

Marbod, Bishop of Rennes (d. 1123), *Life of St. Thaïs*

Translated by Kenneth Baxter Wolf and the students of his Medieval Latin Translation tutorial (Spring, 2021)—Tommy Burke, Madison Hesse, Eugene Kwon, and Millie Mince—from the Latin text found in Patrologia Latina 171:1629-1634.

Marbod of Rennes was an archdeacon and master of the cathedral school of Angers before being consecrated as the bishop of Rennes in 1096 by Urban II. He was widely regarded for his command of Latin, which he applied to works of both prose and poetry. The subject of the present work is the popular story of the Egyptian hermit Paphnutius (d. 360) and the prostitute Thaïs, whose conversion and redemption he spearheads. The earliest version of the story, in Greek, may date to the fifth century. It was translated into Latin by Dionysius Exiguus a century or two later. It should be noted that Marbod, like any poet concerned with meter and rhyme, made decisions that sometimes challenge the rules of grammar and diction. This is most notable in the inconsistency of tense.

Haec est vita sanctae Thaisidis

This is the Life of St. Thaïs.

Vitam cujusdam mulieris carmine dicam

I will recount in song the life of a certain woman

Ut non desperent qui mundi rebus adhaerent,

So that those who adhere to the things of this world may not despair,

Sed per eam discant quia vult Deus ut resipiscant,

But instead learn through her [example] that God wishes them to repent,

Nec resipiscentes habet ob sua crimina viles,

And that He does not hold those who do repent as vile on account of their sins;

Aut sibi pluris erunt qui crimina non habuerunt

Nor will those who did not have sins be of more [value] to him.

Sed mercede pari jubet hos illosque beari

Rather he commands the former and the latter to be blessed with an equal reward,

Vivitur in coelo concorditer et sine zelo.

which is experienced in heaven harmoniously and without jealousy.

Pulchra puella nimis fuit olim nomine Thaisis

There was once a very beautiful girl by the name of Thaïs,

Aegypto tota propter sua crimina nota,

Known throughout Egypt for her sins,

Namque Deum spreuit de cuius munere vivit.

For she spurned God by whose gift she lives.

Corporis ille decor et ad impia facta dedit cor

That one, beautiful in body, surrendered her heart to impious deeds.

Muscipulam Satanae perituris prostituit se;

She prostituted herself as Satan's trap for those about to be perish;

Ad turpes usus formosos vendidit artus;

She sold her beautiful body for shameful purposes;

Noctes insomnes duxit dum suscipit omnes,

She led sleepless nights until she had welcomed them all.

Tanta sitis stupri fuit illi, tantaque lucri;

There was such a thirst for shame in that one, and such [a thirst] for profit,

Miscuit aetates, spreuit consanguinitates;

That she mixed ages and spurned [any concerns about] blood relations

Concubitus moechos concessis credidit aequos.

She believed all her bedded adulterers to be equal, once these things were conceded.

Difficilis nulli, nisi qui nihil attulit illi.

[She was] hard on no one, except the one who offered her nothing.
Ut domus absque sera fuit omnibus illa chimaera.
That chimaera was like a house without a bolt to them all.
Nobilium multi censu praedivite fulti
Many of the nobles, supported with very rich properties
Facti mendici sunt dum sua dant meretrici.
Became paupers when they give their things to this harlot.
Dum Mars turbat hymen macularunt sanguine limen.
While Mars disturbs the union, they tainted the threshold with blood
Ante suas aedes fiebat mutua caedes,
Before her altars, mutual slaughter was done.
Et de rivali currebant sanguine rivi.
And rivers were running with blood as a result of the rivalry.
Illa premens stratum gemmis auroque beatum
She, weighing down her sumptuous bed with gems and gold,
Gaudet se rixae causam pretiumque fuisse,
rejoices to herself that her price has been cause of the quarrel,
Et testes oris rivos putat esse cruoris.
And thinks the streams of blood to be like oral witnesses.
Motus ex fama sanctus Paphnutius abba,
The holy father Paphnutius, is moved by the news,
Egregia vita signisque potens eremita,
That hermit with an outstanding life and powerful in signs
Efficitur moestus, flet, fundit pectore quaestus:
Is made sad, he weeps, he pours out lamentation from his breast
Hei mihi! quot morbis, quam turpibus interit orbis
“Woe is me! As many die from from the turpitudes of the world as they do from illnesses,
Quanta meo pago barathri surrexit imago!
How great is the image of the abyss that has arisen in my district!”
Protinus exutus laicos vestivit amictus,
He undressed Immediately, and put on lay people clothes,
Dissimulans quod erat dum Christo perdita quaerat;
Disguising what he was, while searching for that woman lost to Christ.
Argenti pondus capit ad quos noverat usus
He takes a quantity of silver, for what purposes, he knew well,
Et petit infandae celeberrima tecta puellae.
And he heads for the most celebrated home of that nefarious girl
Ut fuit intrandi, fuit et data copia fandi;
As the opportunity to enter was given, so was the capacity to speak.
Argentum profert, pretiumque libidinis offert.
He proffers silver and offers the price of lust.
Illa viro rapto: Properemus, dixerat, intro,
She had said, to that man in her grasp: “let us hurry inside.”
Et trahit ad lectum non haec ad agenda profectum,
And she draws near to a bed unmade with an eye to the things that were to be done [on it]
In quo strata cito dixit: Mi charo, venito.
Sprawled out on it right away, she said: “Come, my dear.”
Non faciamus ita, responderat huic eremita,

