” the winding melodic passages and hazy, dissonant atmosphere emphasize Bilitis’ seduction of Mnasidika. In a mirror of how Lykas actively attempts to seduce Bilitis through his explicit description of his erotic dream in “La Chevelure,” Mnasidika has now become the “caught dove” who is subject to Bilitis’ explicit descriptions of hypothetical physical intimacy. Combined with Bilitis’ role of voyeur in “La Dormeuse,” the first two songs in Dandelot’s setting reveal a power imbalance between the two women, and this is exacerbated in “L’Étreinte éperdue” as Bilitis’ desire for her lover becomes all-consuming.

Pleasure, Pain, and “Mad” Love in “L’Étreinte éperdue”

If previously, Bilitis seduced Mnasidika by teasing her with the promise of pleasure in “Le Baiser,” in the following song, “L’Étreinte éperdue,” pleasure is finally realized. Of the four poems set by Dandelot, “L’Étreinte éperdue” contains the most blatant descriptions of a sexual act. In translating Louÿs’ poem to music, Dandelot omitted verses 2 and 4, most likely due to their explicit nature. The poem incorporates the imperative voice through Bilitis’ commands to Mnasidika while also describing their lovemaking in the present tense.

Table 6.3 Translation of “L’Étreinte éperdue”

<p>L’Étreinte éperdue</p> <p>Aime-moi, non pas avec des sourires, des flûtes ou des fleurs tressées, mais avec ton cœur et tes larmes, comme je t’aime avec ma poitrine et mes gémissements.</p>	<p>Mad Embrace</p> <p>Love me, not with your smiles, not with flutes or your braided flowers, but with your heart and your tears, like the way I love you with my bosom and my sobs.</p>
--	--

<p>[Quand tes seins s’alternent à mes seins, quand je sens ta vie contre ma vie, quand tes genoux se dressent derrière moi, alors ma bouche haletante ne sait même plus joindre la tienne]</p> <p>Étreins-moi comme je t’étreins ! Vois, la lampe vient de mourir, nous roulons dans la nuit ; mais je presse ton corps mouvant et j’entends ta plainte perpétuelle...</p> <p>[Gémis ! gémis ! gémis ! ô femme ! Éros nous traîne dans la douleur. Tu souffrirais moins sur ce lit pour mettre un enfant au monde que pour accoucher de ton amour.]</p>	<p>[When your breasts alternate with my breasts, when I feel your life against my life, when your knees are put behind me, thus my panting mouth can no longer join yours.]</p> <p>Embrace me as I embrace you! Look, the lamp has died, we roll around in the night; but I press your moving body and I hear your perpetual moan.</p> <p>[Groan! groan! groan! O woman! Eros drags us in pain. You would suffer less on the bed in bringing an infant into the world than to give birth to your love.]</p>
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This poem is an intense moment of sexual physicality between Bilitis and Mnasidika, though an additional aspect of their relationship is highlighted: the correlation between sexual pleasure and pain. In the first verse, Bilitis commands Mnasidika to love her to the point of tears, and she acknowledges that her own method of loving Mnasidika is “with [her] bosom and [her] sobs.” This correlating of pleasure and pain is perhaps most obvious in the final verse of the poem, which is not represented in Dandelot’s setting, wherein Bilitis commands Mnasidika to “groan” in the throes of their passion as a reflection of how “Eros drags [them] in pain.” Strangely, Bilitis then compares Mnasidika’s “suffering” through sex to the pains of giving birth, acknowledging that her sexual suffering will be even more intense.

The equating of the passions of love and pain relates to the theme of “mad” love that lies at the heart of Bilitis’ relationship with Mnasidika. In the poems set by Dandelot, this theme is not only expressed in *L’Étreinte éperdue*,” but also in “*Le Baiser*,” when Bilitis describes Mnasidika’s gaze as making her “ill.” The intensity of love to the point of sickness is a recurrent theme in other poems in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, such as “*L’Amour*” in which Bilitis lists the ways in which the thought of Mnasidika makes her physically sick; Bilitis’ symptoms include

trembling and weeping, dry throat, cold feet, and the pulsing of her temples. In the final verse of the poem, she equates Mnasidika's love to torture:

From all that she tells me I am hurt. Her love is torture and the passersby hear my moans... Alas! How can I call her Most-Loved?²⁰

While the correlation of pleasure and pain in these poems highlights the effect that Mnasidika has on Bilitis, this combination of passionate love with pain also extends to other aspects of Bilitis and Mnasidika's relationship. As Bilitis' early lovesickness suggests, her love for Mnasidika becomes increasingly obsessive until she becomes completely preoccupied with the thought of Mnasidika leaving her for another woman. When Mnasidika does eventually leave her, the pain of losing the one she loves causes Bilitis to experience a profound heartbreak that she will be unable to shake for the remainder of her life.

Before their relationship dissolves into Bilitis' ultimate pain, "L'Étreinte éperdue" provides a glimpse into the early stages of Bilitis' "mad" love for Mnasidika. In his musical setting, Dandelot highlights this paradox of sexual pleasure mixed with pain. The song begins with a 6-measure piano introduction (Example 6.7) that consists of a series of dominant #11 chords that immediately set up a "pained" tension through the dissonant harmonies. In the first two measures, the progression of chords ascends first by minor thirds, moving from G#11—Bb#11—Db#11, and lastly on E#11. Measure 3 shifts down a third to C, and the minor third ascent continues until the final major third movement from Bb#11 to D#11. While this movement by thirds and the extended harmonies fall in line with Dandelot's use of harmonic ambiguity, there is a prolonging of tension that is created in the right hand as the #11 of each

²⁰ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 113. (« De tout ce qu'elle me dit je me sens blessée. Son amour est une torture et les passants entendent mes plaintes... Hélas ! Comment puis-je l'appeler Bien-Aimée ? »)

chord resolves a half-step upward, which then leads into the following chord by ascending a whole step. This voice leading, combined with the dotted rhythm that creates forward movement, falls in line with the traditional concept of musical eroticism that relies on tension and release, and the anguish of prolonged tension and constant dissonance illustrates the anguish of prolonged pleasure without resolution.

Animé et chaleureux ♩ = 120

Example 6.7: “L’Étreinte éperdue,” mm. 1-6

In measures 6-7, the harmony shifts from D#11 to G#11, and the progression from the song’s beginning returns, continuing the cycle of erotic tension. Here, the vocal line emerges, and the forte dynamic and entrance on F5 underscore Bilitis’ command, “aime moi” (“love me”). Throughout the first verse, the dynamic remains *forte* which, combined with the dissonance and tension created through the piano accompaniment, heightens the intensity of Bilitis’ command. While the vocal line throughout the first verse is predominantly conjunct, it is punctuated by

leaps into the high register of the voice, such as the fifth leap to A5 on the word “mais,” which further increases the sense of Bilitis’ maddening passion.

Like the song’s piano introduction, the harmony of the first verse consists of a progression of dominant #11 chords moving in thirds, and while the dotted rhythm in the right hand of the piano persists, it is interspersed with a winding eighth-note pattern in the left hand that calls to mind the hypnotic effect of “Le Baiser” (Example 6.8). This section culminates in measure 16 as the vocal line ascends in another command: “étreins-moi comme je t’étreins!” (“embrace me as I embrace you!”). The tension of this command, to love with “sobs” and “tears,” is punctuated by the melody’s clashing with the harmony beneath it, and the high pitch and extended rhythm of the phrase emphasizes the intensity and desperation of the command (Example 6.9).

Example 6.8: “L’Étreinte éperdue,” mm. 9-10

Example 6.9: “L’Étreinte éperdue,” mm. 16-18

This moment is followed by a piano interlude that extends for six measures. Here, the winding figure from the previous section returns, and its consecutive archlike phrases are akin to relentless waves of passion. This is accompanied by the piano's descent into the low register of the bass clef, and the rumbling effect that is created and the performance marking *sourdement agité* (dully agitated) creates a sense of impending anguish. The rumbling continues with the reentrance of the vocal line, which enhances tension and longing through winding, chromatic movement. For the setting of the poem's final phrase (seen in Example 6.10), where Bilitis and Mnasidika meet physically in their frenzied embrace, the vocal line ascends an octave to Eb4, and each syllable is accented. The quarter-note triplets on the phrase "ton corps mouvant" ("your moving body") creates a syncopation that mimics the friction of bodies moving against one another in an embrace.

On the final words, "plainte perpétuelle" ("perpetual moan"), the vocal line devolves into a melismatic passage whose serpentine contour takes on the hypnotic quality mentioned before. The final syllable of "perpétuelle" is extended over four measures, moving melismatically in measures 38-39 before coming to rest on an F# in measure 40. With respect to the pitch content of the final chord, C#11, the final pitch of the vocal line is the #11. This pitch creates an undeniable tension not only in its dissonance, but also in its avoidance of resolving upward, a motion that has previously been a consistent feature of the harmonic movement in "L'Étreinte éperdue." This final moment is anguishing due to its dissonance and the unresolved sexual tension; it is thus both pleasure and pain that prolongs their "perpetual moan."

più f

mais je pres - se ton corps mou - vant

più f

et j'en - tends ta plain - - - te

dim. per - pé - tu - el *più p*

dim.

- le.

pp

Example 6.10 : “L’Étreinte éperdue,” 33-41

In “L’Étreinte éperdue,” the power dynamic that began to reveal itself in the previous songs comes to fruition as Bilitis’ seduction morphs into a maddening lust. Dandelot’s dissonant and unsettling musical setting heightens the sadistic pleasure that Bilitis seems to gain from Mnasidika’s suffering, and the clashing dissonance with the more traditional (heterosexual) methods of musical eroticism that emphasizes prolonged tension exacerbates the parallel to Lykas’ possessive lust established in “Le Baiser.” While Louÿs claimed to have created a lesbian idyll free of the negative stereotypes often placed upon lesbian characters in 19th-century literature, the violent language with which Bilitis describes her sexual relationship with Mnasidika highlights the faults in Louÿs’ lesbian representation as, in her possessive madness, Bilitis becomes not the ideal of gentle, feminine, lesbian love perpetuated by Louÿs, but the stereotypical “vicious” lesbian.²¹

Musings on Characterization and Lesbian Representation in “Scène”

The final song of *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* is a setting of “Scène,” a poem in the latter half of “Élégies à Mytilène” that depicts one of the final moments in which Bilitis and Mnasidika are together. In the scene, a dialogue takes place between the lovers as Bilitis confronts Mnasidika who has just returned from the market. Bilitis suspects that Mnasidika will soon leave her for another woman, and she questions Mnasidika about whether or not she was actually buying flowers. While Bilitis’ insistent questions attempt to catch her lover in a lie, Mnasidika playfully thwarts each inquiry, leading Bilitis to eventually acquiesce to her charm. While this

²¹ As discussed in chapter 3, Louÿs himself acknowledged the stereotypical representations of lesbians in 19th-century literature, noting that lesbians are often represented as “*femme fatales* or vicious women.” Quoted in Jean-Paul Goujon, *Pierre Louÿs: Une vie secrète* (Paris: Éditions Seghers, 1988), 142. (« femmes fatales ou vicieuses »)

scene of dialogue is playful, it is telling of Bilitis' jealousy and foreshadows Mnasidika's abandonment in the poems that follow.

