Translating the Lesbian Writer: Pierre Louÿs, Natalie Clifford Barney, and "Girls of the Future Society"

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Translating the Lesbian Writer: Pierre Louys, Natalie Barney, and "Girls of the Future Society"

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When Pierre Louys published his famous literary hoax Les chansons de Bilitis (Songs of Bilitis) in 1895, he dedicated the pseudogrec volume of prose poems to “Girls of the Future Society.” Although they were original poems, or what he called “prose sonnets,” Louys presented his work as a scholarly translation of erotic songs composed by a contemporary of Sappho’s whose tomb was recently unearthed by a German archaeologist. Written in the voice of Bilitis, and prefaced by a “Life of Bilitis,” this collection of 158 poems is organized around the three main periods of her life: Bilitis’s childhood as a shepherdess in a little mountain village in Pamphylia (Southern Turkey), which she leaves after losing her innocence and having a child at age fifteen; a ten-year lesbian period spent on Sappho’s island in the company of her beloved Mnasidika; and lastly, a successful career as a courtesan on Cyprus where she retires before reaching her fortieth birthday. Despite the first-person feminine voice and the lesbian content of these titillating songs, the dedication Louys placed on his Chansons de Bilitis seems highly ironic since its intended audience was probably not women at all, but a select literary circle of men including Stéphane Mallarmé, André Gide, Jean de Tjian, Remy de Gourmont, and Henri de Régnier who told Louys that “Reading Bilitis threw me into erotic transports that I am going to satisfy at the expense of my lawful spouse.” Louys wrote to his brother Georges that as much as he would like to have a feminine audience for his work, it seemed unlikely given that “women have only the modesty of words,” and are overly concerned with appearing respectable.3

Yet women did read this work, including a wealthy young American named Natalie Clifford Barney, who not only identified herself as one of those “girls of the future society” but declared that her own Sapphic writing was inspired by Bilitis. When Louys first met Barney, he readily recognized in this exuberant and self-assured young American one of the modern women he may have had in mind when he published Les chansons de Bilitis. At their first meeting, he gave her a copy of his book inscribed with this dedication: “To Natalie Clifford Barney, girl of the future society, her admirer Pierre Louys.”4 Barney first sought out
Louys in 1901 for help publishing a lesbian novel she had written in French, and the following year asked him to help her edit her *Cinq petits dialogues grecs* (Five Little Greek Dialogues) which she, in turn, dedicated: “To Monsieur Pierre Louys by ‘a girl of the future society.’” She was, according to Jean-Paul Goujon, Louys’s “most stable and most constant female friend—perhaps the only true one,” and she maintained this friendship until Louys’s death in 1924. He published little in his later years, becoming a nearly blind hermit who cared only for his books, whereas Barney blossomed into a celebrated salon hostess. She reigned over the lesbian community referred to as “Paris-Lesbos” until her death in 1972 at age ninety-six.

The dedication Barney placed on her Greek dialogues at the turn of the century implies a close connection between Pierre Louys’s lesbian vision as played out by *Bilitis*, and the lesbianism that Barney embodied and championed in her writing and her long life. The relationship between these two “lesbian writers” is indeed a curious one, especially given that contemporary feminist readers have generally condemned the father of Bilitis as exploiting lesbian sexuality for the pleasure of other men. Why would a feminist like Barney, one of the first women since Sappho to write openly about same sex love, befriend a known lesbian pornographer? If we examine Barney’s enthusiasm for *Les chansons de Bilitis* in the context of her own life and work, it emerges that far from endorsing Louys’s lesbian “translations,” she was actually putting the author and his book to use in the service of her own Sapphic vision.

Pierre Louys’s prolific correspondence and the detailed notes he kept about his works in progress reveal what an important work *Bilitis* was to this aspiring writer. Not only did he derive tremendous pleasure from fooling classical scholars, some of whom believed his poems were actual translations, but Louys declared that he was never happier than when composing in the voice of Bilitis. He was constantly adding new poems or revising old ones, and even wrote a secret pornographic version of the *Bilitis* songs that he shared with close friends only. In a key letter to his brother Georges he comments on the originality of *Les chansons de Bilitis*: “I believe that the originality of the book comes precisely from the fact that the question of decency is never raised.” He then refers specifically to “Elegies at Mytilene,” the second part of the book that describes Bilitis’s lesbian escapades, and declares that this part will seem particularly new because

