

CISTERCIAN STUDIES SERIES: NUMBER TWO HUNDRED-NINE

SAINT MARY OF EGYPT
Three Medieval Lives in Verse

Translated by
Ronald Pepin
and
Hugh Feiss OSB

Cistercian Publications
Kalamazoo, Michigan

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The work of Cistercian Publications is made possible in part by support
from Western Michigan University to
The Institute of Cistercian Studies.



Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data

Saint Mary of Egypt : three medieval lives in verse / translated by
Ronald Pepin and Hugh Feiss.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-87907-209-4

ISBN-10: 0-87907-209-1

I. Mary, of Egypt, Saint—Poetry—Translations into English.
2. Monasticism and religious orders—History—Middle Ages, 600–
1500. I. Pepin, Ronald E. II. Feiss, Hugh. III. Flodoard, of
Reims, 894–966. *De triumphis Christi*. English. Selections. IV.
Hildebert, Archbishop of Tours, 1056?–1133. *Vita Beatae Mariae
Aegyptiacae*. English. V. *Vida de Santa Maria Egipcíaca*. English.

PA8129.S25 2005

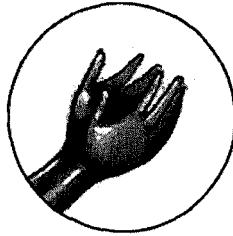
871'.03080351—dc22

2005033844

Printed in the United States of America.

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HILDEBERT
OF LAVARDIN

THE LIFE OF
SAINT MARY OF EGYPT

THE LIFE OF SAINT MARY OF EGYPT^{1*}

CANTO ONE

Just as winter does not nip laurel, nor fire burn gold,
So neither riches nor glory did vex Zosimas as a boy.
Things which quickly perish and those which teach harm
He spurned, renounced, and removed from his
mind and hand.

When he became a monk, he was vigilant in the work
of a monk,
And resolving to follow the teachers of justice and equity,
He insisted upon restraining the law of his own years:
He insisted, and in a short time, with the ways
of his age changed,

He surpassed the ways of his teachers as their teacher.
As his weak age passed beyond the boundaries of boyhood,
His gifts grew, and at the same time his crown increased.
For him nothing was a greater burden than to pamper his
limbs with rest;

Nothing was more unpleasant than not to punish his guilt.
The witness of this was little sleep, rough clothing
And food and bedding; now glory, but then torture.
The witness of this was the monk's color, and flesh
unknowing of Bacchus:

Not flesh, but a thin hide, pale, worn down by whippings,

¹The latin text of *Vita Beatae Mariae Aegyptiacae* can be found in volume 71 of the *Patrologia Latina*, and in a new, recently published edition: *Hildeberti Cenomanensis Episcopi Vita Beate Marie Egiptiace*, ed. Norbert Klaus Larsen. *Corpus Christianorum. Continuatio Mediaevalis* 209, Turnhout: Brepols, 2004.

Although I have not attempted a verse translation, I have preserved the line by line structure of each canto. Readers of Latin may still delight in the steady cadences of Hildebert's leonine hexameters, in his classical allusions, in the word play of his poetry. I hope that the literal translation provided here makes his distinctive tribute to Saint Mary of Egypt accessible to English readers.

Taught to struggle against itself, taught to serve the spirit.
 Amidst these torments, the melody of his holy mind
 used to sing
 Hymns to Christ whenever his tongue was silent.
 His mind, ever conscious of what is right, did
 not separate itself
 From the corruption of the tomb. God knew this;
 man knew otherwise.
 In such ways, while he pressed on zealously
 with psalms and songs,
 He saw the mysteries of Heaven and of things to come.
 He saw and he learned, and with such hope
 he won many battles.

Captivated by hope, Zosimas increased in holy
 deeds just as
 A pond grows from a stream or a sluggish fire from olive oil.
 And he was mindful that morals are beneficial, mindful
 of avoiding applause;
 When he fought well, he took care that his fame
 did not soar.
 The more care he took so much the more did it soar,
 And against his wish it reported every
 work as praiseworthy.
 Countless people came there to be taught, whom he taught
 As their position, age and rank demanded,
 Excelling the greater ones as the moon excels lesser stars.

While Zosimas accustomed himself to these things,
 his pride increased,
 And he said these words to himself: 'Whatever right order
 and justice bid,
 I choose, I follow, I love: I proclaim what must be
 learned and retained.
 Great hardship and scant sleep weaken my limbs.
 These things I chose as a boy, and as a boy I accomplished
 these and more.

Now I am the leader of the flock, the oar and anchor
of the law;

Now I am worthy of heaven, holy in deed,
thought and word.

Alone have I fought with the world to a favorable end.

Admiring these things, the people, the clergy, the
flock of monks

Seek me, hear me, love me and do what
my voice proclaims'.

While Zosimas was boasting of such things and
of his merit,

A certain man, to whom the spirit revealed his failings,
disclosed them to him again:

'Now you have struggled well; you have overcome
well where permitted.

Nothing contends with you; your flesh serves,
your mind rules.

But yet the end of this struggle is doubtful, and when you
can be subdued,

You should not say "I have conquered".

For who conquers or is conquered is shown in the end.

The rewards of the victors depend on the end of the toil;

As Scripture says, "the end crowns, not the fight".

When you fight well, when you think all is accomplished,

Pride, which attacks afterward, remains to be conquered.

Unless this is conquered, the promised crown is denied.

O grief! a faithful man is oft overcome by these weapons;

Under this leader a rose is sometimes turned
into a thorny shrub.