"Let us not do it this way," responded the hermit,
Namque patens locus est, latebras nos quaerere jus est.
For this place is [too] open; it would be better for us to seek out a more hidden place."
Thais ait contra: Deus aspicit intus et extra,
Thais counters [him], "God can see both inside and out,
Tectaque noctis ei sic sunt quasi nuda diei,
And the cover of darkness is for God like broad daylight.
Quem si formidas, nullo velamine fidas;
If you fear Him, rely on no cover.
Si metuens homines latebras quaeris interiores.
[But] If you are afraid of people [seeing us], and you seek hidden places further inside,
Nescis quod quaeris, quia non metuenda vereris,
You do not know what you asking, because you fear things that are not to be feared.
Humanos visus contemnito pariete fisus.
Pay no heed to people watching, your trust placed in a wall."
Intulit hic monachus mulieris verba secutus:
Following upon the words of the woman, this monk repoded:
Si testis sceleris Deus est, ut et ipsa fateris,
"If God is a witness of sin, as you yourself claim,
Nec locus occultus valet ejus claudere vultus,
There is no hidden place that can be closed off from his gaze,
Ergo supervacue paries opponitur iste;
Pointlessly, therefore, is this wall placed in between,
Visibus humanis sit enim procul arbiter omnis,
For even if the Judge of all is far away from human sight
Non tamen evades cum venerit ultima clades;
You will still not evade the Last Destruction when it comes;
Nam scelerum vindex scelerum fit testis et index.
For the Avenger of sins is made the witness and indicator of sins.
O dilecta Deo, regis coelestis imago!
O beloved of God, image of the celestial king,
Si Dominum nosti, cur servis illius hosti?
If you know God, why are you a slave to his enemy?
Cur pro tam multis tecum pariterque sepultis
Why do you bury yourself along with so many others?
Aeterno digne crucianda cremaberis igne?
Will you, who deservedly are to be tortured, burn in the eternal fire?
Non debes vitae, non debes fidere formae,
You ought not to trust in life, you ought not to trust in beauty.
Omnes terra sumus, cito vita fugit, cito fumus.
We are all earth, life quickly runs away, soon it is smoke."
Tam veris verbis subito perterrita Thais
Thais, suddenly so terrified by his true words,
Vae mihi, vae, dixit; pedibus senis oscula fixit,
said "Woe is me" and placed kisses on his aged feet
Et lacrymas fundens, et pugnīs pectora tundens
Shedding tears, beating her breasts with her fists,
Ore virum blando rogat, et suspiria dando