[u]:p until now, lesbians were always represented as *femmes fatales* (Balzac, Musset, Baudelaire, Rops) or as vicious women
(Zola, Mendès, and next to them a hundred lesser writers). Even Mlle Maupin, who has nothing satanic about her, is nevertheless not an ordinary woman. It’s the first time [...] that an idyll is being written about this subject.7

To another friend he confessed that “Elegies at Mytilene” was the only sincere thing he ever wrote. Louÿs anticipated that this part of the book would receive the most attention, and for that reason decided to sign the first edition P. L. As he explained in a letter to his brother: “I will sign Bilitis only with my initials because the morals in the second part are so far from normal and I might be reproached for it in case the volume is a success.”8

Critical reception, however, was generally favorable with critics praising Louÿs’s erudition, his elegant style, the precision of his observations and especially the poetic quality of the songs. Even so, the second part did not escape observation. Writing for the Mercure de France, Camille Mauclair points out that “The entire stay at Mytilene is full of perversity and of Sapphic poetry that is the strangest and the fullest of sound observations of the abnonmal that I’ve ever read. A complete troubling psychology of sexual inversion is drawn there.” He concludes by calling Les chansons de Bilitis “one of the best art books given by this generation . . . a work of art.”9 Classical scholars were not so kind. One outraged German Hellenist, Ulrich-Friedrich von Wilamowitz-Möllendorf, staunchly condemned the book. Another Greek scholar claimed to be already familiar with Bilitis’s poems, and several classics professors even sent him their own translated versions of the poems.

Many young women readers apparently wrote to thank him for the sexual discoveries that reading the Bilitis songs had inspired!

While Pierre Louÿs’s “translated” songs were seen as works of art—albeit titillating ones—his enthusiasm for women, and for lesbians in particular, was not merely literary. He was an obsessive researcher and compiler of all aspects of female sexuality, from pornographic photographs that he collected and took himself—advertising in the local newspapers for models—to lists of sexual vocabulary, techniques, and even personal statistics related to his own numerous amorous adventures.10 Louÿs’s vast erotic output, not intended for the eyes of the public, far outweighs the few titles he published during his lifetime, although nearly all his work centers on women, and reveals a special fascination with young girls, lesbians, and courtesans. All three of these come together in Les chansons de Bilitis, and correspond to the three sections of the book. The lesbian couple that he celebrates in the second part of Bilitis
reflects an aesthetic preference found in many of his other works such as his best-selling novel *Aphrodite* (1896), where he writes:

> When it comes to love, woman is an accomplished instrument. From head to toe, she is uniquely made, marvelously made for love. She alone knows how to love. She alone knows how to be loved. Consequently, if an amorous couple is composed of two women, it is perfect; if there is only one of them, it is half as good; if there are none, it is purely idiotic.

When the twenty-year old Natalie Clifford Barney first read these words, she no doubt felt she had found a kindred spirit. According to her account, she discovered Louÿs poolside, at the summer home of a family friend who had managed to smuggle an illustrated copy of *Aphrodite* into the United States, where it was banned. Not long afterward, Barney followed her mother to Paris, where Alice Pike Barney was taking painting lessons with James McNeill Whistler. Barney began taking lessons too, in French prosody and Ancient Greek, but her time was also taken up with another project—the conquest of one of the most sought-after courtesans of tout-Paris, Liane de Pougy. Pougy’s version of their liaison was published in 1900 under the title *Idylle saphique* (Sapphic Idyll). Barney penned her own version in response, an epistolary novel entitled *Lettres à une connue* (Letters to a Known Woman), and it was with this manuscript in hand that she first approached Pierre Louÿs with the intention of asking him for help with editing and publishing her book.

As a well-known champion of lesbians, Louÿs was an obvious choice, but he was also well-connected in French literary circles and had a reputation for helping to edit his friends’ works as he had done with Oscar Wilde’s *Salomé*, which Wilde dedicated to him. He was also well aware of Barney’s relationship with Pougy since he was close to Henri Albert, Pougy’s literary collaborator/ghost writer, and it may have been this connection that first piqued his curiosity. In any case, Louÿs was immediately enthralled by the charming young American, and expressed his willingness to help Barney get her novel into print. After a first reading, however, he declared it unpublishable, mainly due to her use of some outdated and overused poetic phrases. His advice was to rewrite her book completely. The manuscript was never revised, and Barney was soon on to her next literary project, one that also involved help from Pierre Louÿs.