Table 6.4 "Scène"

Scène	Scene
<p>« Où étais-tu ? –Chez la marchande de fleurs. J'ai acheté des iris très beaux. Les voici, je te les apporte. –Pendant si longtemps tu as acheté ces quatre fleurs ? –La marchande m'a retenue.</p>	<p>"Where were you?" "At the flower shop. I bought some beautiful Irises. Look at them, I bought them for you." "In such a long time, you only bought four flowers?" "The merchant held me up."</p>
<p>–Tu as les joues pâles et les yeux brillants. –C'est la fatigue de la route. –Tes cheveux sont mouillés et mêlés. –C'est la chaleur et c'est le vent qui m'ont toute décoiffée.</p>	<p>"Your cheeks are pale and your eyes are bright." "It is fatigue from the route." "Your hair is wet and messy." "It is the heat and the wind that made me all disheveled."</p>
<p>–On a dénoué ta ceinture. J'avais fait le nœud moi-même, plus lâche que celui-ci. –Si lâche qu'elle s'est défait ; un esclave qui passait me l'a renouée.</p>	<p>"Your belt was untied. I had tied the knot myself, looser than this." "It was so loose that it came undone; a passing slave tied it for me."</p>
<p>–Il y a une trace à ta robe. –C'est l'eau des fleurs qui est tombée. –Mnasidika, ma petite âme, tes iris sont les plus beaux qu'il y ait dans tout Mytilène. –Je le sais bien, je le sais bien. »</p>	<p>"There is a mark on your dress." "It is water that fell from the flowers." "Mnasidika, my little soul, your irises are more beautiful than all there is in Mytilène." "I know it well, I know it well."</p>

Compared to the other three songs in *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*, "Scène" is quite different in both presentation and thematic material. The first three songs center on intimate, erotic moments between the two women, describing (from Bilitis' point of view) the physicality of their relationship and highlighting themes of sexualization, seduction, and obsession. "Scène" depicts an intimate moment between the two women in which the intimacy is not created through physicality, but through dialogue. The creation of an intimate scene through dialogue gives

insight to both Bilitis and Mnasidika's characters, in particular, Bilitis' obsessive and jealous nature and Mnasidika's coquettishness.

While the poem itself prolongs the eroticism of the first three songs of *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* less overtly, Dandelot's musical setting additionally avoids any evocation of a physical sexual encounter, focusing instead on illustrative techniques that depict dialogue and the characterization of the two women. In depicting dialogue, the prosody utilizes elements of recitative that include syllabic text setting and rhythmic patterns that imitate the natural rhythms of the spoken text. Given that two voices are represented in the dialogue that are inevitably performed by a solo singer, musical features (both in the vocal line and the accompaniment) are necessary to distinguish between the two characters. As the two women speak back and forth, depicted in Example 6.11, the dynamics shift between each voice, often with Bilitis' accusatory tone being represented by a *forte* dynamic and Mnasidika's innocent replies sung at a *piano* dynamic. Before Bilitis speaks, her statements are preceded by a swift ascending figure in the piano and an emphatic rolled chord that is illustrative of her bold emotions, and her words are then underlined by block chords that emphasize her declamatory accusations. On the other hand, Mnasidika's replies are accompanied by quickly shifting chords and a staccato countermelody in the lowest voice of the piano, an effect that emphasizes the playfulness of her responses.

Assez vif ♩ = 92

"Où é-tais - tu?" "Chez la mar-chan - de de fleurs. J'ai a - che - té desi-ris très beaux. Les voi - ci, jeteles ap -"

Example 6.11: "Scène," mm. 1-8

While these disparate characterizations are maintained throughout the duration of the piece, in measure 43 (Example 6.12), a slight shift occurs that elaborates on the relationship's dynamic by showing Bilitis' devotion toward her lover. After hearing Mnasidika's many rebuttals, Bilitis is finally convinced of her innocence, and her former declamatory accusations morph into an expressive proclamation of admiration that is characterized by the expressiveness of a slower tempo, legato articulation, and emphatic octaves in the piano accompaniment that underline the vocal melody. While Bilitis' statement that Mnasidika's flowers "are more beautiful than all there is in Mytilène" takes on a sincere and sentimental quality, Mnasidika's response of "I know it well" remains playful, perhaps even manipulative. Nonetheless, the frivolousness of her final response is a sign of the shakiness of the final days of the relationship.

Un peu plus lent

f

Mna-sa - di - ka, ma pe-tite

mf

poco rit.

à - me, tes i-ris sont les plus beaux qu'il y ait dans tout My-ti-lè - ne.

I. Tempo

Je lesais bien, je lesais bien.

pp

p

en pressant

8

And.

*

Example 6.12: "Scène," 43-54

This brief moment of dialogue depicted in “Scène” further highlights Bilitis’ possessiveness and jealousy that is increasingly revealed in the first three songs of *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*. However, the focus on the characterization of Bilitis and Mnasidika and the emotional issues expressed through their dialogue in “Scène” seems out of place when compared to the other songs that emphasize erotic moments between the two women. While Dandelot’s musical setting of the first three songs highlights various issues of lesbian representation found in the poetry that seem to contradict Louÿs’ supposed idyllic vision of lesbianism, the setting of “Scène” perhaps acknowledges another more positive aspect of Louÿs’ poetry that strives to depict a genuine queer relationship.

In exploring the poetry collection and, especially, “Élégies à Mytilène,” there are certain elements to Louÿs’ poems that seem to imply a concern on his part to challenge the crude lesbian stereotypes of his time by creating lesbian characters of depth and complexity. Throughout “Élégies à Mytilène,” there are various poems that do not focus on eroticism or lesbian sexuality but rather center on humanizing its lesbian characters. This is evident in heartfelt moments such as the explanation of the death of Mnasidika’s mother’s mistress in “The Nameless Tomb” and in the numerous poems that emphasize camaraderie and friendship among the women of Lesbos. There are undeniably problematic aspects of the depiction of lesbianism in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, such as the previously explored issues of fetishization, reliance on heteronormative power dynamics, and stereotyping of lesbians as vicious or dangerous; however, in the depiction of Bilitis and Mnasidika’s relationship, there are also moments, like that illustrated in “Scène,” that provide a deeper exploration into their relationship that extends beyond their sexuality.

In similar fashion to the song cycles of Claude Debussy and Rita Strohl, which center on the narrative of Bilitis’ first love, Lykas, Georges Dandelot’s *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* captures

the relationship between Bilitis and Mnasidika, which is arguably Bilitis' most important relationship. In depicting the love shared between the two women, Dandelot emphasizes the erotic nature of Louÿs' poems through various tools of musical eroticism that include a harmonic language steeped in ambiguity and sensuality, musical ideas that allude to fetishization or hypnotic seduction, and clashing dissonance and prolonged tension that highlights the dichotomy between pleasure and pain and Bilitis' increasing "mad love" for Mnasidika. While the depiction of the erotic moments between the two women additionally highlights problematic aspects of lesbian representation in the poetry collection, the final song, "Scène," characterizes the women in such a way that extends beyond their sexuality and also hints at the profound heartbreak that Bilitis will soon experience in the overarching narrative when her jealousy and possessiveness become too much for Mnasidika to bear.

After the scene that is illustrated in the final song of *Quatre chansons de Bilitis*, Bilitis and Mnasidika's relationship soon comes to an end. The loss of Mnasidika has a profound effect on Bilitis' character as, unable to bear the weight of losing her lover, Bilitis leaves Lesbos to begin a new life on the island of Cyprus. While she finds success in Cyprus, the end of Bilitis' life is plagued by the burning memory of her lost love and the threat of impending death. The following chapter will explore this final stage of Bilitis' life as interpreted by Charles Koechlin, highlighting the theme of death that pervades throughout the final section of *Les Chansons de Bilitis*.

CHAPTER 7

THE DYING WOMAN IN CHARLES KOECHLIN'S *CINQ CHANSONS DE BILITIS*

In previous chapters, we explored three song cycles that correspond to the two important relationships that define the early and middle portions of Bilitis' life. Given that *Les Chansons de Bilitis* is recognized predominately as a work of erotic fiction, it is no mystery as to why musical settings of the poems often center around Bilitis' sexual and romantic relationships. The work's categorization as erotic fiction is also precisely what makes Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* unique among musical settings of Louÿs' collection as, throughout the song cycle, eroticism is largely avoided. Instead, Koechlin's cycle depicts Bilitis at the end of her life as she contemplates her waning existence and impending death.

Moreover, Koechlin's song cycle is also unlike the previously discussed song cycles in that it does not follow the chronological order of the poetry collection itself. The song cycle begins with a setting of "Hymne à Astarté" ("Hymn to Astarté") the first poem in "Épigrammes dans l'île de Chypre." While death is not explicitly expressed in the first song, the violent imagery of Bilitis' desperate plea to Astarté reveals her increasing madness and desperation as she confronts the loss of her youth and fertility, the first sign that her death is approaching. In the second song, which is a setting of the penultimate poem in "Épigrammes" titled "Pluie au matin" ("Morning Rain"), Bilitis contemplates her impending death as she writes verses in the sand, and her words are distorted by the falling rain. The third song, "Chant funébre" ("Funeral Song"), returns to the end of Bilitis' time in Lesbos when, after losing Mnasidika, Bilitis calls on the

muses to sing a funeral song for her as she no longer desires to live in the midst of profound heartbreak. In the fourth song, a setting “Hymne à la nuit” (“Hymn to the Night”) which appears directly after “Hymne à Astarté” in the poetry collection, Bilitis becomes so intoxicated with the nighttime that she imagines herself *becoming* the night, an image that foreshadows her fleeting corporeal form. In the final song, “Épitaphe de Bilitis” (“Bilitis’ Epitaph”), which expresses the text of the third and final epitaph on Bilitis’ tomb, Bilitis truly embodies death as she is now a ghostly figure who speaks from the “prairies of the asphodel.”

Koechlin’s choice to center on Bilitis’ death falls in line with typical subject matter the composer visited in his songs and programmatic works. According to his contemporaries and modern scholars, Koechlin’s works reveal a proclivity toward dark, mysterious subjects, including the mystery of death. Several years before the official publication of *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, journalist E. H. C. Oliphant published an English language article titled “The Songs of Charles Koechlin” in which he comments on Koechlin’s preference for a dark profundity rather than the subtle sensuousness and delicacy favored by other well-known French composers of his time, such as Debussy and Fauré. Of Koechlin’s favored poetic choices, Oliphant says:

[Koechin’s] genius is better suited by a vision of the stillness of death and a sense of tragic mystery brooding upon the waters than by idyllic fancies and a regretful reconstruction of faded glories, and that his soul craves the vast spaces and the glowing, if somewhat stark, color of Leconte rather than the closed gardens and the subdued tones of Verlaine and Samain.¹

Robert Orledge, author of *Charles Koechlin: His Life and Works*, similarly comments on Koechlin’s typical subject matter, listing Koechlin’s preferred subjects which include Classical

¹ E. H. C. Oliphant, “The Songs of Charles Koechlin,” *The Musical Quarterly* 7, 2 (April 1921), 195.

antiquity; nature, especially nighttime scenes, moonlight, and rainfall; and “the stillness and cosmic mystery of the universe.”²

In his musical works that show a proclivity towards the subject of death, Koechlin reveals a particular interest in the tragedy of the death of young women. Not only is this clear in *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* with his choice to ignore the obvious erotic themes in the poetry collection and instead set poems that reflect Bilitis’ death, but he also later expanded and orchestrated musical ideas in the final song, “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” into the fourth movement of his *Études antiques*; in separating these musical ideas from Bilitis specifically, the fourth movement of his *Études* adopted a new title, “Épitaphe d’une jeune femme” (“Epitaph of a Young Woman”). Koechlin also expanded on the subject of dying women in his *Chant funèbre à la mémoire des jeunes femmes défuntes* (Funeral Song for the Memory of Young Dead Women), a symphonic poem based on Edmond Haraucourt’s poem “Vierges mortes” (“Dead Virgins”). Speaking on the work, Koechlin states, “this symphonic poem translates the feelings and evokes the visions inspired by the most cruel and unjust mourning of all: that for the death of a young being full of hope and beauty.”³

Koechlin’s expression of the “most cruel and unjust mourning” calls to mind Poe’s famous line on the subject: “the death of a beautiful woman is, unquestionably, the most poetical topic in the world.”⁴ As discussed in chapter 3, this sentiment is no doubt expressed in *Les Chansons de Bilitis* as Bilitis’ impending death is emphasized throughout the latter section of the work. Once she finally succumbs to death, her beauty and sexuality continue to be highlighted, a fact that captures what Julie McQuinn describes as “the decadent mixture of love and death, of

² Robert Orledge, *Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): His Life and Works* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1989), 226.