Remember, if you will, to stand opposed to that monster,

And do not presume so much to call yourself holy,

Or to say that you are deserving of God's promises
before the saints.

There are many who surpass you on the scale of life;

So that you might know them, ask at the banks
of the Jordan.

There a band of monks worships the King of Heaven.
 When you dwell with the monks, do what they do,
 avoid the rest.
 Hurry, go! delaying means a mighty ruin'.

He went, he departed quickly, and he knocked at the
 gates; they opened.
 Then, the abbot was greeted, and he spoke these few words:
 'Why do you come here? Explain'. Zosimas said, 'I wish
 to be instructed,
 And I wish that the great heap of my sins
 might be disclosed'.
 The roughness of his clothing, his suppliant voice, the
 grace of his countenance,
 And the signs of his holy mind supported
 the petitioner's prayer,
 And the father responded: 'No one, dearest brother, no one
 Cleanses the soul of sickness except the Creator
 of the world.
 Ask that your bad ways be curbed and, then, that your
 good ways be instructed.
 Yet, if this assembly pleases you, or this peaceful place,
 If, a great palm, you wish to be joined to small shrubs,
 You may stay. See if the humble habits of this
 sheepfold are beneficial
 And choose with us the mallow of this place as your fodder.
 The greatest of shepherds will nourish us with his own food,
 Food feeding the mind that hungers for nothing after this.
 Nothing is more satisfying to the soul than to be fed by
 the sight of Him'.

Indeed, Zosimas agreed to these conditions
 and remained there.
 He remained, and in his new life in his cell,
 increasing as much
 By the encouragement of the monks as by the
 brandishing of weapons,

He saw fierce battles; he praised, learned, served and loved.
It was the concern of this band of monks, the delight of
this excellent band

To hear teachers of the law, to instruct the young,
not to favor

External appearance, to value justice, to keep the laws,
To say nothing rashly, to avoid wrath, envy, strife,
Curses and pride as if they were deadly poisons.

They did not touch salt, fish, wine, pottage, straw or
Linen; they held it a sin to use such things.

For them there was no taste of herbs, no property, no
mention of possessions;

There was no adornment for the hair, no
thought of wealth.

No one envied the abbot because of the cost
of his clothing or

The disparity of his table, nor, in fact,
did brother envy brother.

Their food and clothing were equal, and tumult
was far removed.

Their drink was the river, their festive food
was edible plants,

Their clothing was goats' hair, their hard belts were rope,
Their joys were the return of the fallen, their sorrow the
straying of the fallen.

Their reading the *Lives of the Fathers*, their admonition
the harmony of brothers.

Their conversation was about God or the holy deeds
of pious people.

Because of their watchful ways, leisure was far off, a psalm
was in their mouth,

Their flesh was weakened by much torture and
by rare warmth,

And the flesh made known its works by weeping and
by frequent retreats.

None of these men knew public rumors, the markets,
External affairs or the changes of customs.

The reason for this was their secluded abode,
their closed doors,
Their stern doorkeeper, a flock and shepherd that
were both austere.
Those men of the cloister had no established officials nor,
Except for their shepherd, did they have a prior.
If a matter demanded something or the father
saw the need,
The concern of each monk was to obey both the matter
and the abbot.
Indeed, the shepherd showed what had to be done, and
he did it
Himself, a prelate prepared to be a servant more than
all the rest.
He was not accustomed to exhort more than to serve.
He was an ornament of the blessed and a mirror for monks.
He was a light in the darkness, cloistered there,
but everywhere renowned.
He was the primacy of morals, a school of justice, a
whipping-rod of guilt,
A cross to himself, a model to his flock, a way to Life, a
glory to the law.
He was known to rejoice for one rejoicing, to grieve
for one grieving.
Severe to these, mild to those, he became all things
to all men.

CANTO TWO

My story reminds me to set forth certain things which the
monks used to do.
At the time when the people, purified by holy baptism,
began to pay
Tithes on the sum total of days for the forgiveness of sins,
The monks also went forth from their cells to new battles,
But first each one, having confessed his transgressions
to the abbot,

Strengthened his soul beforehand and benefitted his body
With the healing taste of the sacraments and of food.
Then the customary blessing was sought. It was given,
They exchanged kisses, and then at last the
gates were opened.

After farewells were said, and both the company and
place were left behind,

The band of monks went forth at once, separated, and
entered the desert.

As custom demanded, some of them remained at home
Not to guard their goods which were accessible to a thief,
But lest the cell should be without the holy offices.

It was made ready by sacred studies and prepared by
Cleansings of the soul; it was poor in feasting, rich in virtue.
Having left their house and openly avowed their retreats
and their spirit,

The monks went forth, each separately, to whatever place
his choice took him.

With equal vows and with witnesses removed,
each one strove,

Prostrate, to sing psalms, to wash away guilt with tears,
To please you, O Christ, with the sufferings of torn flesh,
To rejoice in you as his companion, leader, end and rest.
Each alleged you to be his defence in battle, each made
you his witness,

Each awaited you as his crown, each had you as his help.

They pursued their studies and to an equal
degree they sustained

Their hearts with holy words, their flesh with roots or herbs.

Some of them had bread; the fruits of palm trees refreshed
Some of them instead of tables of delicacies:

The acorn or the wild olive refreshed them instead
of the festive banquet.

Each gathered these things in the desert at a certain time,
And at certain hours each took rest and a little sleep.

And he was greatly frightened, since he thought it
was a phantom.

Agitated by the sight, he recovered through the sign
of the cross.

Then, with his strength put forth, he followed the path
of the one running.