From the beginning of her career, Natalie Barney made it a practice to solicit advice from writers she admired, using literature as a means to
connect with others. Her famous salon, in fact, was founded on that principle. The literary men she counted among her conquests included Remy de Gourmont, Paul Valéry, and Ezra Pound. Her connection with many of the most gifted women writers of her day is reflected in the numerous works of fiction in which characters modeled after Natalie Barney appear. Although she kept company with serious writers, Barney found it more valuable to live her life as a poem than to waste time rewriting, and she was also notorious for not taking people’s advice when it came to her writing. She considered her own life to be her greatest work of art. George Wickes regarded her as a “facile but undisciplined” writer, and Ezra Pound accused her of “complete mental laziness.” Barney explained her aversion for closely editing her work as a desire to retain some of its spontaneity. Although she wrote quite prolifically, producing several volumes of poetry, in addition to memoirs, verse dramas, novels, portraits, and collections of her witty sayings or epigrams, she described her writing as the “leftovers” of her life. In a recent biography, Suzanne Rodriguez explains Barney’s method of keeping notebooks where she jotted down everything worth remembering, using them as a sort of “haphazard filing system” until she eventually moved these stray bits of information onto full-sized pages that a secretary would then transform into a typed manuscript.

All of Barney’s published writing, with the exception of one novel and a dual-language volume of poetry, was written in French. Barney aspired to write in French for a French audience, claiming that French made her think more poetically than her native tongue. She published her first collection of poems in 1900. Aptly titled Quelques portraits-sonnets de femmes (Some Sonnet-Portraits of Women), the book is a collection of thirty-four love poems, dedicated to about two dozen different women, and illustrated with portraits of her women friends painted by her naïve mother who had yet to discover (or perhaps acknowledge) her daughter’s sexual orientation. Curiously, this slim volume, which George Wickes describes as “a slender output for a poet but a remarkable record for a lover in her early twenties,” is not dedicated to the women who inspired the poems. Instead, Barney chose to dedicate her first book “Aux Petrarques sans Laure” (To Petrarchs without Lauras). Her irreverent dedication implies that male poets may be missing their female muses (that is, they are “without Laura”) because they were stolen away by other women, possibly a veiled reference to her successful seduction of Liane de Pougy. The name “Laura” also evokes the convention of writing love poems to an idealized and inaccessible woman represented by Petrarch’s muse. Such a woman may only exist in the
poet's imagination so that the writer is literally without a real-live fe-
male inspiration. In Donald Stone's study of Petrarchistic poetry, for
example, he describes the sonnet as a "love story between two fictional
characters" whose hyperbolic tone leaves no room for the reality of
desire.  

Barney's sonnets, however, tell a different story. She is clearly play-
ing with poetic conventions, looking for literary models that she could
"stretch" to include a lesbian perspective. With a nod toward Pierre
Ronsard, for example, the final poem in her collection begins: "Ma chan-
son est chantée et nos fleurs sont cueillies" (My song is sung and our
flowers are gathered). In the double role of poet and woman, she in-
cludes her own flower in the bouquet immortalized by her verse. More-
over, the portraits that illustrate her poems clearly distinguish her from
generations of male sonneteers. She not only drew her inspiration from
real-life women who reciprocated her affection, in many cases her lov-
ers were also writers themselves. In her unpublished memoirs, Barney
explains that she set out to learn the strict rules of fixed poetic forms in
French so that she could stray from them "en connaissance de cause"
(with full knowledge)—making room for her own voice by bending the
rules. Armed with this strategy and a lesbian agenda, but still concerned
about maintaining a semblance of propriety to appease her parents, it
was "en connaissance de cause" that she made the leap from sonnets to
Greek dialogues, from Petrarch to Bilitis. It was a logical next step for a
nascent Sapphic poet in the context of fin-de-siècle France. This period
saw a revival of interest in Sappho due to the newly discovered frag-
ments of her poems, and the appearance of several new translations
such as Henry Thornton Wharton's "sexually equivocal" English trans-
lation that Barney soon made her bedside book of choice. Sappho's sexual
orientation was a hot topic of debate among writers and scholars.  

Les chansons de Bilitis were part of that debate, and their blatantly lesbian
content helped pave the way for a female-identified Sappho to emerge.
It provided a literary model that helped authorize young Sapphic writ-
ers such as Barney, Renée Vivien, and others to re-imagine Sappho in a
women-only context that generations of poets and scholars had previ-
ously tried to rewrite into a heterosexual script.  