she, sighing, begs the man with her gentle voice,
Ut stans urbe foris expectat eam tribus horis
to wait for her for three hours, remaining outside in the city
Designansque locum rumpit commercia vocum.
And designating a place, she breaks off the exchange of words.
Inde rapit gazas, pigmenta, monilia, gemmas,
From there she seizes her treasures, her dyes, her necklaces, and her gems,
Vestes, argentum, tripodas, crateres et aurum,
Her clothing, her silver, her tripods, [mixing] bowls, and gold,
Et quaecunque sua fuerat de carne lucrata,
And whatever else she had earned from her flesh,
In mediumque forum convectat opes vitiorum,
And gathered the wealth of her vices in the middle of the forum
Quadringentarum quas constitit esse librarum;
She reckoned it [altogether] to be 400 pounds worth;
Suppositoque rogo: Prius haec, ait, igne cremabo
With fire placed under it, she says: "I will burn these things with fire, rather
Quam pro servatis barathri cremer ignibus atri.
Than, for the sake of keeping them, have myself be burned in the fires of the grisly underworld,
Et prius omnino lecti consorte carebo
And I would rather be entirely without any consort in my bed,
Quam pro commissis barathri demergar abyssis.
Than be submerged in the abyss of hell for having engaged in such things.
O miseri cives! de quorum sum male dives,
O wretched citizens, from whose ruin I became rich
Qui scelus emistis, et cum mercede petistis,
You purchased and sought sin with your money,
Praeteritae vitae fructum spectare venite.
Come see the fruits of my former life!
Pompa superbiorum redit huc, et lucra malorum;
Here the pomp of the proud returns the profits of evil deeds.
Ignis consumet quidquid corruptio gignet;
Fire will consume whatever corruption will beget;
Poeniteat mecum vos, quos scelus inquinat aequum,
May I repent along with you whom an equal sin pollutes,
Participes culpae meritorum participate.
Share as participants in the guilt of your just deserts."
Flens dabat has voces, et flere coegerat omnes,
Crying, she uttered those words, and had driven everyone else to weep,
Cum videt in tepidam simul omnia lapsa favillam
When she sees everything fallen all at once in the warm embers
Evolat absque mora detestans facta priora,
She runs away without delay, detesting her former deeds
Et sequitur sanctum cupiens coelestia tantum.
And follows the holy man, longing for heavenly things alone.
Ille puellarum veniens ad septa sacrarum,
That one [Paphnutius], coming to the walls of the holy women,
Religio quarum contemptrix deliciarum

Whose religion is a despiser of [worldly] delights
 Huic, si deficeret, solamina ferre valeret,
 Would be capable of bringing her solace, were she to falter,
 In cellam modicam gaudentem trusit amicam,
 In that modest cell he thrust his rejoicing companion,
 Obstruxitque foris, monstrans exempla rigoris;
 And he blocked the door, demonstrating examples of rigor;
 Una parte tamen breve jussit inesse foramen,
 But he ordered a small hole to be put in one part [of the door]
 Per quod districtus posset contingere victus,
 Through which she might be able to reach her restricted foods,
 Parvum pondus aquae, panisque die sibi quaque;
 A small amount of water and of bread for her each day;
 Nam potu gelido restinguitur atra libido,
 For deadly libido is restrained by a cold draught,
 Et moritur mundo vivens de pane secundo.
 And one living on day-old bread dies to the world.
 Delicias tales jubet ut sibi dent moniales,
 He orders that the nuns give such "delights" to themselves,
 Neve quid addatur metuenda voce minatur.
 And threatens with a terrible voice that nothing else be added.
 Ergo redire parat postquam sua vota patrarat,
 Then he prepares to return since he had accomplished his vow,
 Cum sic de cella clamat miseranda puella:
 When the wretched girl calls out from the cell, as follows:
 Mi pater, ausculta, nec enim paro dicere multa,
 "Listen to me, my father; I am not intending to say many things,
 Ne rogo discedas donec mihi quod precer edas.
 I beg that you do not depart until you tell me what it is that I might pray.
 Mundi factorem breviter dic qualiter orem:
 Tell me in a nutshell how I ought to beseech the Maker of the universe."
 Nomen ait Christi, quo nunquam digna fuisti
 "The name of Christ," he says, "for which you were never worthy
 Os per pollutum non est producere tutum;
 It is not safe to produce [it] through a polluted mouth.
 Nomen divinum sit ab ore tuo peregrinum,
 May the Divine Name be a stranger to your mouth!
 Sed neque praesumas in coelum tendere palmas,
 Nor should you presume to extend your hands toward heaven,
 Fraude diu blanda quae tractavere nefanda;
 [Hands that], for so long, with coaxing deceit, were drawn to such nefarious things.
 Tantum moesta sede, nec ab hoc sermone recede
 From such a gloomy dwelling, do not stray from these words:
 Qui me plasmasti, quaeso, misere roganti,
 'You who fashioned me, I ask, that you have pity on the one beseeching you.'
 Et caput et mentem conversa tuens orientem,
 Keeping watch, turn your head and mind toward the east,
 Mente licet fessa, nunquam sic dicere cessa.

Even when tired in the mind, never cease to speak this way."

Haec ubi dicta dedit plorans patriarcha recedit.

After he said these things, the patriarch leaves, weeping.

Thais in obscuris solis intenta futuris

Thais, on the dark floor, intent on future things.

Luce fruens clara cordis se mactat in ara,

Delighting in the clear light of her heart, sacrifices herself on the altar.

