

Classic Poetry Series

Pierre Louys
- poems -

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Pierre Louys(1870-1925)

Pierre Louÿs (December 10, 1870 - June 6, 1925) was a French poet and writer, most renowned for lesbian and classical themes in some of his writings.

Pierre Louÿs was born Pierre Louis on December 10, 1870 in Ghent, Belgium, but moved to France where he would spend the rest of his life. He studied at the École Alsacienne in Paris, and there he developed a close friendship with a future Nobel Prize winner and champion of homosexual rights, André Gide. In the 1890s, he became a friend of the noted English dramatist and homosexual, Oscar Wilde. Although heterosexual, Louÿs enjoyed entree into homosexual circles. Louÿs started writing his first erotic texts at the age of 18, at which point he developed an interest in the Parnassian and Symbolist schools of writing.

In 1891, Louÿs helped found a literary review, *La Conque*, where he proceeded to publish *Astarte*--an early collection of erotic verse already marked by his distinctive elegance and refinement of style. He followed up in 1894 with another erotic collection in 143 prose poems--*Songs of Bilitis* (*Les Chansons de Bilitis*), this time with strong lesbian themes. It was divided into three sections, each representative of a phase of Bilitis's life: *Bucolics in Pamphylia*, *Elegies at Mytilene*, and *Epigrams in the Isle of Cyprus*; dedicated to her were also a short *Life of Bilitis* and three epitaphs in *The Tomb of Bilitis*. What made *The Songs* sensational is Louÿs' claim that the poems were the work of an ancient Greek courtesan and contemporary of Sappho, Bilitis; to himself, Louÿs ascribed the modest role of translator. The pretense did not last very long, and "translator" Louÿs was soon unmasked as Bilitis herself. This did little to tarnish *The Songs of Bilitis*, however, as it was praised as a fount of elegant sensuality and refined style, even more extraordinary for the author's compassionate portrayal of lesbian (and female in general) sexuality.

Some of the poems were tailored as songs for voice and piano. Louÿs' close friend Claude Debussy composed a musical adaptation *Chansons de Bilitis* (*Lesure Number 90*) for voice and piano (1897-1898) in three parts:

- * *La flûte de Pan: Pour le jour des Hyacinthies*
- * *La chevelure: Il m'a dit «Cette nuit j'ai rêvé»*
- * *Le tombeau des Naiades: Le long du bois couvert de givre.*

In 1955, one of the first lesbian organizations in America called itself *Daughters*

of Bilitis, and to this day Louÿs' Songs continues to be an important work for lesbians.

In 1896, Louÿs published his first novel, Aphrodite--Ancient Manners (Aphrodite (mœurs antiques)), a depiction of courtesan life in Alexandria. It is considered a mixture of both literary excess and refinement, and, numbering at 350,000 copies, was the best selling work by any living French author in his day.

Louÿs went on to publish Les Aventures du roi Pausole (The Adventures of King Pausolus) in 1901, Pervigilium Mortis in 1916, both of them libertine compositions, and Manuel de civilité pour les petites filles à l'usage des maisons d'éducation (written in 1917, published posthumously and anonymously in 1927), a parody whose obscenity is almost unparalleled even in the long history of French clandestine publishing.

Even while on his deathbed, Pierre Louÿs continued to write delicately obscene verses.

Absence

Pierre Louys

An Evening By The Fire

Pierre Louys

Bilitis

Pierre Louys

Dances By Moonlight

Pierre Louys

Eros

Pierre Louys

Gyrinno

Believe not that I have ever loved thee. I have eaten thee as I would a ripe fig, I have drank thee as I would drink hot water, I have carried thee about me like a belt of skin.

I have amused myself with thy body because thou hast short hair and pointed breasts upon thy thin chest, and black nipples like two little dates.

Just as one must have water and fruit, a woman is also necessary, but already I have forgotten thy name, thou, who hast passed between my arms like the shadow of another adored one.

Between thy flesh and mine a burning dream has possessed me. I pressed thee upon me as though upon a wound, and I cried, Mnasidika! Mnasidika! Mnasidika!

Pierre Louys

Love

Alas! if I think of her, my throat becomes dry, my hand falls back, my breasts harden and hurt, and I shiver and cry as I walk. If I see her, my heart stops and my hands tremble, my feet freeze, a redness of flame rises to my cheeks, my temples beat in agony. If I touch her, I grow mad, my arms stiffen and my knees give under me. I fall before her, and I go to my bed like a woman who is going to die. I feel I am wounded by every word she speaks. Her love is a torture, and those who pass by hear my lamentations . . . Alas! how can I call her well-beloved?

Pierre Louys

Remorse

Pierre Louys

Remorse

At first I would not reply, and my shame showed upon my cheeks, and the beating of my heart brought pain to my breasts.

Then I resisted, I told him 'No! No!' - I turned my head away, and his kiss did not open my lips, - nor love, my tight-closed knees.

Then he begged me to forgive him, kissed my hair, I felt his burning breath, and he went away.... Now I am alone.

I gaze upon the empty place, the deserted wood, the trampled earth. And I bite my fingers until they bleed, and I stifle my sobs in the grass.

Pierre Louys

The Last Lover

Come, boy, pass me not by without having first loved me. I am still beautiful at night. Thou shalt see that my autumn is warmer than the spring-time of another.

Seek not for love among virgins. Love is a difficult art in which young girls are little learned. I have studied it all my life in order to give it to my last lover.

My last lover, that shalt be thou, I know it. Behold my mouth, for which an entire people has paled with desire. Behold my hair, the same hair that Psappa the Great has sung.

I will gather in thy favor all that is left of my lost youth. I will destroy the memories themselves. I will give to thee the flute of Lykas, the girdle of Mnasidika.

Pierre Louys

The Perfumes

I will perfume all my skin that I may attract lovers. Upon my beautiful legs, in a basin of silver, I will pour the spikenard of Tarsos, and the metopion of Egypt.

Under my arms, crushed mint; upon my eyebrows and upon my eyes, marjolaine of Koos. Slave, take down my hair and fill it with the smoke of incense.

Behold the oinathe (briony) of the mountains of Kypros; I will let it run between my breasts; the liquor of roses which comes from Phaselis, shall embalm my neck and my cheeks.

And come, pour out upon my loins the irresistable bakkaris (unula). It is better for a courtesan that she should know the perfumes of Lydia, than the customs of the Peloponnesus.

Pierre Louys

To Her Breasts

Flesh-Like flowers, O my breasts: how rich you are in voluptuousness! My breasts in my hands, what lack you of softness, and of mellow warmth and of youthful perfume?

Already you are polished like the breasts of a statue, and hard like the insensible marble. In order that you may submit, I will cherish you the more, you that were already loved.

Your sleek and rounded form is the honor of my brown body, whether I imprison you under a necklace of gold, or leave you free and naked, you precede me with your splendor.

Be then happy this night. If my fingers toy with you in caresses, you alone will know them until to-morrow morning; for this night Bilitis has paid Bilitis.

Pierre Louys