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Sanctity and Theatricality

Exploring the Conversion and Representations of Saint Thaïs through Hagiography, Literature, and Art post the Council of Trent

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Abstract
This study concentrates on the multifaceted representations of Saint Thaïs across hagiography, literature, and art, focusing on the narratives of her conversion post the Council of Trent. Exploring verbal and visual texts, the paper identifies four key perspectives: the historical veracity of Saint Thaïs, the evolution of her depictions through cultural and religious history, a semiotic analysis of genre transposition, and her relevance to faith and conversion themes. Furthermore, it allows a general reconsideration of the semiotic value of saints, highlighting how their portrayals reflect and influence the interrelation between religious belief and cultural narratives. This comprehensive examination sheds light on the intricate interplay between religious doctrine and cultural expression in shaping the legacy of Saint Thaïs.

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>*Car il est vrai que les immondices des peuples entrent dans l'âme des saints pour s'y perdre comme dans un puits.*[1]
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> France 1943 (1891): 242

1. Introduction

In this paper, I will focus on hagiographic, literary, and artistic representations of Saint Thaïs. I will refer to the theme of her conversion and the texts, both verbal and visual, that recounted it in modern times, especially after the close of the Council of Trent.

The character of Saint Thaïs is interesting from several points of view. I have isolated four of them, which will determine the parts that compose the present paper. Firstly, there is the hagiographic problem of verifying the historical existence of the saint. Secondly, there is the philological problem of how her representations have evolved over the course of cultural history and, above all, the history of religious ideas. In this second part of the research, we shall wonder how the principles affirmed and disseminated by the Council of Trent influenced literary or artistic representations of the saint and, especially, of her conversion or, vice versa, how these texts reflect, as it were, the ideas of the Catholic Reformation. Thirdly, Saint Thaïs will be the subject of a semiotic investigation, which will address a double problem of transposition. First, a question of content, i.e., the permanence of Thaïs, her story, and her status as a saint through multiple passages from one genre of writing to another: from the hagiographic document to the romanticized biography, from the latter to the poem, from the poem to the opera libretto, and so on. The considerations that will emerge from this part of the talk will probe the following line of research: what are the genre specificities or literary analogies triggered by the discourse that recounts the lives of the saints? The second part of the semiotic question also concerns the problem of transposition, but in relation to expressive form. Which elements remain, and which change, when we translate the saint's biography, through the mechanisms of intertextuality, from speech to image, and from image to sound? Finally, an anthropological question. What is the relevance of Thaïs to general issues of faith and conversion, irrespective of the historical period in which the saint's life was evoked and portrayed? In other words, what is the mythical value, if any, of Thaïs' conversion, and how does it relate to the proliferation of words, images, and other expressive forms that recount it?

I plan to use four strategies to explore the topic. First, I'll look into what's already known about Saint Thaïs. Then, I'll give a quick history of how she's been portrayed in literature over centuries, focusing on a poem from the late 1500s by Ambrogio Leoni that hasn't been closely studied yet. This will include looking at how her conversion is depicted and its connection to the ide-

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[1] "For it is true that the filth of the people enters the soul of the saints to be lost there as in a well"; all translations in the article are by the author, unless when it is differently specified.

as of the time. Third, I'll discuss how her story has been transformed across different types of art, starting with an analysis by Louis Marin of a painting by Philippe de Champaigne. Lastly, I'll talk about the cultural significance of Thaïs' conversion, showing how theater and puppets play a role in telling her story, using Anatole France's version of Thaïs and its opera adaptation by Massenet as key examples.

2. Hagiography

Thaïs is commemorated on October 8 in Byzantine synaxaria, in the Syriac martyrology of Rabbān Slībā, in Slav-Byzantine martyrologies. and, from the sixteenth century, in Latin martyrologies. However, as Agostino Amore, author of the entry «Taisia» in the twelfth volume of the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* (BSS, 12, 97-9), points out, there are several elements that make hagiographers doubt the historical existence of this saint (Cesare Baronio, for example, did not include her in his Roman martyrology (Baronio 1586)). What are these elements? Firstly, the available documents give no indication of the saint's hagiographic details, such as day of birth or place of burial. What's more, the oldest texts recounting Thaïs' life do not even mention her name, while the name of her converter varies between four different versions: Bessarion, Serapion, John, and, more frequently, Paphnutius. A third suspicious element is the date of commemoration indicated by the martyrologies: strangely enough, it coincides with that of the commemoration of Saint Pelagia, whose story has many features in common with the life of Thaïs. It is likely, then, that the latter is merely the product of an analogical multiplication of the stereotypical hagiographic model of the sinful and then penitent woman. Naturally, this multiplication would refer, according to this reasoning, to the archetypal figure of the Madeleine (Mathieu-Pinto 1997). Agostino Amore also rejects the thesis of Albert Gayet, who had claimed to confirm the historical existence of Thaïs through the archaeological evidence of the (supposed) discovery, at Antinoöpolis, of both her sepulcher and that of her spiritual father. The epigraphic data of the inscriptions found by Gayet and reproduced in his essay «Antinoé et les sépultures de Thaïs et de Sérapion» (Gayet 1902), were deemed questionable by the scientific community.