He ran, and neither toil, age nor the haunts of wild
beasts hindered him.

Hurry, Holy Old Man! You are about to see things better
than you hope.

What you see and follow are the footprints of a woman;
A woman goes before you, a woman who is
not inferior to you.

As with her foot, so with her life does this
hermit surpass you.

By her retreats she has so earned merit that now she
is renowned everywhere.

In her retreats she learned well to conquer the world. She
conquered, this woman

Stained by rain-storms, black from the sun, bent by old age,
Hairy in her exposed parts, uncovered in parts that
should be covered.

The scant, snow-white hair on her head grew rough,
Scarcely touching her shoulders, scarcely touching her neck,
Uncombed, straggling, accustomed to diffuse
itself without order.

The woman was whole before, but now her whole flesh
despised that whole;

Now the whole woman was at war with her whole self.¹

The woman successfully disdained mortal companions,
And with a swift pace she fled from Zosimas who had
been met by chance.

Zosimas followed her and asked her to stop, but she
went on nevertheless.

¹Here I have retained Hildebert's repetition of *tota* in the Latin.

He cried out more loudly than usual: 'Go more slowly,
 whoever you are.

Wait! I am hindered from advancing by fatigue
 and old age.

Wait for a weary man. I am not a wild beast.
 Hold your step.

I am a small thing, indeed, but a man, a sinner, and I
 Acknowledge the same Christ, I visit often the
 sanctuaries of monks;

Here I sigh for pardon for my transgressions.

Do not run away. Stay a little while. Fear the haunts
 of wild beasts,

For the sake of Christ's name, for the rewards that
 you have merited.

Servant of God, stand still. Bless me. Grant what I ask.

Do you not dwell in this wilderness for Christ?

Why do you not listen, at least, because of Christ's name?'

She stopped, and, covered over by her hands, she said:

'Zosimas, I am a woman foremost in acts of sin.

Devoid of clothes, I am embarrassed at the sight of men,
 And modesty for my uncovered groin does not allow me
 to face you,

But since I know that you are a servant of Christ, what
 you seek will happen,

If you give me something by which I might conceal
 a woman's shame.

You want me to speak or to stand still; then turn away
 and give me clothing'.

Then his cowl was given; the woman was clothed
 by it and said:

'Father, why do you pursue the hidden retreats
 of a wretched woman?

Why, or where is your course? Here the lion roars,
 the bear growls.

What good can you hope for in this land of lions?'

While she spoke these words, the monk was
prostrate before her;
He prayed to be blessed, but the woman, also stretched
out on the ground,
Addressed him as 'Holy Father'. The monk saluted her as
'Most Holy Mother'.
Each cried out 'Bless me', and each pressed the other
for a blessing.
This was the cause of their strife; this was the
hermit's sole strife.
The rest of their life was harmonious and without strife.
While they contended thus, the holy woman
spoke as follows:

CANTO FOUR

'Father, you offend me if you do not
consider things properly.
You truly offend when you, a man, ask of a woman that
This—which a man ought to grant to a woman—be
granted to you.
Allow me to speak the truth: a transgressor of the law
is he considered
Who asks that those things be given which can
rightly be refused.
You, a man, you, indeed a monk, you, likewise a priest,
Are impelled by these three roles to yield to
a woman's prayer.
By custom the hand anointed with holy oil, whose
Office is the grace of this gift, orders you
To bless a sinful woman, not to be blessed'.

The father replied: 'O Holy Mother, it is clear enough.
It is clear, Holy Mother, how great your merits are.
For although I was unknown to you and far removed,
Nor were you told what my way of life was, what
my order was,

You knew all; you were not even silent about my name.

Those facts teach how great you are and how
pleasing to God.

Therefore, as you please Him, as you move Him,
so you please me.

If you ask, He will give. Ask; your way of life
will support your wish.

Their way of life assists the wishes of the blessed.

God heeds this and pays it worthy rewards.

There is no turning from this on account of the
difference of sex,

Nor is a crown given or taken away according to person.

Grace or merit gives to each one the gift sought'.

The woman yielded to these points and to the tears
of the one begging her.

She rose and, with few words spoken first, inquired:

'What peace is there for the holy churches? What
is their status?

With what zeal of kings is the sanction of laws practiced?

With what care do the people preserve human rights?'²

He reported that because of her merits
and blessed prayers

The worshippers of Christ were happy and tranquil due
to joyous peace,

And that faith was flourishing. After this he persuaded her

To pray that what now flourished might not
ever grow weak;

That by the antidote of prayers she might
establish and strengthen

A sense of fairness in the rectors of venerable churches.

He said more things besides; she obeyed, prostrated
herself and prayed.

In her soul she rose to heaven, she gave thanks in silence,

²I have translated *mortalia jura* as 'human rights'.

Her soul entreated in secret without any outcry, and her
Gestures gave signs of an outcry, but her mouth
made no sound.

While she prayed thus, Zosimas was amazed,
and he revered

Her mouth, her hair, her face—all possessing much piety—
And her pale cheeks now full of the foreboding of death.

All the assertions of blessed men are that

Whatever was seen, it bore witness to her virtue.

But things more wondrous than the ones told occurred,
For while she put forth at length the various songs of her
Divinely-inspired heart, she hung as if suspended in the air,
Now entirely removed at a distance from the earth,
And as if she were unwilling to endure contact
with the earth.

Then her purified body remained raised on high.

Thus before the eyes of the monk she was a guest
of those above

For an hour, the woman's flesh to be joined
to those above forever.

