

Destins de Femmes

French Women Writers, 1750-1850

John Claiborne Isbell





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27. Louise Angélique Bertin

15 January 1805–26 April 1877



Fig. 27. Louise Angélique Bertin, by V. Mottez. Photo by Adam Cuerden (2019).
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Glanes

L'aube n'a point encor repris sa robe blanche
Et sera longue à s'en vêtir ;
Mais l'épi mûr là-haut depuis hier se penche ;
« Allons ! enfants, il faut partir !

– Non, ce n'est pas le jour, non mère, c'est la lune
Qui, dans la chambre, vient danser ;
C'est son rayon tremblant sur notre armoire brune
Que devant toi tu vois passer. »

La mère, pétrissant une blonde farine,
Prépare le repas du jour ;
Et près du four brûlant une vieille voisine
Viendra veiller jusqu'au retour.

Puis elle appelle encor ; et si l'enfant ne cède,
 Sa rude main l'a secoué,
 Car le jour qui paraît doit, au jour qui précède,
 Par le travail être noué.

Les enfants paresseux, à cette voix sévère,
 Enfin se lèvent en pleurant,
 Et tous, d'un pas boudeur, de la pauvre chaumière
 Ils s'éloignent en murmurant.

La mère vigilante, à travers la montagne,
 A chacun montre le chemin,
 Gourmande le plus grand qui court dans la campagne,
 Soutient le petit par la main.

Si, comme en un sentier, dans le ruisseau limpide,
 Les enfants, pieds nus, vont courir,
 Et s'arrêtent craintifs au courant trop rapide,
 Elle est là pour les secourir.

Ils implorent son aide, et de leurs mains vermeilles
 S'attachent à son tablier,
 Comme on voit se suspendre une grappe d'abeilles
 A la fleur qu'elle fait plier.¹

Louise Angélique Bertin was born in Roches near Bièvres in 1805 and died in Paris in 1877. Daughter of Louis François Bertin, owner of the *Journal des Débats*, and of Geneviève Aimée Victoire Boutard,

1 Louise Angélique Bertin, *Glanes* (Paris: René, 1842), pp. 3–4.

Translation: Dawn has not yet taken back up its white robe / And will be long to dress itself in it; / But the ripe ear up there has been leaning since yesterday; / "Come! children, we must leave!

No, it is not day, no mother, it's the Moon / Which, in the bedroom, comes dancing; / It is its trembling ray on our brown wardrobe / That you see passing before you."

The mother, kneading a blond flour, / Prepares the day's meal; / And near the burning stove an old neighbor / Will come watch till their return.

Then she calls again; and if the child does not yield, / Her rough hand will have shaken him, / For the day which appears must, to the day which precedes, / Be linked by work.

The lazy children, at this severe voice, / Get up at last while crying, / And all, with a sulky step, from the poor cottage / They depart grumbling.

The watchful mother, across the mountain, / Shows to each the path, / Scolds the biggest who runs in the fields, / Holds the little one by the hand.

If, as in a path, in the limpid brook, / The children, barefoot, go running, / And stop fearful at the too-rapid current, / She is there to help them.

They ask her aid, and with their red hands / Cling to her apron, / As one sees a cluster of bees hang itself / from the flower it makes bend.

Louise Angélique was taught by her father after 1811, when France's independent press ended for a time, while her mother, a pianist, likely taught her that instrument. She studied voice with François Joseph Fétis, along with Italian-style composition. For counterpoint, she turned to Reicha, also the teacher of Berlioz and Liszt. Her major works were operas: *Fausto* (1831) and an opéra-comique, *Le Loup-garou* (1827), with libretto by Scribe, which garnered some success. In 1836, the Opéra staged a grander work, *La Esmeralda*, performed for only six nights due to rowdy audiences reflecting her father's exposed political position.² Victor Hugo wrote the libretto but faced censorship in his turn; his *Le Roi s'amuse* similarly closed after one performance in 1832. Critics were condescending to this disabled woman—after contracting polio, she walked with crutches—seeing in her work consolations for her physical infirmity, where Berlioz, who is something of an authority, thought her harmony “virile, forte et neuve,” adding “Mlle Bertin est l’une des têtes de femmes les plus fortes de notre temps.”³ This failure may have discouraged the composer from trying again. Bertin also left twelve cantatas, some instrumental work including six ballades for the piano, five chamber symphonies (all manuscript), and two volumes of poetry, the first awarded a prize by the Académie française. Berlioz dedicated to her the first version of his *Les Nuits d'été*, op. 7, in 1841.

Bertin awaits rediscovery as a composer, and there is argument she merits it. Our focus however is on her two volumes of lyric poetry; let us begin by suggesting that this piece is not the equal of Desbordes-Valmore's “Les Roses de Saadi” (written 1848, published 1860). That however is a high bar. On publication in 1842, *Glanes* won a prize from the Académie française, so the Académie found value in this collection. First, in this poem's plot, there is some blurring of boundaries between the human protagonists and the botany that opens and closes the piece. We have, then, a mother readying her children for the day. They are off, but Bertin won't say where they are headed. Are they gleaning, as the collection's title might suggest? The poems are all untitled and this one gives no reason to think that; indeed, the mother has “une blonde farine” to hand already. What we have instead is a somewhat traditional

2 Michèle Friang and Pierrette Germain, *Louise Bertin, compositrice, amie de Victor Hugo* (Sampzon: Éditions Delatour France, 2019), pp. 55–70.

3 Friang and Germain, *Louise Bertin*, p. 68.

vision of mother and children—a mother hen of sorts—with touches to reduce the risk of cliché here: she has a “rude main” and a “voix sévère”, yet she is “là pour les secourir” as needed. Bertin might have done better with another subject—I’ve found no evidence that she had children—but the range of topics on offer to women poets in 1842 was more limited than today, and she did please the Académie. Let’s turn then to the music and the metaphors. Structurally, this is eight quatrains of alternating masculine and feminine rhymes as well as of alexandrines and octosyllables. The form is demanding and Bertin seems at ease within it, though there is a moment—“Non, ce n’est pas le jour, non mère...”—where the repeated “non” is somewhat clunky. As for metaphors, perhaps the opening “épi mûr” is indeed a presage of gleaning, though harvesters go unmentioned; in counterargument, the family are in “la montagne”, which is not really gleaning country. Let us leave the opening “épi mûr” as unexplained as Bertin makes it. The closing metaphor, for its part, is lovely: the children hang at their mother’s apron as a “grappe”—perfect word, meaning a cluster or bunch of grapes—of bees hangs at a flower. The rather Lamartinian poem perhaps began with that very observation. In all, this is a flawed poem, but one sees why it might appeal to the Académie in 1842. Bertin’s music seems her strong suit, if Berlioz’s testimony counts for something, as one imagines it should. Perhaps this is why she waited thirty years before publishing another poetry collection.

Works

Bertin, Louise, *Glanes* (Paris: René, 1842)

Nouvelles glanes (Paris: Charpentier, 1876)

Sources

Boneau, Denise Lynn, *Louise Bertin and Opera in Paris in the 1820s and 1830s* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Chicago, 1989)

Friang, Michèle and Germain, Pierrette, *Louise Bertin, compositrice, amie de Victor Hugo* (Sampzon: Éditions Delatour France, 2019)