³ Quoted and translated in Orledge, *Charles Koechlin*, 97.

⁴ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Philosophy of Composition” *Graham's Magazine* 28, 4 (1846): 164.

sensual eroticism and cruelty.”⁵ The eroticism of Bilitis’ death is especially apparent in the work’s preface in which the fictional G. Heim, having discovered Bilitis’ tomb, describes the beauty of her mummified remains and the mystery of her once “clear and round, soft and fine” lips.⁶ Like the sleeping woman represented in Dandelot’s setting of “La Dormeuse,” the dead woman becomes a site of fetishization, allowing the observer to objectify the woman without her knowledge.

This chapter will explore the ways in which Koechlin musically illustrates death and the dying woman, highlighting the connection between death, beauty, and femininity that are expressed through Bilitis’ untimely end. Given that the five poems represented in the song cycle are taken from various places throughout the end of Bilitis’ life, Koechlin utilizes a variety of musical techniques to introduce and express the theme of death; these techniques include the representation of death through the *tempesta* and *ombra* topics (particularly in the context of Koechlin’s harmonically experimental style), the incorporation of themes and motifs that serve as allusions to the dead, and the combining of musical evocations of death with nature imagery. In addition to musical evocations of death, this chapter will explore how the incorporation of these musical techniques also brings to light gendered issues common to musical representations of dead or dying women, which occur here, for example, in the female madness in “Hymne à Astarté,” martyrdom in the face of lost love in “Chant funèbre,” and the expression of death in conjunction with beauty that occurs throughout the cycle, but predominately in the songs that highlight death and the beauty of nature. Unlike previous chapters, this chapter will not take a

⁵ Julie McQuinn, “Exploring the Erotic in Debussy’s Music,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Debussy*, edited by Simon Trezise, 117-136 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 127.

⁶ Pierre Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis, suivi de Pervigilium Mortis, avec divers textes inédits*, edited and annotated by Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1990), 37. (« nettes et rebordées, molles et fines »)

chronological approach that discusses the songs in the order that they appear in the cycle; instead, discussions of the songs will be categorized by the above-mentioned interpretive issues.

Fleeting Fertility, Female Madness, and the *Tempesta* Topic in “Hymne à Astarté”

The first song in *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* marks the beginning of Bilitis’ last stage of life in which, after the agonizing heartbreak of losing Mnasidika to, supposedly, another woman, she leaves behind the island of Lesbos to begin working as a courtesan on the island of Cyprus. The temple in which Bilitis begins working is dedicated to Astarté, a goddess of fertility and sexuality, and the opening poem of “Épigrammes dans l’île de Chypre” is a hymn of praise that reveals Bilitis fierce dedication to her goddess. In setting the poem to music, Koechlin made various changes to the original text, and both the original and revised texts will be represented in the table below with changes in italics:

Table 7.1 Translation of “Hymne à Astarté”

<p>Hymne à Astarté [Original Text]</p> <p>Mère inépuisable, incorruptible, créatrice, née la première, engendrée par toi-même, conçue de toi-même, issue de toi seule et qui te réjouis en toi, Astarté !</p> <p>Ô perpétuellement féconde, ô vierge et nourrice de tout, chaste et lascive, pure et jouissante, ineffable, nocturne, douce, respiratrice du feu, écume de la mer !</p> <p>Toi qui accordes en secret la grâce, toi qui unis, <i>toi qui aimes</i>, toi qui saisis d’un furieux désir les races multipliées des bêtes sauvages, et joins les sexes dans les forêts.</p>	<p>Hymn to Astarté [Original Text]</p> <p>Mother inexhaustible, incorruptible, creator, born the first, engendered by yourself, conceived of yourself, issue of yourself alone, and rejoicing in yourself, Astarte!</p> <p>Oh, perpetually fertilized, oh virgin and nurse of everything, chaste and lascivious, pure and enjoyable, ineffable, nocturnal, sweet, breather of fire, foam of the sea.</p> <p>You that grant grace in secret, you that unite, you that love, you that seize with furious desire, the multiplied races of savage beasts, and join together the sexes in the wood.</p>
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<p>Ô Astarté irrésistible, entends-moi, prends-moi, possède-moi, ô <i>Lune ! et treize fois, chaque année, arrache à mes entrailles la libation de mon sang !</i></p> <p>Hymne à Astarté [Revised Text]</p> <p>Mère inépuisable, incorruptible, créatrice, née la première, engendrée par toi-même, conçue de toi-même, issue de toi seule et qui te réjouis en toi, Astarté !</p> <p>Ô perpétuellement fécondée, o vierge et nourrice de tout, chaste et désireuse, pure et jouissante, ineffable, nocturne, douce, respiratrice du feu, écume de la mer !</p> <p>Toi qui accordes en secret la grâce, toi qui unis, toi qui saisis d'un furieux désir les races multipliées des bêtes sauvages, et joins les sexes dans les forêts.</p> <p>Ô Astarté irrésistible, <i>soit que tu imposes la douleur, soit que tu délivres dans la joie</i>, entends-moi, prends-moi, possède-moi, <i>arrache de mon corps bien heureux les libations sanglantes !</i></p>	<p>Oh irresistible Astarté, hear me, take me, possess me, oh moon! And thirteen times, each year, tear from my entrails the libation of my blood!</p> <p>Hymn to Astarte [Revised Text]</p> <p>Mother inexhaustible, incorruptible, creator, born the first, engendered by yourself, conceived of yourself, issue of yourself alone, and rejoicing in yourself, Astarte!</p> <p>Oh, perpetually fertilized, oh virgin and nurse of everything, chaste and desirous, pure and enjoyable, ineffable, nocturnal, sweet, breather of fire, foam of the sea.</p> <p>You that grant grace in secret, you that unite, you that seize with furious desire, the multiplied races of savage beasts, and join together the sexes in the wood.</p> <p>Oh irresistible Astarté, either you impose pain, or you deliver joy, hear me, take me, possess me, tear out from my blessed body the bloody libations!</p>
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In ancient times, the goddess Astarté (the Hellenized name of the Phoenician Ashtart) was worshipped throughout the near East and Mediterranean areas. She is often associated with Aphrodite, with many considering a “one-to-one correspondence, or *interpretatio* syncretism” between the two mythological figures that derives from “the eastern origins of Aphrodite herself, whereby the Greek goddess evolved out of the Phoenician.”⁷ Throughout *Les Chansons de*

⁷ Stephanie L. Budin, “A Reconsideration of the Aphrodite-Ashtart Syncretism,” *Numen* 51, 2 (2004): 95. Budin expands on this syncretism, arguing that the connection between Astarté and Aphrodite developed differently in Cyprus than in other areas of the Mediterranean. She says, “the limited number of goddesses on the island of Cyprus led to the two most prominent—Aphrodite and Ashtart—being seen as one and the same. By contrast, the rest of the Mediterranean, there was a far more general syncretism between Aphrodite and whole family of Near Eastern goddesses, and a similarly general syncretism between Ashtart and various Mediterranean and Near Eastern Goddesses. Aphrodite was not simply a Greek Ashtart, but the western equivalent of Ashtart, Atargatis, Anaitis, Ishtar/Mylitta, and even Isis and al-‘Uzza.,” 96.

Bilitis, Bilitis' worship of the goddess reveals this syncretism, and she uses various titles to refer to her goddess including Aphrodite, Astarté, Paphia, and Kypris. In the case of the latter two titles, Alvah C. Bessie explains in the notes of his English translation of Louÿs' poetry that "Aphrodite's innumerable epithets and appellations, excluding her purely national names such as Venus, Aphrodite, Astarte, Tanit, etc., were largely derived from the names of the various towns at which she had her shrines [such as] Paphos, Cyprus, etc."⁸

While Bilitis praises Astarté throughout the various stages of her life by a myriad of titles, "Hymne à Astarté" is perhaps the most overt profession of her faith. Throughout the poem, Bilitis refers to Astarté by a variety of glorifying titles, such as in the first verse which paints the goddess as a female creator deity who is both "incorruptible" and "inexhaustible." Despite being associated with fertility, the gender dynamic of reproduction is removed from Astarté's own creation as she is "conceived of [her]self" without the assistance of a male creator. Throughout the hymn, Bilitis references Astarté's title of fertility goddess, describing her as the embodiment of youth and fertility as she is the "perpetually fertilized... virgin and nurse of everything" and praising her ability to "join together the sexes." In addition to fertility, Astarté is often connected to war,⁹ and this is emphasized through the hymn's violent imagery. This is even more evident in the changes that Koechlin made to the poem, such as the removal of the gentler description "toi qui aimes" ("you that love") from the third verse and the inclusion of an additional line in the final verse that alludes to Astarté inflicting pain upon others.

The elements of passion and violence that correspond to Astarté's associations with both fertility and war are heightened through Koechlin's musical setting, which is far from a typical

⁸ Pierre Louÿs, *The Songs of Bilitis*, translated by Alvah C. Bessie, iii-iv.

⁹ This correlation with war can be found in Ugaritic literature, predominately through Ashtart's connections with the warrior goddess Anat and storm god Ba'al. Budin, "A Reconsideration of the Aphrodite-Ashtart Syncretism," 107.

hymn in that it incorporates heavy dissonance, augmented intervals, forceful dynamics, and an expansive and demanding vocal line. In fact, many of the techniques used throughout the piece fall in line with the *tempesta* topic which is defined as a set of musical characteristics, often discussed in the context of 18th- and 19th-century music, that are linked to representations of storms or other cataclysmic natural events. The *tempesta* topic is characterized by dissonant chords (especially diminished chords), running eighth-note passages, trills, tremolos, chromaticism, and dramatic fluctuations in dynamics. While these characteristics are often used to illustrate elements of a storm such as wind, thunder, or lightning, it is also linked to supernatural associations, particularly “infernal” beings such as demons, monsters, furies, or deities.¹⁰ Clive McClelland links this supernatural association to “the sublime” which “deals with the idea of elevated of emotions, of which the most exalted were fear and terror,” and McClelland further elaborates on the state of terror as “characterized by violence and passion.”¹¹

In Koechlin’s musical setting, the violent force of the invocation of a passionate, violent goddess is immediately apparent in the song’s tempestuous opening (Example 7.1). The piece begins with an introductory ascending motive in the piano that is marked *fortissimo* which is then proceeded immediately by two accented augmented chords. When the vocal line emerges, it rests on a single pitch, C \sharp , for nearly the duration of the introduction, which mimics the commencement of a chant-like invocation. In nearly every measure of the first verse, the time signature shifts, creating rhythmic instability while allowing for a more speechlike inflection of the chant. The harmony beneath the vocal line is played with a tremolo effect, and there is a *poco a poco crescendo* until the vocal line ascends a fifth on the word “Astarté.” Throughout this first

¹⁰ Clive McClelland, “*Ombra and Tempesta*,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Music Theory*, 279-300 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 286.

¹¹ Clive McClelland, *Tempesta: Stormy Music in the Eighteenth-Century* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2017), ix.

verse, the dynamics continue to crescendo and the tempo gains momentum until the goddess' name is finally uttered.

The musical score consists of four systems, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are in French and describe the goddess Astarté.

System 1: The vocal line begins with a rest followed by the lyrics "Mère i - né pui -". The piano accompaniment starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The piano part includes markings for *ff* and *mp sub.*

System 2: The vocal line continues with "-sa - ble, in corrup-ti - ble cré-a - tri - ce née la pre-mière,". The piano accompaniment features a complex rhythmic pattern with markings for *ff* and *mp sub.*

System 3: The vocal line continues with "en - gen - dré epar - toi même, con - cue de toimême is - sue de toiseule et". The piano accompaniment includes the instruction *poco a poco*.