The dossier compiled by Agostino Amore for the *Bibliotheca Sanctorum* is fairly complete from a hagiographic point of view but omits much of the literary tradition that has amassed around Saint Thaïs. Even more deficient is the all-too-brief iconological overview compiled by Claudio Mocchegiani Carpano (*ivi*: 99). As for the first author, since his aim is to demonstrate the inadequacy of historical evidence in support of the saint's existence, he neglects to weigh up the literary tradition and the space she occupied in the religious imaginary of Christianity. From the point of view of literary history, and even more so from the point of view of semiotic analysis, the difference between hagiographic document and narrative invention lies not only in the codification of writing genres, but also in the relationship between texts and extra-textual reality, i.e., in the way the former veridically refer to the latter. In the case of Thaïs, however, it is perhaps more interesting, even in relation to the histo-

ry of religious mores, to abandon this approach of historical verification (or falsification) of textual semantics, and undertake a literary analysis of a saint who was a narrative character before becoming a hagiographic reality.[2] This operation could be described as an essay in the semantics of representational systems, as Louis Marin would have put it.

2. Literary sources

The earliest literary source concerning the conversion of Thaïs is contained in a Greek legend dating back to the fifth century (BHG, II, 261-2, nn. 1695-7). Other versions were written in Syriac (BHO, 249, n. 1137) and Slavonic (Anal. Boll. 82, 1160-1, nn. 8012-19; Suppl., 287, nn. 8012-3). They already outline the fundamental core of Thaïs' story. This basic narrative structure will be transformed, modified, developed, and enriched by many subsequent texts, but it will nevertheless remain faithful to its starting point. Thaïs is described as a publicly sinful woman, probably a prostitute, a dancer, a mime, an actress, or all of these at the same time. One day, a monk converts her. She gives all her possessions to the poor and retires to a cell to atone for her sins. After three years, Thaïs receives a divine sign indicating the end of her penance. She leaves her cell, but a fortnight later God calls her to heaven. This story, with its clear and dramatic opposition between holiness and sin, good and evil, was a great success with medieval authors, who immediately recognized its extraordinary theatrical potential. Among the features that characterize the saint's conversion, several seem to harmonize perfectly with the idea of a Gothic staging: on the one hand, the public and, perhaps, even theatrical nature of sin and redemption; and, on the other, the contrast between the openness of the stage and the enclosure of the cell, which makes it possible to articulate a mythical spectacle, based on dialectics between void and full, closed and open space, life and death, and humanity and divinity.

All these factors meant that the legendary Greek and Slavic texts, which had already been translated into Latin in the sixth century, were transposed in the tenth century into a famous religious drama entitled *Paphnutius*, composed by the Benedictine nun Hrothsvita of Gandersheim. A century later, Mabord, Bishop of Rennes, transformed the theatrical text into a poem. It should therefore be emphasized that, from the very beginning, Thaïs' literary tradition is characterized not only by a dramatic vocation, but also by its readiness to lend itself to transpositions between different literary genres, which is perhaps a consequence of its intrinsically theatrical nature.

When Jacobus de Voragine included the story of Thaïs' conversion in the *Golden Legend* (Jacobus de Voragine 2007), he triggered its widespread dissemination during the last centuries of the Middle Ages. Two scholars have

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[2] Yet it is crucial to note that hagiographic figures were not primarily intended for literary creation, particularly in their origins. If instances of falsification or blending between hagiographic traditions exist, they likely arose from various motives, such as the embellishment of a saint's biography with details absent from their actual life, or the oral mingling of legends that were later recorded in texts.

focused on the literary tradition of Saint Thaïs in this period. In 1922, Oswald Robert Kühne published *A Study of the Thaïs Legend*, with special reference to Hrothsvita's *Paphnutius* (Kühne 1922). A more general overview of medieval texts referring to the Thaïs' legend can be found in Margareta Wietzorek's *Die Legenden der Thaïs und der Maria Aegyptiaca in der romanischen Literaturen, vornehmlich des Mittelalters* (Wietzorek 1939), published in 1939.