In the first published letter Barney and Louys are known to have
exchanged, Barney already displays her famous open-minded and com-
plex-free attitude about her sexual orientation that would make her a
model for early twentieth-century lesbians. Writing to Louys about the
novel she wants him to help her edit, she explains:
seriously, my book is not malicious, and, if it’s about two women in love it’s hardly my fault; albinos have never been blamed for having pink eyes, so why would anyone hold being a lesbian against me? It’s simply a matter of nature. As for the rest, I’ve never understood why passion, which doesn’t discriminate against anything, would bother about the gender of its victims. It is striking that Louys and Barney share the same lack of “modesty” about lesbianism that Louys had earlier pointed out to his brother as one of the most original aspects of his Bilitis poems. In Barney, Louys recognized a woman ahead of her times who also looked toward ancient Greece for a model of how open-minded and tolerant she wished society would be. This sentiment shines through in the passionate letter she wrote to him in 1901 when she was first courting his friendship:

You make books of joy and Bilitis has given me more passionate ecstasy and more tender affection than any mistress could. If I have wanted to make books, it’s in order to respond to her and I would like to be one of the voices that her words have awakened and to say to the world, old and deafened by lies, blinded by ugliness that there are already girls of the future society who appreciate what you have done for them and who want to express their gratitude to you, as incoherent and awkward as they may be.

Barney was able to express her gratitude to Louys in the form of her second book, Cinq petits dialogues grecs, which she dedicated to him. Barney’s book of ancient love, comprised of five dialogues, with a poetic prologue and epilogue, is both a reflection and a response to Louys’s Bilitis. It is telling, perhaps, that she gave it the subtitle “antithèses et parallèles” (antitheses and parallels). She wrote it directly under his influence, consulting Louys on an appropriate Greek pseudonym, eventually settling on Tryphè, a name she took from the preface of his Aphrodite. She even requested that the cover of her book be printed using the same lettering as an edition of Les chansons de Bilitis. Barney was clearly writing to please Louys. In a letter to him written while working on her Greek dialogues she states just that: “I am sure that if I work to please you, I will work well.” She not only asked for Louys’s input, but explicitly requested that he help fix up her faulty French and even edit the proofs of the book for her. Despite her promise to work hard to please Louys, she fell short of the task of perfecting her verses to his satisfaction. Her letters take on the tone of an apologetic student
who realizes that she has not lived up to her teacher’s expectations. With the exception of a few poems, Barney declared that she was generally not pleased with her little Greek dialogues. In her letters to Louÿs she calls the book boring, and expresses insecurity about the quality of her written French. Her apologetic tone is not entirely sincere since she is able to justify her refusal to revise the text or even to proof her own work closely by describing how she writes to capture a fleeting state of mind, and how she can only write about something during the moment she lives it. Moreover, she tells Louÿs that her little poems, composed artlessly, were meant to be read quickly. Even a quick reading, however, reveals the many parallels between Barney’s *Cinq petits dialogues grecs* and *Les chansons de Bilitis*.

“Epilogue,” the final poem of the book, for example, is very much in the spirit of *Bilitis*. This was the one poem that really delighted Barney who compared it to Louÿs’s “Léda.” The poem’s speaker is in love with water: “Je suis amoureuse de l’eau qui me purifie des êtres. Je me couche sous les fraîches fontaines et j’ouvre mes jambes aux ruisseaux. J’aime l’eau dont l’étreinte me fuit et dont le baiser me frôle.” (I am in love with water which purifies me from beings. I lie down under the cool fountains and open my legs to the flowing streams. I love the water whose embrace eludes me and whose kiss brushes against me.) In “The Tree,” the opening poem of his *Bilitis* songs, Louÿs describes the young shepherdess pursuing similar pleasures while straddling a moist and mossy tree limb: “Je sentais le bel arbre vivre quand le vent passait au travers; alors je serrais mes jambes davantage et j’appliquais mes lèvres ouvertes sur la nuque chevelue d’un rameau.” (I felt the lovely tree come alive when the wind passed through it; so I locked my legs tighter, and pressed my open lips to the hairy nape of a bough.)