System 4: The vocal line concludes with "qui ré - jou - isent toi As - tar - té!". The piano accompaniment includes the instruction *allarg. poco ad lib.* and ends with a forte (*f*) dynamic and a *dim. molto* marking.

Example 7.1: "Hymne à Astarté," mm. 1-8

While this violent and powerful opening evokes Astarté's ferocity, the rhythmic and harmonic instability combined with the fluctuating emotions conveyed through the *tempesta* topic also illustrates another aspect of the poem: Bilitis' desperation as she calls out to her goddess. As McClelland expands in his book *Tempesta: Stormy Music in the Eighteenth Century*, "*tempesta* operates not just as a piece of tone-painting, but as a way of expressing all kinds of turmoil, both literal and metaphorical. It can communicate rage, panic, passion, pursuit, conflict, or madness."¹² In the context of the narrative, Bilitis' emotions are in a fragile state after the loss of Mnasidika and the upheaval of her former life on Lesbos. While "Hymne à Astarté" marks the beginning of Bilitis' new life in which she will find success as a courtesan, the last era of her life will be plagued by unhappiness as she comes to terms with her waning youth, and glimpses of this unhappiness shine through in "Hymne à Astarté." In the final verse, Bilitis demands of the goddess, "arrache de mon corps bien heureux les libations sanglantes" ("tear out from my blessed body the bloody libations"), which references Astarté's ability to preserve her ability to menstruate—a reference that is even clearer in Louÿs' original text which refers specifically to the lunar cycle and the offering of "bloody libations" thirteen times a year. While Bilitis' anxieties around her fleeting youth will continue to haunt her throughout her time as a courtesan, it is the loss of this youth that will eventually lead her to resign to death. As stated in "Vie de Bilitis:"

[Bilitis] remained faithful to the temple, as long as Aphrodite prolonged the youth of her most pure adorer. The day in which she ceased being loved, she ceased to write.¹³

¹² McClelland, *Tempesta*, ix.

¹³ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 36. (« Elle demeura fidèle au temple, tant qu'Aphrodite consentit à prolonger la jeunesse de sa plus pure adoratrice. Le jour où elle cessa d'être aimée, elle cessa d'écrire »)

The consistent use of chromatic dissonance and augmented harmonies in Koechlin’s setting further contributes to the sense of Bilitis unstable emotions. In the song’s opening verse for instance, the two accented chords in the opening gesture and the harmony that accompanies the vocal line are in fact a series of augmented chords. The piece continues to exploit augmented harmonies, and the vocal line is inflected with augmented leaps; this is featured most prominently in the song’s finale. In the final verse, Bilitis pleads for Astarté to prolong her fertility by saying “hear me, take me, possess me, tear out from my blessed body the bloody libations!” The harmonic language beneath this utterance once again morphs into a series of augmented chords, creating a sense of instability that suggests Bilitis’ increasing desperation as she calls to her goddess. In addition, the melody is inflected with augmented intervals, such as the augmented octave in the final leap of the vocal line from a high B \sharp down to B \flat . Augmented intervals in the vocal line, in addition to revealing Bilitis’ desperation, convey the violent imagery at the heart of the text, and this is especially demonstrated in measures 34-36 on the text “arrache de mon corps bien heureux” (“tear out from my blessed body”) (Example 7.2). The vocal line outlines an augmented triad that falls from high A \flat down to E \sharp and then quickly ascends again. The lowest note of this phrase lands on the word “corps” (“body”), and this inverted arch of the augmented triad mimics the image of the goddess reaching down to “tear out” from Bilitis’ “body.”

The musical notation is a single staff in treble clef, 2/4 time signature. It begins with a dynamic marking *ff* and a tempo marking *Animé*. The melody consists of the following notes: a quarter rest, a quarter note B \flat , an eighth note A \flat , an eighth note G \flat , a quarter note F \sharp , an eighth note E \sharp , an eighth note D \sharp , and a final quarter note B \flat . The lyrics "ar - ra-chedemon corps bienheu-reux" are written below the staff, with "corps" aligned under the E \sharp note.

Example 7.2: “Hymne à Astarté,” mm. 33-36 (vocal line)

The violence with which Bilitis pleads for her goddess to preserve her fertility reveals her desperation, and this is reiterated through the final ascent to B5 on the word “sanglantes,” which descends an augmented interval on the final syllable. This final dramatic phrase, featured in Example 7.3, reveals that Bilitis’ desperation has morphed into madness, and the augmented intervals, fortissimo dynamic, and chromatic harmonies that suggest an unbridled and uncontained madness.

Example 7.3: “Hymne à Astarté,” mm. 37-41

Koechlin’s representation of madness in “Hymne à Astarté” calls to mind the numerous representations of madness (particularly female madness) that have been illustrated through music. The *tempesta* topic in particular can be linked to 18th-century operatic madwomen such as Armide or the Queen of the Night, and the harsh, chromatic dissonance found in “Hymne à Astarté” is exemplary of what Susan McClary describes as the “chromatic excess of the madwoman.”¹⁴ Elaborating on the subject, McClary states:

¹⁴ Susan McClary, “Excess and Frame,” in *Feminine Endings*, 80-111 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 101.

If we review the portraits of famous madwomen in music, we find that the signs of their madness are usually among the favorite techniques of the avant-garde: strategies that for each style hover at the extremes, strategies that most successfully exceed the verbal component of dramatic music and that transgress conventions of ‘normal procedure.’¹⁵

For many madwomen, particularly in opera, the state of madness is representative of an excess of female sexuality. This is perhaps most famously represented by Strauss’ *Salome*, who is recognized for “the monstrosity of [her] sexual and chromatic transgressions.”¹⁶ In the case of Bilitis, sexuality plays a role in her own descent into madness, though in her case, it is the threat of losing her sexual power through the loss of youth and beauty that causes her to lash out in an emotionally excessive plea to Astarté. In addition to madness being linked to sexuality, the stories of musical madwomen are similarly linked by their tragic end in death. Like the madwomen before her, the foreshadowing of Bilitis’ death in *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* begins with her own mad scene, which is contained in the space of a single *mélodie*.

Ombre impalpable: The Voice of the Dead and the Ombra Topic in “Épitaphe de Bilitis”

As outlined above, the first song in Koechlin’s *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* conveys the initial moment that Bilitis becomes concerned with her waning fertility, a sign of the loss of her youth that will plague her throughout the final years of her life on Cyprus. The tempestuous opening song reveals the madness of acknowledging mortality, and while the following songs provide vignettes of Bilitis’ struggles with her impending death, the truth of her mortality is finally realized in the last song, “Épitaphe de Bilitis;” here, she speaks as a dead woman through the last of the three epitaphs inscribed on her tomb. Written from the first-person perspective,

¹⁵ McClary, “Excess and Frame,” 101.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 100.

Bilitis' final epitaph recounts a brief overview of the phases of her life and offers solace to those who pass by her resting place that she is content in the underworld, remembering fondly the memories of her earthly life.

Table 7.2 Translation of “Épitaphe de Bilitis”

<p>Épitaphe de Bilitis [original title: Dernière Épitaphe]</p> <p>Sous les feuilles noires des lauriers, sous les fleurs amoureuses des roses, c'est ici que je suis couchée, moi qui sus tresser le vers au vers, et faire fleurir le baiser.</p> <p><i>Je suis née dans</i> [original text: J'ai grandi sur] la terre des nymphes ; j'ai vécu dans l'île des amies ; je suis morte dans l'île de Kypris. C'est pourquoi mon nom est illustre et ma stèle frottée d'huile.</p> <p>Ne me pleure pas, toi qui t'arrêtes : on m'a fait de belles funérailles ; les pleureuses se sont arraché les joues ; on a couché dans ma tombe mes miroirs et mes colliers.</p> <p>Et maintenant, sur les pâles prairies d'asphodèles, je me promène, ombre impalpable, et le souvenir de ma vie terrestre est la joie de ma vie souterraine.</p>	<p>Bilitis' Epitaph [original title: Last Epitaph]</p> <p>Under the black leaves of the laurels, under the amorous flowers of the roses, it is here that I am laid, I who knew how to weave verse to verse, and make kisses bloom.</p> <p>I was born [original text: I grew up] in the land of the nymphs; I lived on the isle of lovers; I died on the isle of Kypris. That is why my name is illustrious and my tomb is polished with oil.</p> <p>Do not cry for me, you that have stopped here, I had a beautiful funeral; the mourners tore at their cheeks; resting in my tomb are my mirrors and my necklaces.</p> <p>And now, on the pale meadows of asphodel, I walk, impalpable shadow, and the memory of my terrestrial life is the joy of my afterlife.</p>
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In order to convey the voice of a dead woman, Koechlin incorporates musical elements that combine to create what he describes as an “antique and funereal light.”¹⁷ In a mirror of the first song, which introduced the instability of Bilitis' emotions when confronting mortality through the use of the *tempesta* topic, Koechlin relies heavily on elements of the *ombra* topic in “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” which is considered the slow and funereal counterpart to *tempesta*. The

¹⁷ Charles Koechlin, “Étude sur Charles Koechlin par lui-même,” in *Charles Koechlin: 1867-1950 « Koechlin par lui-même »*, 39-72 (Paris: La Revue musicale, 1981), 52.

ombra and *tempesta* topics are related to one another in that they both are often used to illustrate the supernatural; while *tempesta* is typically reserved for conveying powerful supernatural images, such as deities, demons, or monsters, images that evoke “the sublime of terror,” the elements of *ombra* are employed when conveying more somber elements of the supernatural such as ghosts, tombs, and death.¹⁸ *Ombra* and *tempesta* share many qualities, particularly elements that create a sense of instability or distress such as chromaticism, unexpected modulations, rhythmic instability, and tremolo effects. However, the element that is the most contrasting between the two styles is tempo. With *tempesta*, tempos are generally fast to convey the force of a powerful storm or a violent supernatural being; however, with *ombra*, “tempos are invariably on the slow side, allowing a portentous or mysterious atmosphere to be established.”¹⁹ *Ombra* is additionally linked to the ceremonial or funereal through the borrowing of martial and ecclesiastical elements, such as the dotted rhythms and repetitive bassline of a funeral march or the monotone melody and monophonic textures akin to chant.

Koechlin’s use of the *ombra* topic is immediately apparent in the song’s slow opening (Example 7.4). The piece begins with a descending chromatic ostinato akin to a lament bass, and its relentless trudge underlaid by a pedal Eb conjures the image of Bilitis walking relentlessly through the plains of the underworld. In the right hand of the piano accompaniment are two independent melodic lines, and the top line’s consistent dotted quarter note followed by a triple eighth-note figure enhances the forward motion of the funeral march. When the voice emerges, Koechlin once again mimics chant through the use of a monotone recitation on Eb. As the vocal line diverges from monophony in measure 3, the rhythmic flow of the text continues to mimic

¹⁸ McClelland, *Tempesta*, 5.

¹⁹ McClelland, “*Ombra and Tempesta*,” 283.

the rhythmic freedom of chant with the performance marking “sans rigueur et avec souplesse” (without rigor and with suppleness).

Lent (mais pas trop) ♩ = 54 *mais sans rigueur et avec souplesse*

p effacé

Sous les feuil-les noi-res des lau-riers, _____

très lié et pp

Example 7.4: “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” mm. 1-2

In a stark contrast from the first song of the cycle, the texture of “Épitaphe de Bilitis” is much lighter, which alludes to the stillness of death and Bilitis’ now noncorporeal form. The nebulous image of a ghostly figure is further enhanced by the multiple chromatic lines which move independently to create a sense of tonal and rhythmic ambiguity. While the convergence of the independent melodic lines often creates dissonant intervals or diminished harmonies, the light texture removes the sense of harshness or violence of the supernatural associations of the cycle’s opening song.