How does the *Golden Legend* recount the conversion of Saint Thaïs? Jacobus de Voragine reproduces almost without change the text of the *Vitae Patrum* dedicated to the *Vita Sanctae Thaïsis, meretricis*, which is contained, with a brief philological commentary by Rosweyde, in volume 73 of the *Patrologia latina*. The *Vitae Patrum* are even mentioned as the source of the saint's story in the very first line of the narrative: «Thaïs meretrix, ut in vitis patrum legitur […]» ["Thaïs the courtesan, as is read in the lives of the Fathers […]"] (Jacobus de Voragine 2007: 1166). In short, a clear theatrical dimension characterizes both the text of the Legend and its sources.

Firstly, the harmful influence that Thaïs exerts on the men who frequent her is evoked by a highly dramatic description: «amatores sui prae zelo litibus inter se consertis frequenter puellae limina sanguine juvenum replebant» ["her lovers, out of jealousy, often filled the threshold of the girl with the blood of young men, entangled in disputes among themselves"] (*ibidem*). Next, the text proposes an element that plays a central role in the unfolding of the conversion story and is, at the same time, a typical *mise-en-scène* mechanism, namely, disguise: when Paphnutius sets out to convert the sinful woman, he disguises himself as a gallant young man. Disguise is a form of lying, through which the monk wishes to convince Thaïs of the falseness of her moral principles. Given the importance of these concepts in the narrative structure of the saint's conversion, it may be appropriate to interpret the story using a theoretical instrument elaborated in the semiotics of Algirdas J. Greimas: the square of veridiction (Greimas and Courtès 1979: 417-418). This is a graphic diagram in the shape of a square which, combining the modalities of being and appearing and their contradictories (non-being and non-appearing), produces four epistemological situations: truth, lie, secrecy, and falsity. The story of Thaïs' conversion unfolds all these combinations of essence and appearance: after the moral falsity of the prostitute's conduct and the lie of disguise, the text of the *Golden Legend* stages, like a theatrical canvas, the secret. Upon paying Thaïs, Paphnutius is invited to lie on the woman's bed, but he hesitates, asking for a more secret place to hide this sinful union: «si est interius cubiculum, in ipsum eamus. Et cum duxisset eum per plura loca, ille semper dicebat, quod timeri videbat» ["if there is an inner chamber, let us go into it. And as she would lead him through several places, he would always say that it seemed to be fearful"] (Jacobus a Voragine 2007: 1167). The narrative space is thus doubled, in a kind of *mise-en-abyme*: no place is hidden enough if you wish to escape the gaze of God, for God is the one for whom secrecy does not exist. And it is precisely at the moment when the saint realizes that her secrets will be a truth for God, and that the moral falsity of her life cannot be sheltered under a lie, that the story completes the staging of the square of truthfulness with the description of Thaïs' conversion, that is, her discovery of Christian truth.

Secondly, Jacobus de Voragine's narrative continues to function as a matrix of theatrical indications, for example when he describes the spectacular *autodafé* in which the saint burns, in the town's main square, all the wealth she had accumulated through prostitution «[...] illa collectis omnibus, quaecumque ex peccato lucrata fuerat, perlatisque in mediam civitatem populo spectante igne combussit [...]» ["[...] she gathered all that she had gained from sin, and having brought them to the center of the city, in the sight of the people, she burned them with fire [...]"] (*ibidem*). Similarly, the end of Thaïs' penance is told with a narrative rhythm that evokes staging: following Paphnutius' stern instructions, the saint remains in her cell for three years. She has only a little water and bread to survive, and is forced to dispose of her body's natural water in her own cell («quo jubes, pater, ut ex naturali meatu aquam meam effundam? Et ille: in cella, sicut digna es» ["Where do you command, father, that I pour out my water from the natural passage? And he [replied]: in the cell, as you deserve"] (*ivi*: 1168). Moreover, she is not allowed to pronounce the name of God in her prayers. These three years of mortification of body and spirit culminate in a vision: Paphnutius having asked Antony whether it was opportune to release Thaïs from her cell, the old abbot orders his disciples to spend an entire night in prayer vigil, so that God could reveal to them the reason for Paphnutius' arrival. The answer was received in a nocturnal vision.

All these details encourage us to identify, in the narrative structure that recounts Thaïs' conversion and redemption, the influence of a medieval dramatic mentality, which, starting from an earlier legend, enhances those elements that are more in harmony with the practice of mysteries and other popular spiritual representations in the Middle Ages. In the text we are going to analyze in greater depth, namely that of Ambrogio Leoni, this strong theatrical connotation remains, but at the same time it is inflected according to the criteria of post-Tridentine dramatic ideology.