One of the central dialogues in Barney’s book, “In the Time of Greek Decadence” lays out, in the form of a philosophical discussion, the attraction to ancient Greece that Barney shared with Louÿs. They are both enthralled by the hedonistic sensuality they associate with Hellenism in contrast to Christianity’s disdain for the body. Another poem in Barney’s dialogues entitled “Sonnet” reinforces this paganism when the speaker addresses Lesbos with this request: “Venge-toi du mépris de la Laideur immonde / Qui se nomme Virtue . . .” (Avenge yourself against the scorn of the vile Ugliness/ Whose name is Virtue . . .). The dialogue entitled “Sweet Rivalries,” however, diverges sharply from the *Bilitis* model. This dialogue is Barney’s statement on jealousy, as one of the members of a sort of lesbian *ménage à trois* kills herself to make room for her rival. This section also contains a long digression about Sappho who is
described as the perfect poet-lover: “Quand elle parle, il semble qu’elle n’existe que pour l’art; quand elle aime, on sait qu’elle ne vit que pour l’amour.” (When she speaks, it seems that she exists only for art; when she loves, one knows that she lives only for love.) The love Barney had in mind here is not exclusive. She was strictly opposed to fidelity herself, and writes frequently on this topic in her later works. In “L’amour défendu” (Forbidden Love) for example, she points to the example of Sappho:

Et la grande Sapho ne vécut-elle pas en harmonie, non avec une seule, mais avec plusieurs de ses amies, qui, se succédant, éprouvèrent de ces douces rivalités qui furent plutôt un sujet d’inspiration que de discorde, à en juger par les fragments que Sapho, cette “dixième Muse,” nous a laissés.

(And the great Sappho, didn’t she live in harmony, not only with one, but with several of her women friends, who succeeded one another, proving that these sweet rivalries were rather a subject of inspiration than of discord, to judge from the fragments that Sappho, that “tenth Muse,” has left us.)

In Les chansons de Bilitis, however, it is jealousy that destroys the relationship between Bilitis and Mnasidika, and prompts Bilitis to leave Sappho’s island for a career as a courtesan in the service of the goddess Aphrodite. Despite many beautiful and sensual poems, there is much in the “Mytilene” section of the Bilitis songs to offend women readers such as Barney who would not recognize herself in the dynamics of the female couple created by Pierre Louÿs. Besides the poem entitled “Psappha,” where Bilitis finds herself “initiated” by a woman she presumes to be Sappho herself, Bilitis quickly finds a partner, a lovely girl named Mnasidika. Most of the lesbian poems Louÿs wrote are tender or painfully passionate celebrations of this single female couple that mimics a heterosexual relationship. In the poem entitled “The Wedding,” they go through a mock wedding ceremony on Lesbos, with Bilitis donning a man’s tunic to marry her beloved Mnasidika (CB, 95). Bilitis later presents her “wife” with a wax doll that they pretend is their child (CB, 102). There is even a poem in which Bilitis asks her neighbor’s advice about where she can purchase an object she dares not name (presumably a dildo), which she needs because Mnasidika is still a virgin (CB, 117).

One of Pierre Louÿs’s most outspoken critics, Lillian Faderman, criticizes his version of lesbianism as “promiscuous, fickle, narcissistic,
sadomasochistic, and childish based on a heterosexual model.”31 Others see Louys’s depiction of lesbian love as a product of the author’s perverse voyeurism. Elyse Blankley, for example, sees the women in Louys’s *Bilitis* poems as touching “one another for the benefit of the male audience that watches, just as it might do in a Parisian brothel.”32 This is certainly the case in the poem entitled “Pénombre” (Shadowy Light) where Bilitis and her lover pleasure each other under a sheet that hides them from view. “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.” (Nothing in the world, not even the lamp, saw us that night. Which one of us was loved, only she alone and I could say. But men will know nothing of it.) (CB, 105) Gretchen Schultz counters these lines with this appropriate come-back: “nothing or no one, that is, but Louys’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.”33