At the beginning of the second verse (Example 7.5), the pressing dotted-rhythm of the countermelody is still present in the highest voice of the accompaniment, and the vocal line continues in a chant-like fashion. However, the ostinato bass line gives way to a homophonic texture with triadic harmony. Here, Bilitis recounts the stages of her life including her childhood

in “the land of the nymphs,” her life with Mnasidika “on the isle of lovers,” and her final years on Kypris. While she is reminiscing on these memories, the triadic structure of the chords and exclusive use of the treble register in the accompaniment suggest a lightness and pleasantness, as though she remembers these memories with fondness. However, the ambiguous tonality created by parallel movement suggests the haziness of memory, and the dissonances created by the clashing of the countermelody and vocal line with the chord progression convey a sense of unease. While Bilitis wants those who stop by her tomb to know of her happy memories, there is an unshakable sadness that colors her reminiscence.

3 *pp* **a Tempo**

3 3 3

Je suis née dans la terre des nymphes, j'ai vécu dans l'île des a

dolciss.

Example 7.5: “Építaphe de Bilitis,” mm. 7-8

In measure 14 (Example 7.6), the lower register of the piano emerges, and the lighthearted nature of the previous verse is thwarted by the consistent, ominous bass. Additionally, the reemergence of the two countermelodies in the right hand of the piano creates dissonance through chordal extensions and suspensions that heighten the sense of instability. In this section’s corresponding text, Bilitis reassures the visitors to her tomb that they should not cry for her, for she is resting happily, buried with her mirrors and necklaces. However, the

ominous mood created through the low timbres and dissonant intervals, staples of the *ombra* topic, further alludes to a sense of unease, hinting that her spirit is not quite at rest.

a Tempo (♩ = 60)
dolciss.

Cédez un peu Nemepleu-repas, toi quit'ar-rê-tes,

dolciss.

Example 7.6: “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” mm. 14-15

Between the third and fourth verses, the piano plays a transition that involves a series of descending whole-tone tetrachords (Example 7.7), and it is in this moment that the song perhaps becomes the most tonally ambiguous. It is after this transition that Bilitis relates that she now walks the prairies of the asphodel, and the descending motion of the tetrachords in this transition mimics her descent to the underworld. In addition, the use of the otherworldly whole-tone scale separates Bilitis from reality, positioning her in the haziness of the spiritual realm.

Example 7.7: “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” mm. 21-23

At the beginning of the song’s final verse (represented in Example 7.8), the same material from the song’s beginning returns, though now the bass Eb spans three octaves, firmly establishing Bilitis’ position on the underground meadow. The dynamic marking here is a dramatic *ppp*, and the vocal line returns to a monotone recitation. As Bilitis utters her final line, “et le souvenir de ma vie terrestre est la joie de ma vie souterraine” (“and the memory of my earthly life is the joy of my life in the underworld”), the ostinato lament ceases. While the top melodic line in the accompaniment continues, the middle line gives way to a series of triads that crescendo little by little until momentum ceases on the downbeat of measure 27. Here, the dynamic arrives at *pianissimo* on a dissonant and ambiguous chord that emphasizes the sung text, “joie” (“joy”). While the rhythmic momentum of the left hand slows, the countermelody in the right hand of the piano continues, and it continues to climb in range into the next octave, a gesture that mirrors Bilitis reaching up toward the earth, clinging to the memories of her earthly existence.

ppp *sans serrer les triolets.*

et main-te - nant, sur les pâ-les prai-ries d'as-pho-dè - les,

je me pro-mène, ombre im - pal - pa - - ble, et le sou - ve - nir

smorz. (*seffacant*)

de ma vie ter - res - tre est la joi - e de ma vie sou - ter - rai - ne

sempre legatissimo très peu cresc. arriver à pp dim. sempre smorz. ppp

Rall. *pppp*

smorz. comme une vision qui s'efface (presque imperceptible)

Example 7.8: “Épitaphe de Bilitis,” mm. 24-32

In measure 28, as the countermelody comes to an end and Bilitis speaks her final words (“vie souterraine” [“life in the underworld”]), the accompaniment shifts into oscillating half steps hovering over triadic harmonies. In the following measure, the texture lightens a bit as the chords change to open fifths, and with the appearance of the final half step motif, the ending is marked with a *rallentando* and a decrescendo to *pppp* and accompanied by the specific directions “comme une vision qui s’efface (presque imperceptible)” (“like a vision that fades [almost imperceptible]”). The oscillating half steps and repetitive parallel fifths in these final measures harken to the funeral march, and combined with the gentle fading of the tempo and dynamics, the ending conjures an image of Bilitis trudging back into the darkness of the underworld after having appeared once again as a ghost to speak to those who pass by her grave.

Of the five songs in Koechlin’s *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, “Épitaphe de Bilitis” is the most obvious example of the theme of death given its depiction of a dead woman speaking from beyond the grave, and through the use of the *ombra* topic, Koechlin illustrates Bilitis as a ghostly figure traversing the underworld. However, in addition to incorporating musical signifiers of the dead, Koechlin’s setting also provides the listener with glimpses of the emotions that Bilitis still harbors toward the memories of her earthly life, hinting to the nuances of her life and her experiences with love and heartbreak that are avoided in the words of her final epitaph.

Many that I have Known are Dead: Musical Allusions to the Dead in “Chant funèbre”

In the opening and closing songs of *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, Koechlin utilizes the familiar stylistic qualities of *tempesta* and *ombra* topics to illustrate both Bilitis’ madness when faced with mortality and her eventual ghostly form in death, respectively. In the songs that lie between, Bilitis’ eventual death continues to be foreshadowed in both the poetry and music, and

while features of *ombra* and *tempesta* are present throughout the cycle, such as the consistent use of monophonic, chant-like melodies in each of the songs, there are also additional allusions to death including recognizable motifs that reference the dead, a technique that is used predominately in the third song of the cycle, “Chant funèbre.”

In *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, “Chant funèbre” is the final poem of “Élégies à Mytilène,” the concluding moment of Bilitis’ time in Lesbos. In the poem, Bilitis calls upon the Mytilenean muses to sing a funeral song for her as the grief of losing Mnasidika is too much for her to bear. As she watches the dying of the earth with the ending of autumn and reminisces on those who have passed on, she laments her own impending death saying, “il est temps aussi que je disparaisse” (“it is time for me also to disappear”).

Table 7.3 Translation of “Chant funèbre”

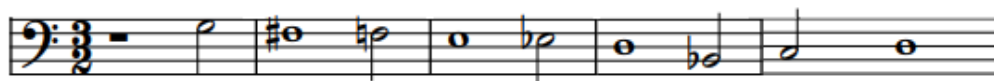
Chant funèbre	Funeral Song
Chantez un chant funèbre, muses Mytiléniennes, chantez ! La terre est sombre comme un vêtement de deuil et les arbres jaunes frissonnent comme des chevelures coupées.	Sing a funeral song, Mytilenean muses, sing! The earth is somber like a mourning garment and the yellow trees tremble like cut hair.
Héraïos ! ô mois triste et doux ! les feuilles tombent, <i>neige dorée</i> [original text: doucement comme la neige], le soleil est plus pénétrant dans la forêt plus éclaircie. Je n’entends plus rien que le silence.	Héraïos! Oh sad and sweet month! The leaves fall, <i>golden snow</i> [original text: softly like snow], the sun penetrates deeper into the thinner forest. I hear nothing but the silence.
Voici qu’on a porté au tombeau Pittakos chargé d’années. Beaucoup sont morts, que j’ai connus. Et celle qui vit est pour moi comme si elle n’était plus.	Here is where Pittakos, charged with years, was carried to the tomb. Many that I have known are dead. And she who lives is for me as if she were no more.
[Celui-ci est le dixième automne que j’ai vu mourir sur cette plaine.] Il est temps aussi que	[This is the tenth autumn that I have watched die on this plain.] It is time for me to

je disparaisse. Pleurez avec moi, muses mitylénienes, pleurez [sur mes pas !]	disappear also. Weep with me, Mytilenean muses, weep [at my footsteps!]
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The mood of the song is similar to “Épitaphe de Bilitis” in that it immediately establishes a funereal atmosphere in the song’s opening. The piece begins with a somber piano introduction that remains in a monophonic texture for the first three measures. The song’s opening measure (Example 7.9) is particularly evocative as the four descending half-steps from G—E are suggestive of the lament bass, a well-known musical sign for death or sorrow. In particular, the chromatic descent’s beginning on G, as well as the quick rhythm of the F \sharp , call to mind the most famous example of a lament bass found in the final aria of Henry Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas*, an aria typically referred to as simply “Dido’s Lament” (Example 7.10).



Example 7.9: “Chant funèbre,” m. 1



Example 7.10: “Dido’s Lament,” ground bass

In Purcell's operatic depiction of the ill-fated romance between the queen of Carthage and the Trojan prince, the famous lament occurs after Aeneas is unwillingly tricked into leaving Carthage and Dido behind. Abandoned by her lover, Dido announces that "death must come when he is gone." Despite Aeneas eventually returning and offering to stay with her, his initial abandonment leaves Dido feeling spurned, and her unhappiness at his unfaithfulness causes her to resign to death. In her final moments, she calls upon her handmaiden Belinda for comfort, and after a bleak moment of recitative in which Dido announces her impending death, the lament bass emerges, introducing the final aria. In the chapter titled "Remember Me, But Ah, Forget My Fate," Amanda Winkler discusses the narrative importance of the ground bass in Dido's aria:

As she declaims the final words of her closing recitative "Death is now a welcome guest" (Dido has given up all desire to live—like Ophelia and Desdemona and the other women who die, victimized by unhappy love), the inexorable ground bass, the famous chromatic octave descent, begins. Just as the oscillating ground bass in her first air reveals Dido's indecision and ambivalence, in death, her music tells us she has found her true purpose: martyrdom.²⁰

As Winkler mentions with her references to Ophelia and Desdemona, Dido is but one example of female martyrdom in the face of "unhappy love." Beginning in the 17th century, female characters who become so overwhelmed by separation from or rejection by their lovers became a common trope on the theatrical stage, and this was fueled by the stereotypical notions of women's emotions being more unstable or excessive than that of men. Women who suffered from unhappy, obsessive love were similar to madwomen, suffering from "erotic melancholy" or "lovesickness," and the emotional outpourings of these lovesick women provided composers of opera and song with ample opportunities for musical outpourings of dramatic emotions; as Winkler explains, "composers assigned music to lovesick women aesthetically marked as

²⁰ Amanda Winkler, "Remember Me, But Ah, Forget My Fate," in *O Let Us Howle Some Heavy Note: Music for Witches, the Melancholic, and the Mad on the Seventeenth-Century English Stage*, 63-113 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 112.

emotionally excessive and created laments using devices that focused attention on the spectacularly obsessive, overly passionate quality of female love, accentuating the misogynistic notion that women were irrational and emotionally volatile.”²¹ Being one of the most famous musical representations of lovesickness, the evocative ground bass of “Dido’s Lament” serves as a musical symbol of obsession that ultimately results in the heroine’s self-induced death.

In comparing Dido’s situation with that of Bilitis, it becomes apparent why the chromatic opening to “Chant funèbre” is particularly fitting. Like Dido, Bilitis chooses to become a martyr, resigning to death after being spurned by her lover, and the resulting lament announces her choice to die. However, as we know from explorations of the other songs in the cycle, an aspect that sets Bilitis apart from Dido and other women martyred by love is that she does not immediately meet death; instead, she leaves Lesbos and the memories of Mnasidika behind and begins a new life in Cyprus. Even though she is able to postpone her death, her new profession becomes haunted by the memories of her previous lovers, especially Mnasidika, and this unhappiness ultimately leads her to resign to death once more for good (a fact that will become apparent in “Pluie au matin”). The chromatic descent that begins “Chant funèbre” is thus a clear foreshadowing of her eventual death, “a clear indication that the lure of the grave can’t be avoided.”²²

If indeed the piece begins with the familiar motive that immediately announces Bilitis’ connection with Dido, the full chromatic descent is never realized, and instead of maintaining a repetitive ground bass, Koechlin’s monophonic introduction twists into harmonic and rhythmic ambiguity. It is not long, however, until the lament motive returns. At the onset of the third verse in measure 21, the descending chromatic motive from the song’s beginning appears in the right

²¹ Winkler, “Remember Me, But Ah, Forget My Fate,” 65-66.