La Taide / convertita: / rappresentazione / spirituale. / Di Ambrogio Leoni Crocifero, is a poem in free hexasyllables, composed like a theatrical text: five acts, containing, respectively, six, eight, seven, nine, and ten scenes, preceded by a prologue entitled «*l'angelo*» ["the angel"] and separated by four intermissions, «*della morte*» ["on death"], «*del giudicio finale*» ["on the last judgement"], «*delle pene infernali*» ["on infernal punishments"], «*della gloria dei beati*» ["on the glory of the blessed ones"]. I consulted a twelfth edition printed in Venice in 1600 by Gratioso Perchacino, which I found among the books preserved in the library of the *Accademia degli Intronati*, founded in Siena between 1525 and 1527. Significantly, the text of *La Taide convertita* was contained in an anthology of dramatic texts, including Ongaro's *Alceo*, Sforza d'Oddo's *Erofilomachia*, Settizonio's *Roselmina / favola / tragisatiricomica*, Lodovico Dolce's *Il ragazzo* and Giovan Battista Leoni's *La falsa / reputazione / della fortuna*.

It was quite a challenge to locate some information on Ambrogio Leoni, the author of the text, whose very frontispiece reveals that he was a 'crocifero', i.e. a member of the sinful Crosier order. First of all, he should not be confused with Ambrogio Leone, a much more famous figure, professor of medicine, historian and philosopher, about whom we have copious documentation. The

only literary historian to provide some details on Ambrogio Leoni is Giovanni Fantuzzi, in the fifth volume of his *Notizie degli scrittori bolognesi*, printed in 1786 (Fantuzzi 1786). In turn, the Bolognese scholar refers to the third volume of Francesco Saverio Quadrio's *Della storia e della Ragione d'ogni Poesia* (Quadrio 1739-52, 3, 75). According to this author, Leoni's work was reprinted in Milan by Giambattista Bidelli, in 1621, in twelfths, and in Venice, by Lucio Spineda, in 1625, again in twelfths. It would seem, then, that Ambrogio Leoni lived in the early years of the seventeenth century. However, Fantuzzi claims to have seen an edition of *La Taide* dated 1559, and printed in quarto. If this is true, perhaps the text was written during the years of the Council of Trent. Yet it is not impossible that other editions of the same work appeared earlier.

In any case, the fact that it was reprinted at least three times, and that in 1617 Marcantonio Ricci da Cingoli published a prose version of it (*La Taide Convertita, Rappresentazione Spirituale d'Ambrogio Leoni Crocifero, ridotta di verso in Prosa da Marcantonio Ricci da Cingoli*. In Milano, per Jeronimo Bordone, 1617, in twelfths), might indicate that this spiritual representation had a fairly wide circulation.

As far as the author is concerned, the religious order of which he was a member, that of the Crosiers, was instituted by St. Cletus pope and martyr, and was suppressed by Pope Alexander VII on April 28, 1658. The Cruciferi of Bologna were 'Ospitalieri' and had their church and convent in the suburbs of Bologna, shortly after the Porta di Strada Maggiore. In August 1662, Pope Alexander VII decreed the transfer of the church, convent, and garden to the Jesuit-run Collegio de' Nobili of St. Francis Xavier. Subsequently, after the dismemberment of the Society of Jesus, the same properties passed to the Barnabite fathers. The destitution of the Crosiers order prevents us from knowing more about Ambrogio Leoni, as the history of his order is very incomplete in the seventeenth century. He was probably a member of the Bolognese aristocratic Leoni family.

Within the framework of these philological coordinates, I would now like to approach the text of *La Taide convertita* from two different angles: on the one hand, an extra-textual approach, aimed at identifying the status of sanctity after the Council of Trent; on the other, an intra-textual approach, which will analyze the figures of conversion in Leoni's work. As the text of this spiritual representation is extremely complex, both in terms of narrative plot — with its many complications in relation to the Gothic structure of the Golden Legend — and style, which is typically Baroque, I will only be able to focus on a single figure, which nevertheless plays a predominant role in the semiotic fabric of the work: that of the net. My interpretation is intended to emerge from the interaction between intra- and extra-textual data.

To introduce the discourse on holiness in the Catholic Reformation, no text seems more appropriate than the prologue that Giulio Cesare Valentino, translator from Spanish into Italian of the *Flos Sanctorum*, by Toledo theologian and preacher Alfonso de Villega (1534-1615) (Villega 1588), wrote for the second volume the work he translated, dedicated to the Old Testament saints and published in Venice in 1596 by Giovan Battista Ciotti (Villega 1596). In it, the Italian translator explains the theological and spiritual function of sanctity

by means of a curious comparison: the virtues of the saints are compared with those of eyeglasses (in the Baroque period, optics were often used as a source of metaphorical imagery). First, Giulio Cesare Valentino insists on the need to perfect the art of Christianity through the examples contained in the lives of the saints. He cites St. Augustine, according to whom humanity has two paths to God: writing and the creature. Next, he refers to a passage by Nicephorus Calixtus, who recounts that Saint Anthony, a hermit, when asked how he could live in the desert without books, replied, with Saint Paul, that the invisible things of God can be conjectured from visible things. Consequently, continues the translator, we read the lives of the saints because they are the living signs of divine perfection. Yet this formula could harbor an idolatrous attitude, to which Christian authors were much more sensitive after the harsh attacks unleashed by the Protestant Reformation on the Catholic cult of the saints. At the same time, the Council of Trent and the theologians of the Catholic Reformation produced a conceptual framework for ruling out any suspicion of heresy in hagiographic writing and reading. I quote from the prologue to the Italian edition of the *Flos sanctorum*:

Ma bisogna auuertire che si come quelli che adoperano gli occhiali, non se gli mettono per vederli, & fermare in essi la vista, ma perché passi oltre, & per mezzo di quelli mirare l'altre cose, così non dobbiamo [...] fermarci nelle creature, ma per loro mezzo inuestigare Dio, che fece simili operationi, in modo che dobbiamo servirci delle creature, come di occhiali, accioche dalla loro contemplatione passiamo alla contemplatione del Creatore, l'amiamo, & serviamo, & gli consegniamo i nostri cuori. I Santi sono occhiali, chiari, & Cristiani, hanno da seruirsi di mezzo per andare à Dio [...].[3] (Villega 1691, prologue)

The saints are spectacles: we need to use them to see God better, but without allowing our gaze to linger on the spectacles themselves. This image transposes the post-Tridentine theology of sanctity into metaphorical terms. The decree "*De invocatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum, et sacris imaginibus*" ["On the invocation, veneration, and relics of the saints, and holy images"], whose contents Hubert Jedin has described in detail in his monumental history of the Council of Trent (Jedin 1935: 143-188, 404-429; Jedin 1975: 4, 2, 182 *et seq*.), approved at the end of the Council and expounded by the relation of the Bishop of Farmagosta on December 3, 1563 (Ehses 1924: 1098-1103), emphasized the desirability of using saints and their representations, both in hagiography and iconography, as models to be imitated, «quia Dei per sanctos miracula et salutaria exempla oculis fidelium subiiciuntur, ut pro iis Deo gratias agant, ad sanctorumque imitationem vitam moresque suos componant [...]» (Ehses 1924: 1078).

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[3]   "But we must be warned that just as those who use glasses do not wear them to see the glasses themselves, and to fix their sight on them, but so that they might look beyond, and through them behold other things, in the same way, we should not [...] stop at creatures, but through them investigate God, who performed similar operations, so that we must use creatures, like glasses, so that from their contemplation we may move to the contemplation of the Creator, love Him, & serve Him, & give Him our hearts. The Saints are clear glasses, & Christians, must use them as means to go to God [...]."

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The concept of sanctity promoted by the Council of Trent is not new, but emphasizes the exemplary role of the saints in Christianity, thus welcoming, perhaps, some of the suggestions put forward by Melanchthon concerning the cult of the saints in his *Confessio Augustana* (Burschel 1995).

The texts, both verbal and visual, which, after the close of the Council of Trent and the dissemination of the principles affirmed by its theologians, represent sanctity, are profoundly influenced by this emphasis on the exemplarity of the saints. If we compare Ambrogio Leoni's *Taide convertita* with the Thaïs of the *Golden Legend*, the change is obvious. The saint is no longer the isolated protagonist of a heroic Christian story, but the center of a network of human relationships that includes several characters: the hermit monk Paphnutius, as well as Gabrina, Thaïs' servant, and two suitors, who bear the names, premonitory of their characters and fate (*nomina sunt consequentia rerum*), of Caparbio, which in Italian means "obstinate", and Candido, "candid". Leoni's *Taide* scene also features Caparbio and Candido's two servants, named Vafrino and Fedele respectively, plus a number of personifications of virtues or vices, such as "La Penitenza" ["penance"] or "La Voluttà" ["voluptuousness"]. A group of superterrestrial characters completes the list: an angel, Lucifer, the infernal spirits Asmodeo and Astarothe, and a group of demons and furies ("furie").

The plot of *La Taide* is too complex to be easily summed up in a few words. It must be emphasized, however, that this multiplication of characters is neither simply a Baroque caprice nor merely the fruit of a theatrical requirement but stems from a doubling of narrative enunciation that reproduces, by semiotic means, the theological principles promoted by the Council of Trent. Whereas the *Golden Legend* contained only one conversion, that of Thaïs, Leoni's *Taide* introduces both a second conversion, that of the suitor Candido, who renounces the carnal love of Thaïs to embrace a wholly spiritual life, and a failed conversion, that of the suitor Caparbio, who, consistent with his own name, persists in his criminal plans of seduction; at the end of the play, he is abducted by a group of enraged demons, who lead him into the depths of hell. In the semiotic terms disseminated by Umberto Eco (Eco 1979), this post-Tridentine spiritual representation includes in its narrative fabric the specular images of two types of model reader: those who, like Candido, will imitate Thaïs and follow her on the path to conversion, and those who, on the contrary, like Caparbio, will fail to profit from the example of the redeemed sinner and will doom themselves to damnation.