Louys’s focus on the lesbian couple is an aesthetic choice since he structures his book as a series of brief sensual moments—a single kiss, a crushing embrace, the sight of the lover’s body still imprinted on the warm but tousled sheets—that Bilitis, the former shepherdess who has somehow learned to write poetry, immortalizes in her poems for future generations. What is completely missing from the years that Bilitis spends on Sappho’s island is a notion of community, one that would include a school for teaching young women the art of poetry. This is crucial to the Sapphic vision that Barney promoted in her writing and put into practice in her salon. It is also central to Renée Vivien’s poetry in which sister poets celebrate the rebirth of a Sapphic cult, loving and singing as they imagine women once did on Sappho’s island.34 The two women shared the dream of establishing a community of creative women on Lesbos in imitation of the women disciples who drew their inspiration from Sappho. Barney and Vivien even traveled to Sappho’s island together in 1904 with this in mind. Although their plan was never realized, Barney was able to make a place for Lesbos in Paris in the form of her literary salon.35 According to Lillian Faderman, Barney’s circle “functioned as a support group for lesbians to permit them to create a self-image which literature and society denied them.”36 Literature was at the center of the social gatherings Barney hosted for more than fifty years at her salon on the left bank of Paris. She regularly featured performances and readings of her own and others’ lesbian writing, helped finance publications by her women friends, sponsored a literary prize for women writers only, connected writers with potential publishers,
and translated works to help promote exchanges between Anglophone and Francophone women writers. The format of her Académie de Femmes, which she established in 1927, was developed to facilitate such literary exchanges. Pierre Louÿs, in contrast, wrote community out of his lesbian script. Bilitis and friend are too busy playing house to play school. As Elyse Blankley has observed, “Louÿs’s Bilitis lives among the women of Lesbos, but her contact with them is limited to the exchange of gossip. Thus the female community and its interaction are either trivialized or ignored.”

Louÿs not only ignores community, he also makes a clear separation between the lesbian as lover and the lesbian as writer. The former clearly interests him, while the latter does not. The only indication of how Bilitis possibly came to compose her songs is a single line in the preface “Life of Bilitis” in which Louÿs speculates (behind his translator’s mask): “It is without a doubt this admirable woman [Sappho] who taught the little Pamphylian the art of singing in rhythmic phrases, and of preserving for posterity the memory of dear ones” (CB, 33). The only other mention of writing comes in “Morning Rain,” one of the final poems of the collection. As Bilitis observes the courtesans returning home late with their lovers, she scratches verses in the sand which the rain erases drop by drop. “Oh! Que je suis triste et seule ici! Les plus jeunes ne me regardent pas; les plus âgés m’ont oubliée. C’est bien. Ils apprendront mes vers, et les enfants de leurs enfants.” (Oh! how sad and lonely I am here! The youngest do not look at me; the oldest have forgotten me. That’s fine. They will learn my verses, and the children of their children.) (CB, 187) She concludes that when the other courtesans are old and forgotten, “Ceux qui aimeront après moi chanteront mes strophes ensemble.” (Those who love after me will sing my stanzas together.)

Bilitis’s words are a striking paraphrase of one of Sappho’s famous fragments, with an important difference. “Someone, I believe, will remember us in future,” wrote Sappho, who is believed to have addressed her words to a circle of followers, disciples who would carry on after her. This, at least, is the way Renée Vivien and Natalie Barney interpreted these words, considering themselves as part of the “us” responsible for reviving a Sapphic cult and keeping Sappho’s memory and tradition alive. With his Bilitis, Pierre Louÿs has created a totally different fiction of a lesbian writer, one who defers writing poetry to her lonely retirement years. He gives no indication that she composed her poems as she lived them, reciting her lovely verses to Mnasidika in moments of passion (as Barney was known to do with her lovers), or sharing them with friends. On the contrary, Louÿs invents her poetry as
a nostalgic recreation of the past, divorced in time and space from the acts that inspire it. Writing fills the void for a Bilitis who is no longer desirable, like an afterword to the story of her life, rather than an integrated part. This is the conclusion he reaches in his preface to Les chansons de Bilitis: “It is more likely that, having aged, Bilitis contented herself by singing her memories of a long-past childhood” (CB, 36).

Louys’s (fictive) account of the lonely Bilitis composing in her old age contrasts sharply with the way Barney wove writing, friendship, and community together in her life and work. Whereas Bilitis leaves Lesbos after ten years to make her living sleeping with men, only relaxing with her women friends on her days off (as we see in the poem called “Les amies à dîner” [Women Friends for Dinner]), Barney adopted a lesbian lifestyle that became almost a cult (CB, 172). Renée Vivien makes this distinction clear in A Woman Appeared to Me, the semi-autobiographic novel she wrote about her relationship with Natalie Barney. In the voice of San Giovanni, an androgynous female poet who considers herself a disciple of Sappho’s, she roundly condemns male fascination with lesbians and explains:

“Men see in the love of woman for woman only a spice that sharpens the flatness of their regular performance. But when they realize that this cult of grace and delicacy will permit no sharing, no ambiguity, they revolt against the purity of passion which excludes and scorns them. As to myself,” she added, almost solemnly in the strength of her sincerity, “I have raised the love of noble harmonies of feminine beauty to a faith. Any belief which inspires ecstasy and sacrifice is a real religion.”