²² *Ibid.*, 112.

hand of the piano (Example 7.11); over the proceeding four measures, the entire material from the song's introduction sounds in the right hand while the left hand plays a repetitive ostinato that outlines an ascending Phrygian tetrachord (B—C—D—E), and it is in this four-note motive that another reference to the dead emerges. As Federico Lazzaro points out in “Bilitis après Debussy,” the ascending tetrachord calls to mind the repetitive ostinato that characterizes the beginning of Debussy's “Le Tombeau des Naiades,” which conveys Bilitis' weary trudge through the winter snow (see Example 4.9).²³ There are several thematic connections between “Le Tombeau des Naiades” and “Chant funèbre;” for instance, each song is a setting of the final poems in a stage of Bilitis' life, and each poem marks the bleak end to one of Bilitis' most important relationships. In addition, each poem conveys bleakness through the seasons, with the harsh winter in “Le Tombeau des Naiades” symbolizing Bilitis and Lykas' dead relationship and the dying autumn reflecting Bilitis' own impending death.

²³ Federico Lazzaro, “Bilitis après Debussy. Hommage, influence, prise de distance?” *Revue musicale OICRM* 2, 1 (2014): 171-172.

Example 7.11: “Chant funèbre,” mm. 21-24

In addition to the thematic connections between the poems, the inclusion of this musical homage to Debussy’s *Bilitis* songs further highlights meanings in the text. As mentioned previously, the ostinato begins at the end of the first phrase of the third verse, and it ends after the vocalist utters “beaucoup sont morts que j’ai connus” (“many that I have known are dead”). Lazzaro sees the inclusion of this ostinato as a conscious homage to Debussy’s *Bilitis* songs, given the inescapable influence of the *Trois chansons de Bilitis*. While Koechlin completed “Chant funèbre” in 1908, at the time of the cycle’s publication in 1923, Koechlin would have been “well aware that the phrase ‘beaucoup sont morts que j’ai connus’ was accompanied by this

musical pattern now associated with Debussy's *Chansons de Bilitis*.²⁴ Thus, a retrospective look at the homage to Debussy, who had died before the publication of *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, brings a new layer of meaning to the song's emotional expression. While Bilitis reflects on those in her own life who have died, the inclusion of the motive from "Le Tombeau" is like Koechlin's own reflection on the death of the composer whose famous depiction of Bilitis no doubt influenced his own musical setting. Viewed in this light, the ascending Phrygian ostinato thus becomes a sonic representation of grief and memory, representing the grief felt for a fading figure of the past.

Nature, Beauty, and the Dying Woman

No less than Koechlin's musical setting of "Chant funèbre," the poetry itself is similarly imbued with metaphors of death. In particular, the autumnal setting is indicative of Bilitis' own fading existence as she compares herself to the dying earth. She focuses on the physical changes of the season that relate to death, such as the earth becoming "somber like a mourning garment" and the yellow trees which "tremble like cut hair." Taking the full narrative context into account for the latter description, the reference to "cut hair" foreshadows the moment just before Bilitis' actual death in the final poem of "Épigrammes dans l'île de Chypre," "La Mort véritable." Coming to terms with the loss of her beauty, Bilitis acknowledges it as Aphrodite's will, saying, "Aphrodite! Merciless goddess, you wanted that happy youth with beautiful hair should fade from me in a few days."²⁵ Bilitis thus cuts off her hair and gives it as a final offering to the goddess. She captures her final moment in the final verse her last poem:

²⁴ Lazzaro, "Bilitis après Debussy," 171-172. (« bien conscient que la phrase « Beaucoup sont morts que j'ai connus » était accompagnée par ce patron musical désormais associé aux *Chansons de Bilitis* debussystes »)

²⁵ Louÿs, *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, ed. Goujon, 188. (« Aphrodite ! déesse impitoyable, tu as voulu que sur moi aussi la jeunesse heureuse aux beaux cheveux s'évanouît en quelques jours »)

Having cut off all my hair, I twisted it in my belt, and I offer it to you, eternal Kypris! I will not cease to adore you. This is the last verse of the pious Bilitis.²⁶

Like “Chant funèbre,” the remaining middle songs of Koechlin’s cycle, “Pluie au matin” and “Hymne à la nuit” (songs 2 and 4, respectively), reveal an affinity for nature imagery. In “Pluie au matin,” for instance, the morning rain distorts Bilitis’ words as she writes verses in the sand, and in “Hymne à la nuit,” Bilitis becomes intoxicated by the sensuality of the nighttime. The inclusion of poems that center on nature imagery reveal Koechlin’s most important and revered source of inspiration as, according to Orledge, “most of Koechlin’s inspiration came direct from Nature.”²⁷ Nature was not only a source of artistic inspiration for Koechlin, but the composer also saw it as the source of his spirituality as he considered himself as “a pantheist, believing in the harmony of nature, rather than an adherent to any particular creed.”²⁸

It is no wonder then that three of the five poems chosen by Koechlin are centered around nature imagery, and, like the autumnal season signifying Bilitis’ untimely end, these nature images highlight the overarching theme of death. In his musical setting, Koechlin illustrates images of nature by utilizing evocative musical motives, such as the evocation of rain through a consistent sixteenth-note pattern in “Pluie au matin.” The song is a setting of the penultimate poem in “Épigrammes dans l’île de Chypre,” and thus Bilitis’ death fast approaches, her solemn mood reflecting her transition to the afterlife. She laments the fact that she is no longer as desirable or memorable as she once was, saying “the youngest do not look at me; the oldest have forgotten me.” The rainfall that washes away her words in the sand reflects how she herself feels

²⁶ Ibid., 188. (« Toute ma chevelure coupée, je l’ai tordue dans ma ceinture et je te l’offre, Kypris éternelle! Je ne cesserai pas de t’adorer. Ceci est le dernier vers de la pieuse Bilitis »)

²⁷ Orledge, *Charles Koechlin*, 227.

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

as though she is fading away; however, the final verse reveals Bilitis' hope that her memory will survive through those who will remember and sing her songs after she has passed.

Table 7.4 Translation of “Pluie au matin”

Pluie au matin	Morning Rain
<p>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.</p>	<p>The night fades away, the stars leave, here the last courtesans have returned with their lovers. And me, in the morning rain, I write verses in the sand.</p>
<p>Les feuilles sont chargées d’eau brillante. Des ruisseaux à travers les sentiers entraînent la terre et les feuilles morte. La pluie, goutte à goutte, fait des trous dans ma chanson.</p>	<p>The leaves are loaded with shining water. The streams that cut through the paths carry earth and dead leaves. The rain, drop by drop, makes holes in my song.</p>
<p>Oh ! que je suis triste seule ici ! Les plus jeunes ne me regardent pas ; <i>et les plus âgés m’oubliées</i>. [original text: les plus âgés m’ont oubliées] <i>Mais tous il sauront</i> [original text: C’est tout, ils apprendront] mes vers, et les enfants de leurs enfants.</p>	<p>Oh! I am sad and alone here! The younger ones do not look at me; <i>and the older ones forget me</i>. <i>But all will know</i> [original text: That’s all, they will learn] my verses, and the children of their children will also.</p>
<p>Voilà ce que ni Myrtalê, ni Thaïs, ni <i>Glykère</i> [original text: Glykéra] ne se diront, le jour où leurs belles joues seront creuses. Ceux qui aimeront après moi chanteront mes strophes ensemble.</p>	<p>Here is something neither Myrtalê, nor Thaïs, nor Glykère will say, the day that their beautiful cheeks will become hollow. Those that love after me will sing my songs together.</p>

The song begins with a piano introduction that establishes the setting (Example 7.12). In the top line of the piano, a repetitive sixteenth-note figure emerges. The motive, marked with a *ppp* dynamic and *lié* (“light”) articulation, imitates the light falling of rain upon the sand. Underneath the consistent sound of rainfall, the left hand plays a monophonic melody that begins with a foreboding series of tritones in measure 2. In measure 3, the melody becomes tonally nebulous, and the syncopation of triplets against the rain motive further creates a sense of ambiguity. In measure 8, as the melodic motion ceases on an E \flat 7 chord (second inversion), a

monophonic vocal line emerges that reflects Bilitis' lethargic and somber mood and the funereal atmosphere of the scene as she prepares for death. While the vocal melody begins to move in measure 13, its slow and speechlike articulation maintains the lethargic mood throughout the duration of the piece.

Andante tranquille (♩ = 88)

Andante tranquille

ppp lié

pp

Un peu plus lent (très peu) (♩ = 84)

pp

La nuit s'ef - fa - ce,

ppp

Example 7.12: “Pluie au matin,” mm. 1-8

Alongside Bilitis' weariness expressed through the vocal line, the rain motive also continues throughout the piece, symbolizing the relentless erasing of her verses that mimics the inevitability of her own erasure. While the continuous, sixteenth-note "droplets" effectively capture the image of incessant, gentle rainfall, there are also aspects of this repeated motive that enhance the narrative expressed in the text; for instance, while the rain is consistent throughout the song, there are two brief moments where it ceases, and these marked moments coincide with important textual meanings. The first moment in which this occurs is measure 21, as the vocal line utters the word "morte" ("dead") (Example 7.13). Here, the accompaniment shifts to a right-hand tremolo on an E minor chord and arpeggiated fifths in the left hand. This shift in texture stands out against the lighter texture of the measures surrounding it, effectively drawing attention to the word "morte." Although, in context, Bilitis is referring to the dead leaves, the emphasis of the word highlights Bilitis' apprehension toward the concept of death.

Example 7.13: "Pluie au matin," mm. 20-21

Besides this moment of textual emphasis, there is one other place in which the rain motive disperses, and this takes place during the vocal line’s final phrase (Example 7.14). In the preparation of this moment, the vocal line ascends in whole-step movements in measure 33 until resting on a D \sharp on the downbeat of measure 34, and as the vocal melody rises in pitch, the rain drops rise in whole step increments with each utterance. While this builds in momentum, the raindrops abruptly cease in measure 34 as the vocal line introduces the phrase “chanteront mes strophes ensemble” (“[they] will sing my verses together”). The lightened texture allows a clear articulation of this text which is the single moment in the poem which Bilitis expresses a bit of hope in the face of death. However, this moment is short lived as the rain motive returns again in measure 35 on the utterance of the second syllable of “ensemble,” which also serves as the song’s highest vocal pitch (G5). After being interrupted once again by the rain, the vocal line falls down a seventh on the song’s final syllable, noting Bilitis’ defeat and resignation as the rain once again bores holes in her song.

The musical score for Example 7.14, "Pluie au matin," measures 33-35, is presented in a two-staff format. The top staff is the vocal line, and the bottom staff is the piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 3/4. The vocal line begins in measure 33 with a triplet of eighth notes (G4, A4, B4) and rests on a half note D \sharp 4 on the downbeat of measure 34. In measure 35, the vocal line rises to a half note G5. The piano accompaniment features a rain motive of eighth notes in measure 33, which ceases in measure 34 and returns in measure 35. Dynamics include *pp*, *dolciss.*, and *sempre*.