A close relationship between the theology of the Council and the literary representation of holiness can also be seen in the figures Ambrogio Leoni uses in his poem. One metaphorical image recurs obsessively, almost excessively for the contemporary reader: that of the net. A few quotations will suffice to exemplify such repetitiveness: Thaïs' soul is enveloped by amorous laces («amorosi lacci», 1, 1) or by human wrappings («avvolgimenti umani», *ibidem*). At the same time, when Caparbio refers to the monk Paphnutius, who takes his lover away from him, he defines him as a new Circe or Medea, who ensnares young girls in her occult nets («qual novella Circe, ò qual Medea / Hor queste, / hor quelle incaute giovinette / Ne le sue reti occultamente in-

trica», ["like a new Circe, or a Medea / Now these, / now those unsuspecting young girls / She secretly entangles in her nets"], 1,2). Likewise, Fedele advises his patron to free his heart from the ties of Love that knot it, that tighten it («O te beato, se provar potrai / Quanto lieto sia un cor, quanto felice, / Cui legame d'Amor né stringe, e annoda» ["O you blessed one, if you could experience / How joyful, how happy a heart can be, / To whom the bonds of Love neither tighten nor tie"], 2, 1); etc.

Metaphors relating to hunting and fishing are typical of Baroque aesthetics, but in Leoni's spiritual, edifying, and moralizing poetry, nets, laces, knots and wrappings acquire a specific value, which I would like to elucidate by reference to two different texts, one verbal, the other visual.

In the *Carmina Tridentina*, composed by Antonio Sebastiano Minturno in 1564 (Minturno 1564), just after the end of the Council of Trent, the Church is compared to an enormous net that catches the souls of the faithful and saves them from spiritual shipwreck. It is an image that goes back, naturally, to the Gospel metaphors of fishing, and gives the net a positive connotation. At the same time, in the numerous editions of Ripa's *Iconologia*, printed in Europe in several languages between the end of the sixteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth, the net is the fundamental iconographic element in representations of the *Inganno*, of deception, as shown by the engraving that accompanies Ripa's iconological description (Ripa 1988, 1, 215-6). After more than a century, Raimondo di Sangro, the learned prince of Sansevero, remembered this iconography and, in the sumptuous mausoleum he had erected for his family in Naples, used it to represent the conversion of one of his ancestors (Cioffi 1994: 37-38). In a sculpture by Francesco Queirolo, a man freeing himself from a net becomes the symbol of "disinganno", the counterpoint to deception, which Ripa had associated with the net. Among the quotations carved into the open book lying at the foot of the statue, and indicated by the angel, is a verse from the Book of Nahum (1:13): «vincula tua dirumpam», "[For now will I break his yoke from off thee, and will burst thy bonds in sunder] (KJV)".

A comparison of these two texts reveals the way in which the figure of the net is employed by Ambrogio Leoni: it is at once a symbol of perdition and salvation, carnal humanity and divine spirituality, good and evil, vice and virtue, sin and redemption. This ambiguity is not accidental but finds its justification in the systems of representation that the Christian civilization, especially during the Reformation promoted by the Council of Trent, uses to describe, understand, and encourage spiritual upheavals. As I have tried to demonstrate (Leone 2004), conversion poses a problem of ineffability for both the self and those who represent it, be they hagiographers or painters, because it is expressed in an instant that is a paradoxical fusion of good and evil, absence and presence of faith. Consequently, this spiritual trigger is often rendered by ambiguous symbols, such as Saint Augustine's fig tree, Saint Magdalene's ointment, or Saint Paul's horse. Thaïs' net embodies the same semantic mechanism and, at a time when the Church emphasized both the first conversion of heretics, infidels, and atheists, but also the second conversion of sinners or simply lukewarm believers (Armogathe 1982), effectively represents the possibility of retaining the identity of the self even after the upheaval of conver-

sion.

The identity of the subject in the representation is a semiotic problem, a fact that encourages us to move on to the third part of the paper, dedicated to the problems of transposition of genre and medium.

3. Transposition

The theory of intra- and inter-semiotic translation and transposition is vast. For the purposes of this paper, I will refer to a theory developed by the Italian semiologist Omar Calabrese, which classifies the different types of translation and transposition by considering them as stylistic phenomena (Calabrese 2000).