At such occurrences Zosimas was sorely afraid and
thought it an

Evil omen or something which was truly dissonant
from the woman.

But she taught him that he was deceived, and she won
back the brother

Who, badly agitated, returned to himself. He was
recovered by these words:

'Ah! where are you carried off to? What are you doing,
Father? Why are you

Troubled? What is this stupor of mind? I perceive well
that you perceive badly.

You have sinned against me when you thought
me a phantom.

I am a woman of wretched fortune, a criminal more
than a woman.

I am mortal flesh, palpable, material and, if you
 do not know,
 Flesh which lives because of a soul, which
 needs food, which
 Is changed by time, which warns of blood and ashes.
 This which I am now I can give assurance of myself,
 But what you have seen, what you were amazed
 at while nearly
 Speechless, is not attributed to me, for God effects this.
 If something virtuous is done, it happens through the
 work of Heaven;
 If either you act rightly or think rightly, it also
 comes from above.
 We are a mere shadow, we are smoke driven by a storm,
 We are hay of the field, flesh first and filth afterward.
 The shape of things perishes, and another is
 given every day.
 While thus we are changed, we also in silence
 bear witness to
 What a thing promises to become, where our
 nature sends us,
 What we are or will be, where we are going and whence
 we have come.
 All things are certain announcements of humankind's end'.

CANTO FIVE

Afterward, when Zosimas believed that nothing came
 from this woman by chance,
 He acknowledged his fault and begged forgiveness
 with suppliant prayer.
 He urged her with tears and with the most profound sighs
 Not to conceal anything from him, but that she reveal
 what she was, from where,
 By what nourishment she was sustained,
 who accompanied her.

And the father added these words: ‘Answer,
O Most Holy Mother.

It will be useful to be heard; Christ wants these things
to be disclosed.

He suggested this journey to an old man, and with Him
as a guide I came.

He gave me little to fear in the land of wild beasts,
He directed my steps. He fortified a weary man
with his strength.

He mitigated the coldness. He taught me to
endure the heat.

Unless God had aided him, who could have
borne such hardships?

I have come through the haunts of lions
for a particular good.

From there let it be carried back to where it will be
a glory to Christ.

Let this torch, this renowned jewel go forth
from these hidden places.

God does not want the illustrious lights of the world
to be concealed,

By whose rays the winter of souls is relieved.

Therefore, report what you have done, for the
praise of Christ.

How well it is recounted, by this is our neighbor edified!
To be silent about moral lessons is truly a sin’.

He spoke these words and returned to his prayers
with abundant tears;

The woman lifted up the prostrate man and addressed
the one uplifted:

‘Woe to me! How many tears am I asked to remember?
What series of wicked deeds and what worldly contagion
Do you seek out, my Father? Do you strive to know more
than my sin?

Whom would I not shock if I should set forth
in order my life,

A base life, a life to be kept secret, a life that
feared no crime?

What hearing can you grant to a woman's lewd acts?
Or what person mindful of morals might tolerate these
memoirs of shame?

What shall I aim for or what shall I do? To display this
wound causes shame,

But if it is concealed, the remedy for the wound is lost.
Eclipsed by this sad decision, the praise of Christ is lost!

When ills are healed, unless thanks are rendered
on this account,

It happens that guilt returns to the ungrateful person.
Lest I offend so, I shall tell of my shameful life and how
God bathed the sores of my soul with his balm.

It is expedient that I be embarrassed for an hour in the
presence of a monk,

That I might not be so before the face of God in the
presence of the saints'.

She said these words and wept; she blushed and feared
to make report.

She looked upward and she looked down; confusion
altered her expression,

Shame constricted her face, there was profuse sweat
on her whole body.

If a part was begun, it scarcely came to the end.

Finally, reproving the sins of the life which had
been asked about,

With her face covered by her poor attire, she spoke thus:

CANTO SIX

'The country of the Nile brought me forth
from noble stock,

But after I grew up, I destroyed the reputation
of my family.

Then my father on one side and my reprimanding mother
on the other

Often imparted to me in my tender age the precepts
of a strict life.
Gathering the decrees of decency, my mother, as
is the custom,
Taught me to forget the occupation that virtue
does not commend,
And with threats added, she said: "Be like
the Sabine women,
Offer hope to the chaste; be serious in speech,
modest in expression,
And on your young face let the stern matron prevail.
No one has learned too quickly how
to avoid harmful things;
It is right for any age to strive after modesty."
I remember that my supportive parents warned me
of these things,
But the warnings of each parent were tossed to the winds,
And my decency began to be wickedly despised
from my twelfth year.
Thereafter, my bones took on the shameful heat of passion;
Thereafter, when I realized that the union
of a true marriage was
Banished, and that my sluggishness, my shame
had not yet perished,
I endured the loss of my virginity without recompense.
And lest my parents opposing me might delay my wishes,
I left my homeland and went to Alexandria.

'When I reached the place, I was considered to be a
public place for sin.
Nor was that enough, since, when a man was lacking to me,
I roamed about the districts and, solicited by no
one, I solicited,
Disreputable in my attire, roving in eye,
lewd in expression.
With glances given, I was a crime of nature and an enemy.

My gait was feminine, and my speech declared
me a seductress.

They cried out in public (it makes me ashamed to recall
this woman of shame!).

My whole being cried out (Madness is less troublesome!).

Thus forgetful of myself, the guide and
path of destruction,

I spent every one of my days in stories of sin.

I called the day sad on which by chance I was
admonished about virtue,

Which day, as often as I violated it, I treated
as a solemn festival.