Example 7.14: “Pluie au matin,” mm. 33-35

While Bilitis' somber mood and apprehension toward death is accompanied by the evocation of rain imagery in "Pluie au matin," the fourth song, "Hymne à la nuit," centers on the image of night. Poetically, this text is most unlike the other poems that Koechlin chose to set in his *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* as there are no obvious textual allusions to Bilitis' death or fleeing mortality. Rather, the poem seems to rely more on the themes of eroticism found in early parts of the poetry collection as Bilitis becomes intoxicated with the sensual atmosphere of the nighttime. Phrases that reference the sensuality of the night including "warm air like human breath," "how sweet you are on my lips," and "you enter into me" all hint at the erotic. Despite Bilitis' reverence for the nighttime that ventures on sexual ecstasy, the final verse of the poem, in which Bilitis' tears "bathe both [her] hands," seems to hint that Bilitis' bliss is tainted by a disconcerting emotion.

Table 7.5

Hymne à la nuit	Hymn to the Night
Les masses noires des arbres ne bougent pas plus que des montagnes. Les étoiles emplissent un ciel immense. Un air chaud comme un souffle humain caresse mes yeux et mes joues.	The black masses of trees move no more than the mountains. The stars fill an immense sky. A warm air like a human breath caresses my eyes and my cheeks.
Ô Nuit qui enfantas les Dieux ! comme tu es douce sur mes lèvres ! comme tu es chaude dans mes cheveux ! comme tu entres en moi ce soir, et comme je me sens grosse de tout ton printemps !	O night that birthed the gods! How sweet you are on my lips! How warm you are in my hair! How you enter into me this night, and how I am filled with all your spring!
Les fleurs qui vont fleurir <i>cette nuit</i> vont toutes naître de moi. Le vent qui respire est mon haleine. Le parfum qui passe est mon désir. Toutes les étoiles sont dans mes yeux.	The flowers that bloom <i>this night</i> are all born of me. The wind that breathes is my breath. The perfume that passes is my desire. All the stars are in my eyes.

<p>Ta voix, est-ce le bruit de la mer, est-ce le silence de la plaine ? Ta voix, je ne la comprends pas, mais elle me jette la tête aux pieds et mes larmes <i>lavent mes deux mains</i> [original text: coulent dans mes mains].</p>	<p>Your voice, is it the sound of the sea, is it the silence of the plain? Your voice, I do not understand it, but it throws me from head to toe and my tears <i>bathe both my hands</i> [original text: flow into my two hands].</p>
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When placed in its narrative context, this seemingly inconsequential scene provides an additional clue to Bilitis' state of mind. In the poetry collection, "Hymne à la nuit" directly follows "Hymne à Astarté" in which Bilitis' previously discussed "mad scene" occurs. In addition, "Hymne à Astarté," the first poem of "Épigrammes dans l'île de Chypre," appears directly after "Chant funèbre," the moment in which Bilitis resigns to death in the face of heartbreak. Given this context, it is clear that Bilitis' emotions are still unstable as she grieves the loss of her lover and her fading youth, and this emotional instability perhaps accounts for the emotional outpouring at the end of "Hymne à la nuit."

At this pivotal moment in Bilitis' life, the overarching theme of the poem, nighttime, provides further insights that foreshadow the story's narrative. In the beginning of the poem, Bilitis provides descriptions of the nighttime, honing in on its sensuality; however, in the second stanza of "Hymne à la nuit," Bilitis expresses how the night "enters into [her]," a moment that expresses an intense intimacy with the night. In the following stanza, Bilitis speaks as though she herself is the nighttime, relating parts of her physical body with various nature images, such as the wind being her breath or the scent of night being her desire. While this hallucinatory language is perhaps a continuation of the madness she experienced in "Hymne à Astarté," this evocation of her physical body returning to nature foreshadows the decay of her body after death. In addition, the poetic image of nighttime is often connected to the theme of death; as William Beauchamp explains in his introduction to French poetry through the lens of Victor Hugo's

“Demain dès l’aube,” the nighttime is often utilized as a “symbol of mourning and death” whereas the daytime is its opposite, the “archetypal symbol of life and joy.”²⁹ Thus, as Bilitis embodies the night, she metaphorically embodies death, foreshadowing her ghostly form at the end of her story (and in the song that directly proceeds “Hymne à la nuit” in Koechlin’s song cycle).

Through his many compositions, both vocal and orchestral that address the topic of night, Koechlin developed a number of techniques that he commonly utilizes to evoke elements of the nighttime. For instance, to convey the image of the wide-reaching, starry sky, Koechlin employs what Orledge describes as “chains of wide-spaced polytonal chords converging in contrary motion.”³⁰ Often, the image of expansion is further enhanced by the superimposing fourths or fifths in these dissonant chords, a technique that appears in the opening measures to “Hymne à la nuit” (Example 7.15). Here, a series of dissonant, wide-spaced chords underlines the fluid vocal line that introduces the nighttime scene until the arrival of measure 4, in which the dissonant chords collide in a disparate treble range. This series of clashing chords is additionally marked with the seemingly contradictory performance marking *lourd mais pp et très lié* (heavy but *pianissimo* and very light), an effect that creates the juxtaposition of the heavy, humid air that is “chaud comme un souffle humain” (“warm like a human breath”) and the gentle light of the stars hovering above.

²⁹ William Beauchamp, “An Introduction to French Poetry: Hugo’s ‘Demain, dès l’aube...’” *The French Review* 49, 3 (1976): 386.

³⁰ Orledge, *Charles Koechlin*, 228.

Adagio, très lent (♩ = 44)

*lourd mais **pp** et très lié*

Les mas - ses noir res des ar - bres ne bou - gent pas plus que des mon - ta - gnes;

Les é - toi - les em - plis - sent un ceil im - men - se;

mp : Serrer un peu le mov.

Example 7.15: “Hymne à la nuit,” mm. 1-4

In general, the vocal line is rhythmically free and evocative of speech. In measure 8, a new accompaniment figure emerges in which block chords are played in the right hand of the piano in unpredictable patterns of duplets and triplets (Example 7.16). This hazy

accompaniment, heightened by the consistent use of the sustain pedal, is an example of another technique employed by Koechlin to create the sensual atmosphere of night which involves a “fluid melody with murmuring accompaniment.”³¹

(♩ = ♩) = 60
Toujours lent
mp *sost.* 3

O Nuit qui-en-fan-tas les Dieux_

Toujours lent
3 3 3 3
p *sost.*
très fondu

Example 7.16: “Hymne à la nuit,” m. 8

While the *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* mostly avoids musical depictions of eroticism, the forward momentum in measures 11-14 reflects the suggestive language of the night “entering into” Bilitis (Example 7.17). In fact, the tempo marking *pressez peu à peu* (press little by little), calls to mind Debussy’s setting of Lykas’ erotic dream which culminates in the exclamation “tu entres en moi,” the exact phrase that Bilitis now utters to the night in “Hymne à la nuit.”³² Additionally, the rhythmic movement continues to press, *poco a poco*, and the vocal line rises until arriving on F#5 on the word, “printemps.” After this ecstatic climax, the dynamics and

³¹ Ibid., 228.

³² It is worth noting that death/dying is often used as a metaphor for orgasm in song and poetry. In this instance, the metaphor is flipped, with this orgasmic moment serving as the catalyst for Bilitis “dying” as she becomes the night.

tempo slow again until measure 17, where the mood shifts to a new sense of tranquility, *d'une sonorité très claire* (with a very clear sonority); it is here that the third verse of the poem begins, in which Bilitis embodies the tranquil night.

Pressez peu à peu
Com - me tu es chau - de dans mes che - veux,

sempre legato
bien soutenu

Pressez peu à peu

Com - me tu en - tres en moi ce soir, Et com - me je me sens
cresc. poco a poco *cresc.* *poco* *a*
En pressant eno - core (pour arriver à

poco *mf presque* *f*
gros - se de tout ton prin - temps

mf presque *f* *dim.*
♩ = 126)

Example 7.17: “Hymne à la nuit,” mm. 11-15

The final verse brings a sense of unease as Bilitis seems to become confused, snapping out of her trance when she hears a voice that she cannot place and eventually breaking down into tears. Beginning in measure 30, the vocal setting of the song’s final phrase (“mais elle me jette la tête aux pieds et mes larmes lavent mes deux mains” [“but it throws me from head to toe and my tears bathe both my hands”]) provides a bit of emotional insight for Bilitis’ outpouring of emotions (Example 7.18). At the beginning of this phrase, the vocal line slowly descends by an octave and a seventh, from G5 on the word “mais” (the highest note of the vocal line and effectively the moment of climax) to A3 on the final word, “mains.” This dramatic descent suggests that Bilitis’ tears do not result from her reverent affection for the night, but rather from a sense of defeat. In revisiting Bilitis’ embodiment of the night, which metaphorically foreshadows the eventual loss of her corporeal form in death, this final melodic descent recalls Winkler’s allusion to the “lure of the grave.”³³

Example 7.18: “Hymne à la nuit,” mm. 30-34

³³ Winkler, “Remember Me, But Ah, Forget My Fate,” 112.

The metaphorical image of Bilitis' fading corporeal form is perhaps also alluded to in the song's coda. As the vocal line disappears after its descent into the lower register of the voice, the accompaniment, which has previously carried a lively, "murmuring" undercurrent, similarly fades away. As seen in Example 7.18, the consistent triplet eighth-note figures give way to a series of quarter notes in measure 31, and rhythm is further augmented in measure 35 as the vast, open chords from the beginning return (Example 7.19). Beginning at a *pianissimo* dynamic, the open chords slowly fade to a *pppp* dynamic, and this dynamic fading combined with the outward contrary movement of the chords in the treble and bass clef creates a sense of the corporeal becoming noncorporeal, a solid form dissolving into the darkness of night. This final image serves as a precursor to the following song, in which the listener will encounter Bilitis' disembodied voice, a spirit speaking from the darkness of eternal night.

Example 7.19: "Hymne à la nuit," mm. 35-39

While the inclusions of nature imagery in *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, specifically images of the autumn season, rainfall, and the nighttime, all appear as metaphors for death, Koechlin's affinity for nature and the illustration of nature scenes in his music corresponds to another theme: beauty. In an autobiographical study of his own life and works, Koechlin emphasizes the "search for Beauty above all" and highlights the importance of not only expressing beauty through art, but "finding it in the world."³⁴ Thus, nature remained one of the greatest sources of beauty for Koechlin, a fact that is corroborated by his vast number of songs and programmatic works illustrating nature scenes. While the nature scenes in *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* can be viewed as metaphors foreshadowing Bilitis' death, they also provide a backdrop of beauty to her unfortunate end, effectively creating a beautiful, feminine death worthy of the moniker of "the most poetical topic." The tragedy of death, through the inclusion of images of beauty, thus becomes beautiful, corresponding to Koechlin's own musings on the power of beauty:

The essential thing is this, that the search for beauty dominates and that the joy of this beauty can be stronger than the bitterness of ugliness.³⁵

Throughout *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, Charles Koechlin highlights Bilitis' impending death, and this death is finally realized in the setting of one of the epitaphs written on Bilitis' tomb. Koechlin's unique musical expression of the tragedy of death in *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*, which includes illustrations of Bilitis' dramatic emotions, her internal conflict, and nature metaphors secures Koechlin as "a twentieth-century harmonic precursor who clung firmly to nineteenth-century Romantic sources of inspiration."³⁶ While the subject of death from which Koechlin took inspiration may be an unexpected aspect of Louÿs' erotic *Chansons de Bilitis*, it

³⁴ Charles Koechlin, "Étude sur Charles Koechlin par lui-même," 69. (« recherche de la Beauté avant tout ») (« la trouver dans la monde »)

³⁵ Ibid., 69. (« Mais l'essentiel est dans ceci, que la recherche de la beauté domine et que la joie de cette beauté puisse être plus forte que l'amertume de la laideur »)

³⁶ Orledge, *Charles Koechlin*, 294.

reveals yet another theme that can be extracted from the poetry collection and one of the archetypal representations of which Bilitis embodies: the dying woman.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

This study of the song cycles based on the *Les Chansons de Bilitis* has revealed the multifaceted story of a fictional ancient Greek poet who, according to Claude Debussy, possessed the “most persuasive voice in the world,” which not surprisingly inspired a remarkable variety of musical responses.¹ In each of the musical settings explored here, the composer took inspiration from one of the three main stages of Bilitis’ story: the early years of her life on Pamphylia, her time on the island of Lesbos, or the final stage of her life as a courtesan on the island of Cyprus. Given Bilitis’ various stages of womanhood, her multiple sexual and romantic relationships, and the emphasis of eroticism in the poetry collection as a whole, the differences in the musical interpretations similarly highlight different themes of gender and sexuality that are present in the composers’ chosen texts.