The prologue to Cinq petits dialogues grecs expresses some of the same sentiments, as an unknown woman offers the poem’s speaker an all or nothing proposition:

Si tu m’aimes, tu oublieras ta famille et ton mari et ton pays et tes enfants et tu viendras vivre avec moi.
Si tu m’aimes, tu quitteras tout ce que tu chéris, et les lieux où tu te souviens et ceux où tu espères; et les souvenirs et tes espoirs ne seront plus qu’un désir vers moi.

(If you love me, you will forget your family, your husband, your country, and your children and you will come live with me.
If you love me, you will leave everything that you cherish, and the places you remember and those where you hope; and
your memories and your hopes will only be a desire toward me."

According to Joan DeJean, it is with these lines that "Barney inaugurates the Sapphic fiction of 'Sapho 1900' by assaulting her reader with a definition of Sapphism as a totalizing 'cult' experience, a pseudoreligious experience that requires those who would be believers to sacrifice everything else to it. . . ." The Sapphic model Barney embraces and promotes is obviously not the same as Louys's, although she found it useful to implicate him in her rewriting of Sapphism. Bilitis may have awakened Barney's voice as stated in her enthusiastic letter to Louys, but she was clearly not afraid to depart from the Sapphic fiction he established, despite the deferential tone of some of her early letters.

Louys leaves so little place for Bilitis as a lesbian writer in the elaborate scholarly framework he concocted for Les chansons de Bilitis because he designed it to call attention to himself as the author, not to the fictive Bilitis. Some critics speculate that he may have intended the book to be read as an inside joke, not meant for women readers at all. Despite his close relationships with women writers such as Gérard d'Houville (Marie de Régnier) and Natalie Barney, Louys found woman as the object of writing much more interesting than woman as the producer of writing, as suggested by these comments he addressed to Valéry about women poets: "I don't believe in Marceline or in her female rivals. The more I love the heart and body of women, the more painful it is for me to read their verse. But . . . it would take too long to justify."

The cause he espouses in his Bilitis poems is not a Sapphic one promoting the expression of same-sex love by aspiring writers such as Barney. Instead, as Lawrence Venuti has argued, the construction of authorship within Les chansons de Bilitis is masculinist, "a game of poetic one-upmanship" in which Louys, as the original author and "translator" of his text, "competes against classical poets in representing the female as an object of male sexual domination."

Venuti's argument makes it clear that although the respective publications of Natalie Barney and Pierre Louys constitute efforts to translate lesbianism for a turn-of-the-century audience, their motives were quite different. Moreover, the discrepancies between the lesbians that Louys created, and the lesbianism that Barney lived and wrote about seem quite glaring. Yet, it is easy to understand how she, an aspiring writer who first expressed her lesbianism in a foreign language and in a male-dominated poetic form, was in no position to criticize Louys for
the inauthentic role he played as the voice and "translator" of Bilitis. In her later years, the mature Barney would be more outspoken about using her expertise to correct male accounts of female sexuality. She wrote an essay on "Breasts," for example, to counter an article she found offensive and inaccurate, and she was also clear about condemning Proust's Gomorrah as "unrealistic." Barney seemed to understand, as Gretchen Schultz has expressed so well, that "lesbian authenticity is less a myth than a confrontation with and a remaking of myths." Barney's Cinq petits dialogues grecs was a crucial part of that confrontation as she began a lifetime of rewriting, creating her own legend in the process. Put into context, we can appreciate Les chansons de Bilitis as an important stepping stone that Natalie Clifford Barney, with the foresight of a "girl of the future society," used to forge her own path toward Lesbos.

NOTES

1. Pierre Louÿs, Les chansons de Bilitis, ed. Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). Goujon's excellent scholarly edition includes a long, detailed, and extremely useful appendix containing previously unpublished texts and correspondence. All translations into English are my own unless otherwise indicated. All further references to this edition will be cited in the text as CB.