Songs that referred to sin and that taught lewdness
I loved, I learned, and I surpassed mimes with my melody.

And when I could excite worn out dancers or older men

To no passion, then disdaining them, I
enticed young ones.

I bought them with any sort of gift,

And among my partners in sin I
distributed individual gifts

Which the needle and spindle might yield for our use
in this life.

Because of these tools the hand
of the pauper approached;

By these tools a house, sustenance, clothing was sought.

By these a sharer of our desires was granted, and a
successor of our guilt.

How much (for I remember) did abundance
of wine please me?

How earnestly desired was food, from which lust is aided?

And when there are these two mighty enemies of our sex
and time of life,

A third foe is added to them: drunkenness.

Because of these plagues, with me and through me
the world was ruined;

Never was it or will it be able to be burdened
by an equal destruction.

Whoever made me go less astray multiplied
his own troubles,

And I preserved for myself the prize of
always acting wickedly.

When I did not know whom I might surpass in sin,
Through manifold sin, after all others, I
even surpassed myself.

For just as I had first dared going astray and then gave in
to raging desire,

Whatever sin I had committed, I justified the worst evils.
And not even my ripe age put limits on my wickedness.

Hateful in the eyes of God for sins of such kind
and such degree,

I spent three times three years and twice times four.

Behold, on a certain day (but how shall I relate this to you?

How wretchedly I fell!), I saw youths on the shore.

I saw them and enticed them. I asked where they
wanted to go.

Smiling, the first one said: "We are going to Jerusalem".

I inquired whether they might accept a companion. The
same one added:

"If you enlist as a sailor, you will go. Our ship stands open
in the air."

Then I said: "In place of a sailor on a ship, I have
prepared pay for you.

If you seek pay, you will possess me in place of pay.

I have nothing except myself, but if it pleases
you, use me.

I have nothing better. Take the enjoyment of this gift.

By this condition I alone shall satisfy all,

If, from all, sustenance comes to me alone."

After these words had been spoken, the young man made
his way in the sand

And, as if the frivolity of my words had been
scorned, he exhorted

The sailors, he called his comrades, he urged, 'Let's sail!'

I bound my hair, I painted my face for sin,
I threw away my spindle, I girded myself for the
experience of sailing.

I proceeded into the vessel; the sea promised prosperity.
The wind was favorable, the youths sailed with the wind
by their skill,

And for a few hours we made use of the watched coast.
Ah me! Where am I sinking? With what speech shall I
tell the rest?

Grant pardon to a wretched woman; shame impels
me to conceal

Those things, and to recall such great
madness brings terror'.

She said these words and wept, and a blush
filled her venerable face.

Zosimas comforted the weeping woman and entreated
her to recount her story.

She obeyed, and at last she answered thus
the one entreating her:

CANTO SEVEN

'My Father, in that ship I multiplied my sins.

I did nothing there save what was contrary to the law,
And every thought of justice was far from my concerns.
Thus, I wickedly reproached the sailors and directed them
to wicked acts.

I incited the sluggish and I summoned those who
lingered in fear of shame.

The one who found sin pleasing, I considered brave; I
swore that he was blessed.

Taught to serve a man's desire with my whole body,
Through the thousand perils of the sea, my care
was for sin:

To cling to wickedness, to fear nothing except virtue,
To be turned toward passion, to be very often
dissipated by wine,

To be filled with food, to vary the melodies of my singing,
To practice all these things which are hostile to salvation.
Believe me, I marvel much that such sin was unavenged,
That neither sea nor wind destroyed the villainy
of the wicked.

I marvel that the ship served perverse people
for these shameful acts,
That God's wrath did not hinder so many sins,
such great sins,
That the shore and the south wind and the waves
bore this lewdness,
That evils were safe amid almost a thousand
forms of death.

But the Lord Jesus, though offended, knew how to spare;
Though offended, he spared, and in sparing he showed
how to return.

At length the Fount of Mercy freely showed me that,
Although angry, he defers to punish our guilt, and
he is reluctant
To strike, since he seeks to spare our faults'.

CANTO EIGHT

'So that you will not be burdened by the long account
of my passions:

I was brought to port, and, a harlot, I entered
the new city.

Joined to a fickle crowd, I remained in the city as a
foreigner and a foe.

I went around the streets, and I sought
after unjust embraces.

So the citizen, just as the stranger, was
urged toward misdeeds.

While I enticed these men, while I in my raving
joined myself to

Such great vileness, the exaltation of the holy
cross, which was

There at that time, summoned the citizens
to the sacred places.
A multitude of fathers went before, the devotion
of mothers followed.
The almost-empty city compelled me to go, to see, to seek
What was drawing the people, what was pleasing
in the sanctuary.
I went seeking a deadly companion for myself,
and, it shames
Me to say, one who might have intercourse
with a wicked woman.
But later this desire disappeared, and
the mercy from above
Restrained the passions and surges of my incitements.
In fact, wanting to enter the gates and see the holy relics,
I was not allowed to enter them nor to see them.
The open door was receiving the people who came,
But a heavenly force rejected me, a sinner.
While I supposed that these things happened because
of my feminine weakness,
I struggled with as much impudence as I could to go in.
But not even then could I enter through the open doors,
Although people going before and people
following were entering.
I was amazed and angry that I was held back
from the holy sanctuary.
I even mingled with the crowds so that, pushed forward
by them, it might help.
I struggled, and I pushed the people pressing together,
But none of these attempts profited me in my
wish to enter.
My guilt wore out these efforts and weakened them,
And my sin did not allow me to reach the holy entrance.