Both Claude Debussy and Rita Strohl were inspired by the early portion of Bilitis’ life, and each conveyed the story of Bilitis’ first relationship with Lykas. As explored in Chapter 4, themes of phallic seduction and oppositional characterization highlight the power imbalance between Bilitis and Lykas in Debussy’s *Trois chansons de Bilitis*, though his choice of poems leaves the details of their relationship vague. While Rita Strohl’s *Bilitis* centers the same portion of Bilitis’ story, her song cycle highlights the sexual violence that taints her relationship with

¹ From a letter from Debussy to Louÿs, dated 16 October 1898. Claude Debussy and Pierre Louÿs, *Correspondance de Claude Debussy et Pierre Louÿs*, compiled and edited by Henri Borgeaud (Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1945), 118. (« la voix la plus persuasive du monde »)

Lykas through the explicit setting of the poems that depict the act and thematic development that reveals the effects of rape on Bilitis' character.

Georges Dandelot's *Quatre chansons de Bilitis* centers on the lesbian relationship between Bilitis and Mnasidika, highlighting the homoerotic element of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* for which the work is most recognized. Dandelot's interpretation sets poems that explicitly depict Bilitis and Mnasidika's sexual relationship, and his musical setting utilizes various techniques of musical eroticism. While the techniques of musical eroticism express the physical relationship between the two women, they also highlight issues regarding lesbian representation in Louÿs' poetry, i.e., the fetishization of lesbians and the inclusion of a power dynamic between the two women that emphasizes negative stereotypes of lesbian characters. While three of the four songs in Dandelot's collection center on scenes of intimacy, the final song, "Scène," additionally offers a snapshot of the personalities of the two women and provokes further questions surrounding the depiction of a lesbian relationship in Louÿs' poetry collection.

Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* centers predominately on the bleakness of Bilitis' last stage of life, especially as it pertains to her impending death. Throughout his cycle, Koechlin utilizes various musical techniques to illustrate or hint at Bilitis' death, and this illustration of a dying woman falls in line with the prevalence of the theme of dead or dying women in art and literature. It also highlights Koechlin's particular affinity for this topic, which he considered "the most cruel and unjust mourning of all," which can also be seen in other orchestrated works including *Chant funèbre à la mémoire des jeunes femmes défuntes* and the fourth movement of his *Études antiques*.²

² Quoted and translated in Robert Orledge, *Charles Koechlin (1867-1950): His Life and Works* (Chur, Switzerland: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1989), 226.

In addition to exploring poetic interpretation through song and various ways in which issues of gender and sexuality can be expressed through song, I have also drawn attention to underrepresented works and composers in the genre of *mélodie*, particularly Rita Strohl, Georges Dandelot, and Charles Koechlin. While Debussy's *Trois chansons de Bilitis* continues to be performed, the songs of Strohl, Dandelot, and Koechlin are rarely programmed. The case studies found in this document reveal how the revival of unknown works and unknown composers can bring new perspectives to the study of music as the songs of Strohl, Dandelot, and Koechlin interpret *Les Chansons de Bilitis* in vastly different ways and highlight various important aspects of the poems. This study focuses on the themes of gender and sexuality that are expressed through these various musical interpretations, and further study of these songs could bring out additional themes found in the text. Georges Dandelot's additional Bilitis settings (*Six chansons de Bilitis* and *Cinq chansons de Bilitis*) have not been covered in this document, and discussion of these songs could provide additional examples and methods of interpreting *Les Chansons de Bilitis* through song. Each of the underrepresented composers included here possess a vast repertoire of *mélodies* beyond their Bilitis songs, and exploration of their songs could provide further insight into the music of these composers and acquaint performers and audiences with unknown repertoire.

During the writing of this document, I have had multiple opportunities to perform the song cycles explored here through lecture recitals, and my close readings of these songs through my research have provided new insights into my own interpretation of them. For instance, knowledge of the narrative, historical, and cultural context of *Les Chansons de Bilitis* gave new perspectives on the character of Bilitis as interpreted in each song cycle, and my musical analysis brought out musical meanings that may have otherwise been overlooked. In addition, by giving

special attention to the issues of gender and sexuality in *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, I became especially sensitive to these important topics in my interpretation of the song cycles. The dissemination of my research through additional performances and publications will provide opportunities for other performers by introducing new repertoire and methods of interpretation, and my exploration of these works and the themes that can be extracted from them can assist both scholars and performers who would like to discover more about these songs and their texts.

Though my study is limited by the analysis of particular works based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis*, the methodologies used in analyzing these songs and the themes of gender and sexuality found therein can be applied to other repertoires of song in a variety of styles, languages, or time periods. Regarding themes of gender and sexuality, my analysis of the theme of the dying woman in Charles Koechlin's *Cinq chansons de Bilitis* brought awareness to the prevalence of this theme in art, literature, and music, though this topic became difficult to navigate due to lack of scholarly resources pertaining to it. I would like to see this topic in particular explored further, not only in French *mélodie*, but also in other repertoires.

As my study has shown, Pierre Louÿs' *Les Chansons de Bilitis* provoked a variety of musical interpretations, and there are many more musical settings of these poems that are mostly unknown and rarely (or never) performed. In order to bring awareness to these works, I have compiled a list of songs and other vocal works based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis* which can be found in the Appendix.

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APPENDIX

List of songs and song collections based on *Les Chansons de Bilitis*:¹

1899: Claude Debussy

Trois chansons de Bilitis

“La Flûte de Pan”

“La Chevelure”

“Le Tombeau des Naïades”

1900:² Rita Strohl

Bilitis, vol. I and II

“Lykas”

“La Partie d’osselets”

“La quenouille”

“La Flûte de Pan”

“La Chevelure”

“Roses dans la nuit”

“Les Remords”

“Le Sommeil interrompu”

“Bilitis”

“Le Serment”

“La Nuit”

“Berceuse”

1904-1905: Pierre Langlois

Quatre chansons de Bilitis

“Paroles dans la nuit”

“La Pluie au matin”

“Chanson”

“La Lune aux yeux blues”

1908: Marcel Pollet

“La Pluie”

“Volupté”

“Le Souvenir de Mnasidika”

¹ Valuable resources that were used to discover these works include the LiederNet online archive, the catalog and digital library of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and a list of works provided by Federico Lazzaro in his article “Bilitis après Debussy.”

² According to Rita Strohl herself, an earlier addition appeared before Debussy’s, though the 1900 edition published by Toledo is the earliest version that has been documented.

1908: P. de Wailly

“Au vaisseau”³

1913: August De Boeck

“Chanson (Ombre du bois)”

1913: Joseph Jongen

“Chant pastoral” (for women’s choir and piano or orchestral accompaniment)

c. 1913: Francisco de Lacerda

“Berceuse”⁴

1915: Kaikhosru Sorabji

“Roses du soir”⁵

1920: Marcel Dupré

Deux mélodies tirées des Chansons de Bilitis de Pierre Louÿs

“Sous la pluie”

“Roses dans la nuit”

1920: Luciano Gallet

Deux chansons de Bilitis (for three voices and piano)

“Phittae Milaie”

“Lykas”

1923: Charles Koechlin

Cinq chansons de Bilitis

“Hymne à Astarté”

“Pluie au matin”

“Chant funèbre”

“Hymne à la nuit”

“Építaphe de Bilitis”

1929: Georges Dandelot

Six chansons de Bilitis

“Le Passant”

“Les Contes”

“Le Sommeil interrompu”

“La Nuit”

“Berceuse”

“Les Petites enfants”

³ Part of a collection of two songs titled *Deux poèmes antiques*. The other song in this set is on a text by Jean Benedict (“Sous un berceau de clématites”).

⁴ Part of a song collection titled *Canções Francesas* (French Songs). The other five songs in the collection borrow texts from various authors including Marc Legrand, Armand Silvestre, and Francisco de Lacerda himself.

⁵ Setting of “Roses dans la nuit” that includes changes to the original text.

1930: Miriam Gideon
“La Pluie au matin” (unpublished)

1931: Georges Dandelot
Cinq chansons de Bilitis
“Le Réveil”
“La Quenouille”
“Conversation”
“Chanson”
“La Pluie au matin”

1933: Georges Dandelot
Quatre chansons de Bilitis
“La Dormeuse”
“Le Baiser”
“L’Étreinte éperdue”
“Scène”

c. 1933: Jeanne Bernard
Trois chansons de Bilitis
“Les Petites enfants”
“Les Contes”
“Berceuse”

1933: Odette Fayou
Deux chansons de Bilitis
“La Lune aux yeux blues”
“La Pluie”

1935: Roman Maciejewski
Pieśni Bilitis (Songs of Bilitis – translated into Polish by Leopold Staff)
“Fletnia” (“La Flûte de Pan”)
“Nagrobek Bilitis” (“Le Tombeau de Bilitis”)
“Wspomnienie Mnasidiki” (“Le Souvenir de Mnasidika”)

1937: André-Marie Cuvelier
Chansons de Bilitis, 1st collection
“Phitta Meliā”
“Hymne à la nuit”
“Le Tombeau des Nāïades”

Chansons de Bilitis, 2nd collection
“Les Contes”
“Chant pastoral”
“La Flûte de Pan”

Chansons de Bilitis, 3rd collection

“Les Petits enfants”

“Au dieu de bois”

“Chant funèbre”

Chansons de Bilitis, 4th collection

“Chanson (Torti-Tortue)”

“Les Danses au clair de lune”

“Chanson (Le premier me donna un collier)”

Chansons de Bilitis, 5th collection

“Les Seins de Mnasidika”

“Le Tombeau d’une jeune courtisane”

“Les Fleurs”

Chansons de Bilitis, 6th collection

“Le Réveil”

“Chanson (Quand il est revenu)”

“Première épitaphe”

“Dernière épitaphe”

Chansons de Bilitis, 7th collection

“Lykas”

“La Pluie”

“La Rivière de la forêt”

1941: Åke Uddén

“Tendresses”

1942: Åke Uddén

“La Poupée”

1944: André-Marie Cuvelier

Chansons de Bilitis, 8th collection

“La Coupe”

“Le Vieillard et le nymphes”

“L’Arbre”

“Roses dans la nuit”

“Paroles dans la nuit”

1945: Åke Uddén

“Chanson (Le premier me donna un collier)”

1946: Robert le Grand

Cinq chansons de Bilitis

“Bilitis”
“Le Serment”
“Chanson (La nuit est si profonde)”
“La Nuit”
“La Danseuse aux crotales”

1954: Joseph Kosma
Les Chansons de Bilitis (opерetta)

1977: Alina Piechowska-Pascal
Chants de Bilitis
“La Lune aux yeux bleus”
“L’Offrande à la déesse”
“La Flûte de Pan”
“Bilitis”

1981: Cecilie Ore
“Le Tombeau des Nàiades”

1986: Michel Decoust
“L’Arbre”⁶

2002: Christophe Sirodeau
“Le Souvenir”

⁶ From the song cycle titled *Sept chansons érotiques* (Seven Erotic Songs). The cycle includes texts from various poets including Louise Labé, Michel Butor, Gabriel-Charles de Lattaignant, Maurice Rollinat, Paul Verlaine, and Clarisse Nicoïdski.