Jamque malis magnis cruciarat se tribus annis,

She had already tortured herself for three years with great punishments,

Cum Pater ille pius miserando laboribus hujus

When that pious father, seeks to know for himself

Christus utrum dederit veniam sibi noscere quaerit.

Whether Christ had given his favor to that one who was to be pitied for her efforts.

Te petit, Antoni [f. Tunc petit Antonium], par cujus religioni

He makes his way to Antony; no one who was living

Orbis ab extremis vivebat ad ultima nemo,

Was his equal in spiritual determination from one end of the earth to the other

Quid quaerat dicit, quod quaerit postmodo discit.

He tells [him] what he is seeking, what he seeks he presently learns.

Nam jubet insomnes fratres Antonius omnes

For Antony orders all his sleepless brothers

Nocte secutura lacrymis et supplice cura,

The following night with tears and with suppliant attentiveness,

Et precibus sanctis aures pulsare Tonantis,

And with holy prayers to beat on the ears of the Thunderer

Pro qua discenda descendit Paphnutius abba,

For the sake of those things that are to be known, Father Paphnutius approaches

Cuilibet ut clausam dignetur pandere causam.

any one who might deign to lay bare the inaccessible truth

Nec tamen his aperit quid sit quod discere quaerit

Yet he does not disclose to them what it may be that he seeks to learn

Tunc reliquis potior Paulus cognomine major

Then one by the name of Paul, who was better and greater than the rest,

Mentis in excessu, fixo super aethera gressu,

In a departure of the mind, and with a determined step above the aether

Gemmis ornatum cernit radiare grabatum

He sees a couch, ornate with gems, that is shining,

Murice constratum, visuque per omnia gratum,

Covered with purple, and pleasing to the sight in every way,

Quod tanquam stellae tres servavere puellae;

[A couch] that three girls, like stars, watched over

Quae dum miratur soli sibi talia fatur:

While he marvels at the things [that he was seeing], he says as follows to himself alone

Hanc, Pater Antoni, requiem tibi credo reponi.

"I believe that this place of repose has been put aside for you, Father Antony."

Reddita vox, inquit, quae nil dubitabile linquit,

A voice is given in response, which leaves nothing to doubt:

Non cujus dicis, sed Thaisidis meretricis.

“No [it is not the repose of him] whom you speak but that of Thaïs the harlot.”
His ita compertis gressus ad Thaisida vertis,
Having thus ascertained these things, now you turn back toward Thaïs,
Optime Paphnuti, mox fracto carcere duci
O great Paphnutius, to be led to the broken cell,
Praecipis inclusam longo cruciamine tusam,
You instruct the one enclosed, crushed by her extended torture,
Atque renitentem, latebrasque fovere volentem
You console the struggling one, wishing to warm her hiding place,
Consolaris ita: Sit pax tibi, sit tibi vita,
[consoling] her in this way: “May peace be with you, may life be with you,
Non ultra plores, finisti namque labores
Do not cry any longer, for you have completed your labors.
Omnia commissa tibi noveris esse remissa.
May you know that all [the sins you] committed have been forgiven.
Reddidit illa Patri: Quod sub tempore carceris atri,
She responded to the father: “What I endured during my time in that dark prison,
Quo semper luxi, nil longum, nil grave duxi
Where I mourned, was neither long nor burdensome,
Ad peccatorum numerum pondusque meorum.
[In comparison] to the number and weight of all my sins.
Hoc ita me pressit quod nunquam a mente recessit
[That weight of sin] so oppressed me that it never receded from my mind
Naribus ut flatum sic gessi mente reatum.
I bore the guilt in [my] mind like the breath in my nostrils.”
Tunc Pater: Hoc, inquit, tibi nil poenale relinquit,
Then the father says: “Nothing worthy of punishment remains to you.
Pectore quod tristi perfecte poenituisti;
Because you have repented perfectly in your sad breast,
Namque Deo gratus plus spiritus est tribulatus,
For in fact a tormented spirit is more pleasing to God,
Quam tribulata caro cruciamine semper amaro.
Than flesh that is tormented perpetually by bitter torture.
Plus cor contritum probat, inque bono stabilitum,
[God] approves [your] contrite heart, made firm in the good,
Quam si compescis te semper ab omnibus escis.
[More] than [he would] if you [were to] restrain yourself from all foods forever.”
Quinquies illa tribus vixit super ista diebus,
She lived for five times three days beyond this point,
Et sic cum Christo, mundo requievit ab isto.
And so, with Christ, she rested from this world.