With regard to the identity of Saint Thaïs, her conversion and her sanctity across different genres, the permanence of a core of narrative elements (the sin of prostitution, the monk's disguise, the burning of riches, penance in the cell, the meeting between Paphnutius and Antony, the saint's liberation, her death), guarantees the transmission of the fundamental content of the story of the converted sinner from one writing style to another.

The question of transposition between different expressive substances (for example, from writing to painting) is much more complicated. Louis Marin, faced with the *Paysage avec sainte Thaïs libérée de sa cellule par Paphnutius*, painted by Philippe de Champaigne between 1654 and 1656, wonders about the possibility of correctly reading an image, when it condenses, in a single instant, a story that the written text spreads out over several years (Marin 1995):

> Comment savoir si Dieu a remis les péchés de la courtisane recluse dans sa cellule ? Comment connaître le véritable sens de l'arrivée de Paphnuce auprès de saint Antoine? Comment discerner les signes de Dieu ? Comment connaître ce qu'ils indiquent, ce qu'ils ordonnent ?[4] (*Ivi*: 68-69)

Louis Marin responds to these questions with a subtle hermeneutic bricolage, unfolding and deciphering the visual synthesis of the painted image to find an interpretive path hidden both in the folds of the landscape and in the way the depiction of Thaïs refers to the other landscapes in the same series: those of Saint Pelagia, Saint Mary the Egyptian, and Saint Mary Penitent. The four images divide the story of an ideal spiritual path into fragments of four moments of real life, through which the vicissitudes of conversion and sanctity are distributed.

Nevertheless, this fragmentation can be reconciled with the unity of a narrative because it is the transposition, through changes in figures and style, of a written story that is itself in turn translation, that of the *Vies des saints Pères des deserts*, translated into French by Arnaud d'Andilly and published in Paris in 1647 (Andilly 1647). Louis Marin has elucidated in exemplary fashion the links between this publishing venture and Port-Royal spirituality. For

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[4] "How do we know that God has forgiven the sins of the recluse courtesan in her cell? How can we know the true meaning of Paphnutius' arrival at Saint Anthony's? How can we discern God's signs? How can we know what they indicate, what they command?"

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my part, I would like to emphasize that the relationship between Arnauld d'Andilly's writing and Philippe de Champaigne's painting is part of a wider tradition, in which the iconographic representation of Thaïs' sanctity is often linked to her hagiographic narrative. This profound link was established as early as the very first images dedicated to the saint, namely in the illustrated editions of the *Golden Legend*, printed in the fifteenth century: for example, in the *Legend* de la Zainers Gallery (fol. 22v), in Augsburg, printed in 1471 (Schramm 1922, 2, ill. 8; Bohm in LCI, 8, 428), a xylograph depicts Thaïs' conversion. Other hagiographic works reproduced, modified, and transmitted the saint's iconography: the *Buch der Heiligen Altväter*, printed in Augsburg in 1482 (fol. 307; Schramm 1922, 4, ill. 1017); the *Solitudo sive Vitae eremicolarum*, in Sadeler's edition, published in 1621, containing 86 engravings; the *Lebenschreibung der heiligen Altväter und derjenigen Frauenpersonen* [...], published in 1761.

In the migrations — from one style to another, from writing to painting — of the figures that represent Thaïs' sanctity, the theatrical dimension of her story and, above all, of her conversion, plays an eminent role, in that it creates a kind of hyphen between the time of narration and the space of visualization. This theatrical dimension also concerns the anthropological value of Thaïs' story, which is highlighted by Leoni's *La Taide*, but is further explored by Massenet's *Thaïs* from Anatole France. This value could be expressed as follows: Thaïs is a woman who sins by showing off her body. In some versions of her story, this sin even translates into a theatricalization of the saint's countenance: she is a mime, an actress, a woman who disguises herself and plays a role that does not correspond to the truth of her soul. At the same time, in literary and artistic representations of the saint, disguise and, more generally, theatricality become an instrument of salvation: the monk saves Thaïs' soul by disguising himself and, therefore, transforming himself, albeit for a very short time, into an actor. But at the more general level of representation (Leoni's "rappresentazione spirituale"), this same transformation affects the relationship between Christianity and spectacle: through the story of Thaïs, the Christian civilization attempts to reconcile itself with the concept of staging. As Silvia Corandini has shown in her essay *Teatro e spettacolo nel Seicento* (Corandini 1990: 52-79), the Catholic Reformation used theater and, more generally, theatricality as an instrument of persuasion and conversion: on the one hand, the theatricality of religious art (painting, sculpture, architecture) and rites (processions, canonizations, ceremonies); on the other, theater, which is embodied in all the new or renewed forms of sacred spectacle. The story of Thaïs justifies this new rhetoric and expresses it in narrative form.