As I realized this, I spoke thus: 'It was not right that
Those sacred places lie open to me, a wretched woman,

Sacred places to be respected for the glory
of their blessed works.
Here the lamentable covenant of death was broken.
By these works the Creator expiated our deeds; he
became a victim.
Here he was condemned, here he died, here
he was buried,
From here he rose again and brought back life from death.
Having dared to come to places
of such wondrous sweetness,
I did not bring olive oil, I did not bring the
perfume of incense,
Nor a pure soul that would be more pleasing than
all of these.
The stench that bears witness to shameful acts was
readied in place of incense,
And in place of the glory of good morals I bore a
host of disgraces
And whatever wretchedness falls to this kind of women.
Alas! What have I attempted? What kind of woman am
I? Where and whence
Have I gone? A harlot from a vile brothel, I have come to
the table of Christ.
Burdened by these evils, I have come, such a one,
to such places.
Often attempted in vain, this entrance has impeded me.
God hates the shameful acts of the whorehouse and keeps
them from His altars,
And he keeps uncleanness of soul from
his lifegiving nourishments'.
Then I was silent, and I did not withdraw far from there,
But standing before the doors, I was immersed
in welling tears,
And thrice repulsed, I lamented, and sorrow burdened
my groaning mouth.
My emotions were divided, confusion assailed my heart,

And it began to be mindful of morals, to be
 ashamed of evils,
 And although it was late, although I was buried, I sought
 to rise again.
 What I rightly sought was granted, and Lazarus came
 forth from the tomb'.

CANTO NINE

By chance there was nearby a beautiful picture of a woman
 Painted beneath the name of that exceptional Mary
 Who bore the Saviour, like a star in its splendor'.
 While I gazed upon this, I was changed within, and I
 became a different person.
 Weeping, I came nearer, I humbled myself before the face
 of this woman,
 And on bended knee I importuned the mother of our
 Father with this prayer:
 "To you, pious Virgin, holy Virgin, Virgin Mary,
 Virgin of a new rank, I come, but I am a woman of death,
 But I am wickedly common, unclean, a woman
 of the brothel,
 One who has lamented except when I have done things
 that should be lamented.
 When I committed shameful acts, as if praised
 for shameful acts,
 I laughed, and many a sad face became cheerful with me
 as a concubine.
 Every night was entirely sleepless when a man approached,
 And I considered it a sin if I did not cover myself
 with much sin,
 Rejoicing in forbidden intercourse, and
 with married people.
 So did I fill up the course of my wretched life;
 So did I proceed. Now I condemn what I did wickedly,
 I repent of going astray, and the foulness of my
 frenzy seems sordid.

I shall not suffer, though I am rightly condemned, or I
will love my guilt
If the bolt is loosed by which a sinful woman is detained,
If a wretched woman is permitted to see the Cross of Life.
I hope for this through you; through you I seek to ascend.

For although he is angry, may your Son grant this
with you as suppliant.

Indeed, let him grant this, since he is Father and Son
at the same time.

A double disposition influences his exorable heart;
To any gift you seek, each—Father and Son—is
turned as One.

Therefore, under this covenant, grant to me what I
rightly strive for;
Be the witness of this covenant, and be also the avenger
of my weakness.

I do not want my crime spared if it is repeated.”
With these words spoken and vices now relinquished
from my mind, I arose.

I turned away from there, good hope accompanied me
to the sanctuary,
And, impatient of delay, I entered, but without a struggle.

I rejoiced to be admitted, I begged that my
sins be remitted,

I cried out for forgiveness, I bowed before the
banners of salvation.

The sins of my soul frightened me away
from the sacraments;

When these had been exposed, I sought again the
Mother of mercy,

And I gave thanks to one so well-deserving, I
duly prayed that

What she bid would happen, I asked to be taught
where to go.

I sought the way of good morals, I implored their mother
to guide me.

While I pounded so anxiously at the doors of life,

She answered thus (I knew not who was speaking,
I only know that someone spoke in this manner):
“If you cross the Jordan, you will find rest.”

Then a stupor came over me which ceased after a time;
Thus admonished, I went forth quickly.
I sought and took the way where one
approaches the Jordan.

While I was hurrying along, a certain man conveniently,
According to the circumstance, offered me three silver
coins and gave

Them secretly. Then I bought three loaves and,
having gone beyond

The city walls, I pressed forward and was carried
forth and withdrew

As an exile from the multitude. It was evening, and
I drew near

The sanctuary of John the Baptist which the
forementioned river flows past

On its gentle course. There, after I professed my
guilt amid tears

And groans, I approached the eucharist
with a contrite heart.

From there I crossed the forenamed river with the bread
I had received;

I sought a way of life by which I might condemn
my former sins.

Then I deprived myself of pleasures of the flesh and
lust of the flesh;

Then I redeemed my time of wickedness
with a better purpose.

But perhaps my words weary you, and the sun that
Cannot be held back hastens along in his swift car.

‘Therefore, Father, desist’. Then he said:

‘Most pious Mother,

Come, tell what followed; nothing is more
rightly made known.