2. Henri de Régnier to Pierre Louÿs, 16 December 1894, Bilitis, 329. The original reads "... que je vais satisfaire aux dépens de l'honneur de mon mari ordinaire" [sic]. Régnier uses the masculine word "mari" (husband) instead of wife (femme), possibly a pun on the name Marie, a reference to Marie de Heredia whom both Louÿs and Régnier were courting at the time. Régnier would marry Marie the following October, although she and Louÿs would remain lovers for several years. It is widely accepted that Louÿs was the father of Marie de Régnier's son Pierre, born in 1898. Pierre Louÿs would marry Marie's sister Louise in 1899. For a full account of Marie de Régnier's relationship with Louÿs, see Jean-Paul Goujon, Dossier secret Pierre Louÿs-Marie de Régnier (Paris: C. Bourgois, 2002). Marie, who wrote under the penname Gérard d'Houville, also wrote a novel about their relationship entitled L'inconstante (The Unfaithful Woman) (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1903).

3. Pierre Louÿs to Georges Louis, 29 March 1895, Bilitis, 314. Note that Pierre began signing his works with an archaic spelling of his family name when he was nineteen years old. His brother Georges retained the more usual spelling, Louis.


7. Pierre Louÿs to Georges Louis, 22 December 1897, Bilitis, 317, emphasis in the original.

8. Pierre Louÿs to Georges Louis, end of 1894, Bilitis, 312.


10. For a better understanding of Pierre Louÿs's erotic writings, see Jean-Paul Goujon, "Pierre Louÿs ou la subversion de la morale," Europe: revue littéraire mensuelle

By focusing on the literary qualities of Louys’s erotic writing instead of its blatantly pornographic content, both Goujon and Phillips appear to be apologists for Pierre Louys.

II.


13. Like many wealthy American families, the Barneys made many extended visits to Europe. When Natalie and her sister Laura were aged ten and seven, they even attended a French boarding school near Fontainebleau named Les Ruches while their mother studied art in Paris. Both girls had learned French at an early age thanks to a series of French-speaking nannies and some French-speaking relatives including their great-aunt Louisa who refused to learn English.


15. The most famous of these in English is Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (London: Cape, 1928) where Barney is the model for Valérie Seymour. Renée Vivien portrays her as Valley in *Une femme m’apparut* (1904; rpt, Paris: Régine Deforges, 1977); she is Laurette Wells in Lucie Delarue-Mardrus’s novel *L’ange et les pervers* (The Angel and the Perverts) (Paris: Ferenczi, 1932); Djuna Barnes calls her Dame Evangeline Musset in her witty satire *Ladies Almanack* (Paris: Titus, 1928); and in Liane de Pougy’s *Idylle saphique* (1901) she is Florence Temple-Bradford or “Flossie.”


25. See letters 12 and 15 in Correspondances croisées.
27. Barney, Cinq petits dialogues grecs, 111.
29. Barney, Cinq petits dialogues grecs, 23.
34. See, for example, Vivien’s poem “Psappha revit,” in Œuvre poétique complète de Renée Vivien, 1877–1909, ed. Jean-Paul Goujon (Paris: Régine Deforges, 1986), 252–53. Female community in Vivien’s poetry is also the major focus in Blankley’s “Returning to Mytilène.”
35. Renée Vivien is the penname of Pauline Tarn (1877–1909), an Anglo-American poet who was one of Barney’s first lovers. Like Barney, Vivien is remembered as one of the first women poets to write openly about lesbianism. Her writing career was short but quite prolific. She published more than ten books of poetry, including two translations from the ancient Greek, and several novels and collections of prose poems, before her death in 1909 at the age of thirty-two. Although Vivien is considered to be a more talented and serious writer than Barney, Pierre Louys did not think highly of her poetry. See Correspondances croisées which also includes letters exchanged between Vivien and Louys.
36. Faderman, Surpassing the Love of Men, 269.
39. Renée Vivien, A Woman Appeared to Me, trans. Jeanette Foster (Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1982), 36–37. Foster’s translation is of the 1904 version of Vivien’s novel. Vivien also published a revised version in 1905 following her trip to Mytilène with Barney during which they reconciled, Une femme m’apparut, rev. ed. (Paris: Alphonse Lemerre, 1905). The second version, which is more flattering to Barney, is a watered-down version of the original novel that portrays Barney as a cold-hearted femme fatale.
40. Barney, Cinq petits dialogues grecs, vii.
41. DeJean, Fictions of Sappho, 280.
42. Qtd. in Correspondances croisées, 33. Ellipsis in the original.
44. Barney, Traits et portraits, 179–84.