When Anatole France retells the story of Thaïs, he transforms it profoundly, but retains and highlights, in the representation of her conversion, the anthropological and spiritual value of theater. I do not know if the French Nobel Prize winner read Ambrogio Leoni's *Taide*. He certainly could have. In the prologue to his *Puits de sainte Claire* (France 1895), he writes:

J'étais à Sienne au printemps. Occupé tout le jour à des recherches minutieuses dans les archives de la ville, j'allais me promener le soir. [...] Sur la voie blanche, dans ces nuits transparentes, la seule rencontre que je faisais était celle du R.P. Adone Doni, qui alors travaillait comme moi tout le jour dans l'ancienne Académie degli Intronati.[5] (*ivi*: 1)

France worked all day in the same library where I found Leoni's book. He might have read it (textual clues seem to confirm this, such as the importance of the net metaphor in France's *Thaïs*). In any case, theater, and especially puppet theater, with its enormous metaphysical potential, was a fundamental source of inspiration for France's *Thaïs*. His imagination was spurred by Signoret's puppet performances in Paris in 1888 (Bancquart 1984: 1325). Curiously, the creation of a literary work with many similarities to France's *Thaïs*, Flaubert's *Tentations de Saint Antoine*, was probably inspired by a puppet show, Père Lagrain's *Mystère de saint Antoine*, staged in his puppets' theater in Rouen (Dumesnil 1962: 81-3; Foucault 1995: 15). In the narrative fabric of France's Thaïs, the redemption of the theater and the glorification of the body as an instrument of spiritual salvation occurs much more vividly than in Leoni's *Taide*. In the French writer's interpretation, theater is the site of Thaïs' damnation (Paphnutius sees her for the first time when she plays the role of Polyxena in a tragic pantomime), but also the occasion for her sanctity. The flute, «semblable à celles dont jouent aux festins les filles de sa profession» ["similar to those played at feasts by the daughters of her profession"] (France 1943: 228), which she receives in her penitential cell from Albine, the convent's abbess, becomes an instrument for celebrating the Lord's praises all day long. Similarly, when Thaïs is released from her cell, not after three years, but after sixty days, not by Paphnutius' return, but by a door that opens spontaneously, for the rest of her life she employs «son art et même sa beauté à l'édification de ses sœurs» ["her art and even her beauty for the edification of her sisters"] (*ivi*: 229). She portrays before them «les actions des femmes fortes et des vierges sages de l'Écriture» ["the deeds of the strong women and wise virgins of Scripture"] (*ibidem*). She imitates Esther, Deborah, Judith, Mary, sister of Lazarus, and Mary, mother of Jesus. In a few words, she acts.

4. Conclusions

In the brief and necessarily incomplete excursus I have just presented on the sanctity of Thaïs and its literary and artistic representations, from the Middle Ages to modern interpretations, I wanted to highlight in particular the role this vast tradition has played in Christian civilization, especially in relation to the spiritual semantics of conversion and the theological conception of theater. These two elements are inextricably linked, for when Thaïs leaves

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[5] "I was in Siena in the spring. Busy all day with meticulous research in the city archives, I went for walks in the evening. [...] On the white road, in those transparent nights, the only encounter I had was with R.P. Adone Doni, who then worked like me all day in the ancient Accademia degli Intronati".

her cell, it is not only the saint who is redeemed, but also the idea of sacred representation.

The present article has focused on the complex portrayals of Saint Thaïs, exploring her representation through various mediums and the evolution of her narrative post the Council of Trent. By examining the historical accuracy of Saint Thaïs, the development of her depictions, a semiotic analysis of genre transposition, and her significance in the context of faith and conversion, the study has brought to light the profound interconnections between religious beliefs and cultural expressions. This thorough investigation not only offers a nuanced understanding of Saint Thaïs' legacy but also prompts a broader contemplation of the semiotic value of saints, underscoring how their representations mediate between spirituality and societal narratives.

Crucially, the relationship between sanctity and theatricality emerges as a key theme, suggesting that the sacred and the performative are not mutually exclusive but rather deeply intertwined aspects of religious experience. The theatricality inherent in the stories of saints like Thaïs — where the dramatic unfolding of conversion and penance plays out — serves as a powerful vehicle for conveying spiritual truths and the transformative potential of faith. This blend of sanctity and spectacle underscores the role of narrative and representation in fostering a deeper engagement with the divine, highlighting the capacity of religious stories to encapsulate and express complex theological ideas and human experiences. Through this lens, the article articulates a compelling argument for reevaluating the role of theatricality in religious narratives, positing it as an essential element in the articulation of sanctity and its resonance within the broader cultural and historical context.

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