Speak, O Handmaiden of God. A great part of the day
remains and nothing
Complies more with my wishes than that you tell
your whole story.
Come, if you remember, tell what hardships
you suffered there,
Where your food came from, what and where your
clothing came from;
If any temptation waged war with you again and did
not overcome you;
If your former troublesome passion of the
flesh ceased seething'.
Here, moved by the old man's requests, she sat down
on the sand
And, shedding tears, she added the following
to her first discourse:
'My Father, after the failing of my lamentable life,
I completed forty-seven years, and yet I did
not wash away
My sins without a hard struggle, for again
I was tempted, and after my holy vows there was
A return to cups of spiced-wine and excess of foods.
The fishes of Egypt and the desire for wine (which
had been forsaken)
Affected me in my wretchedness and tormented me so
much more violently
The more I turned my attention to banquets and the
zeal for drinking.
While moderation seemed vile to me and
drunkenness was pleasing,
In cities and abroad my vice was
abandoned with difficulty.
Everywhere, in all places, the Enemy assailed my plan
of good morals.
His evil mention of pleasures beset my
insufficiently-strong spirit
And attacked it; Eve raged and troubled the Man.

Eve desired the food of death in the gardens of life.

Ah, me! It shames me to tell certain things, yet I
shall tell them.

Learn that nothing is secure unless it has first been
freed from flesh.

That which threatens and thwarts virtue will
always be present.

I was inflamed with the ardor of sexual union
and the desire

To sing melodies and songs of accursed loves, and
to my mind

That was wickedly relapsing, forbidden embraces
And a thousand married men returned, kisses were sought,

And my wishes wandered toward sexual union.

Virtue was a burden; to be considered beyond the law
caused me no shame.

I loathed the law, I put serious matters after trifles,

A life of wandering alone after crowds, the desert
after city gatherings.

These fantasies assailed my weakened virtue,
And a form of madness stifled the growth of morals in me

Until, turned in prayer to that excellent Mary,

I withdrew my sight from those temptations of my soul.

Thus, I came here, I groaned, I wept, I became a sacrifice,

I sought to be reformed, I prayed for my better ways of
old to be renewed.

After holocausts of prayers my right mind
returned and persisted;

After the weeping of my heart, every thought of
filth fled away.

Through these remedies the abundant temptations
of my mind subsided,

And the medley of renewed shameful acts abated.

That which burned wickedly grew accustomed
to be utterly cold.

Moreover, as I was weeping and wretchedly cast down,

A brightness shone around me and covered me entirely.

It was sent to recall one going astray, to raise
up one falling,

To bring good hope, to bestow strength, to point
out a crown.

Thus, seventeen years elapsed; harsh times
Were mixed with gentle ones, and savage times with mild.

But when I truly wept, the Virgin Mother wiped
off my new wounds

And washed them. Then there was salvation; then I
was at peace.

Through so many years, my food was just the two loaves

That I carried here with me at the time I departed
from the city.

They had become dry and hard, and they had lost
their proper color,

And they had ceased to confer strength, yet
from this source

I was accustomed to relieve my hunger sparingly.

I scarcely found anything that I might drink when
I was weak.

After the loaves had been consumed for a long time,
My mind, clinging to the Lord, withdrew from vain cares.

From then until now my old temptation has subsided.

From then until now my emotion has obeyed reason.

Until now my outer food has been plants with foliage;

Until now my inner food has been the words of heaven.

The clothes that I had, age tore and wore away;

Then, naked, I remained in regions scorched by the sun

Where, enduring excessive cold in the hours of the night

And excessive heat in the hours of the day, I prayed

For the sins and the losses of my past life.

I exchanged hymns for jests, I purged loud
laughter by sorrow,

Punishment atoned for pleasure, thirst for drunkenness,

Poverty for luxury, toil for leisure, juice for honeyed-wine,

Torture for a soft couch, holy devotion for guilt.

I bore just as many torments as I had done shameful acts
in the past.

Whatever sin the flesh had committed, the sacrifice
of flesh cleansed.

What punishments, what sort of struggle
with these punishments,

Or what tortures were renewed equally for me
night and day

God knows, the Witness and the Reward of these labors.

Often under the constellation of the fiery Crab and
in the frozen winter

I grew stiff with the cold of night, I was burned by the
heat of day,

And, secure nowhere, I lay down as if dead.

To this pain was added dust storms and the sand's heat,

Neither was the burden of these lightened by the
conditions of the region,

For the place, as you see, is empty of trees, mountains,
caves and places

By which the heat of the Dogstar³ is kept away or winter's
cold is warded off.

You know that Mankind does not live soundly
by bread alone,

Nor does a person withstand the winds by clothes
or buildings alone:

God is sustenance for all; God is a whole garment for all.

The King of Heaven rules heaven, and he
sustains the faithful.

When the wind rages outside, the ardor of His love
suppresses the wind;

Neither because of snow nor wind does the soul's
devotion grow cold.

Hope in the starry region is not at all difficult
for good people.

³The Dogstar, or Sirius, located in the constellation Canis major, is the brightest star in the sky.

As I had promised myself the world, wickedly partaking
of the world,
No writings for the heart, no reading was a concern
to me, nor anything
Of doctrines or of the soul, only of accursed things.
There had been only one devotion, the sins of lovers,
And to gratify people wickedly in a house of ill repute.
If I undertook again anything of virtue, of morals, of piety,
If I picked up again the counsels of divine books, behold:
It was given by heaven. God taught these, God carried
them into effect.

The Spirit filled my soul without delay and
instructed my words:

There was no toil for me in learning, no
toil in instructing.

Thus have the seasons of my past life flowed by.
The seasons that remain offer me the hope of a reward,
A solemn reward, because the reward is everlasting life'.

CANTO TEN

'I have explained in order what I did wickedly or well,
And it did not shame me to disclose what
I shamefully pursued.

There is no reason why you should stay here longer.
The shadows increase, the evening star comes,
the constellations shine,

Night in its customary course orders your return.
Therefore, turn back.

Do not publish abroad what I have entrusted
to you alone.

When your monks go forth from the monastery
And likewise cross the river Jordan,
You will remain, resting at home because of an illness
Which, however, you will get over with the Lord's help.
When you have been made sound, go
forth without delaying,

And remember to bring with you the food of the altar,
Which I hope for in heaven and seek to take
first on earth.

I hope for this pure essence; I seek the essence and the
form of the essence.

Animated by this food I shall go securely where I
strive to go.

For me this is a guide, a bearer, a way, a homeland, a reward.

With this guide, My Father, pursue your way; I
shall meet you.

A certain day will bring you again before these eyes; it
will bring you,

And I shall announce certain things that will
benefit your brothers.

Then, then at last I shall see you for the final time'.

With her farewell said and Zosimas left behind, she
fled from there.

As she departed, not even looking back at his entreaty,

He followed her with his eyes; after he saw her thus

Carried away in swift flight and recalled in vain,

He reversed his steps, turned back and departed.

His cell lay open to him on his return. The woman stayed
fixed in his mind,

The woman remained in his heart, and hardly was she
thought of as a woman.

Thus the appearance of the woman was equal to the
saints on high.

Thus her manner, her face, her humility, her mortal ashes
were not those of a human.

These and almost these alone did he contemplate and
long to see.

These Zosimas sighed for night and day alike.

A set time was selected in which the holy flock
might go forth.

Behold, the set time arrived; the community departed
from its house,
But Zosimas was stricken by illness and compelled
to stay there.
He gave thanks cheerfully because
what the woman-prophet
Had told him was fulfilled. He lay sick, but in due time
he would follow.
Whoever hopes for lofty rewards
willingly endures hardships.
Hope aided the ailing monk, hope cheered him as he lay
in his bed,
Hope pushed back his groaning and his tears,
Curbed his anxieties, relieved his cares,
brightened his face.
He was not deceived by hope, for his former
health was restored;
He was well again in a short time, and the weakness
of his frail age
Did not hold him back. He went forth, and the toil he
longed for was begun.
And as if the woman might be cheered by foods
or various provisions,
He carried with him a pan of boiled lentils,
Adding also the carefully-protected Food of Life.
He undertook his journey during the evening
of the sacred supper,⁴
And, moved by hope and faith, he hastened to reach
the river bank.
As soon as he stopped, sighing he spoke such
words as these:
Ah, me! in vain have I sought and traveled
about this wilderness:
Either the woman lies in hiding forgetful of an old man,
or she is hindered

⁴Holy [Maundy] Thursday.

By the sands, or she came earlier but departed,
 disappointed in her hope,
 And while I delayed, she went to the regions
 where she dwells.

Perhaps she will come, but what opportunity will there
 be for me

Of delivering the sacrament or of speaking
 with the woman?

The Jordan stands in the way; to advance on foot is
 a useless effort.

In fact, nowhere is there a shallow place nor a bridge nor
 a boat anywhere'.

Lamenting much, the sorrowful old man cast
 his eyes about;

He gazed attentively into the distance, for his mind and
 mouth were still.

Behold, with swift steps, on bare feet, late in the
 evening, the woman

Came as she promised, and she visited the old man again,
 And barely standing, as if worn out by the hardship
 of her journey,

She raised her soul and her serene face
 toward the heavens

And, weeping, made the sign of the fruitful cross
 on the water.

Thus by this token she crossed the distance of the waters
 Between them like one with feet covered with dust.

The world obeys no one who entrusts himself to the world;
 The elements know how to favor a pure soul.

Whoever rejoices in good deeds dares to ask for any good
 things at all.

One who offers himself without the wound of sin longs
 for nothing in vain.

The moon was shining brightly and did not allow her
 actions to lie hidden;

By the moon's rays these sights were exposed, and
from the old man
They wrested and elicited various songs of praise.
Behold, after the darkness was removed, the woman
and the man
Devoted themselves to pious vows. With holy
prayer they appeased
The Divinity, they drenched their faces with weeping,
they interrupted
Their speech with sobs, they prayed
for sinners, they imbued
Their speech with examples, they rejoiced sincerely, the
woman in the old man,
The man in the woman. The sum of their speech was
God or moral lessons.
After these were finished, she approached the chalice
of God's mercy,
And, having confessed before she would touch any
part of it,
She offered herself with tears and made herself fit
for the chalice.
Then, as she knelt, the wedding feast of Life was
given to her,
And in that drink she was united to Christ,
her Leader, relating
In such speech to her companion what had been
entrusted to her:

CANTO ELEVEN

'My Father, examine your brothers'
transgressions and regressions.
Some of them disdain the teaching of morals and—as if
they do not know
By what deception the Enemy strives to deceive or
by what means

He assails the door to the soul—they
 disregard the Enemy.
 By subtle cunning the wolf lies in wait at the sheepfold.
 If the sheep strays anywhere, she dies, stricken
 by a wound,
 And while she looks back, she is exposed to his bite.
 May the care of Abbot John oppose these injuries,
 And may he encourage his flock not to spurn
 the monk's rule.
 To the brother who goes astray, let the rule equal a father
 who is not silent,
 Since those whom equal guilt binds together, equal
 punishment also torments.
 Thus did Eli fall when he made sad the King of Heaven.
 Lest such a transgression of the rule be his,
 may the father
 Root out harmful things by virtue of his watchful care.
 May he keep watch before the gates, strengthen those
 wishing good morals,
 Inspire beginners, restrain those who
 display immoderate behavior.
 May he reprove and encourage them; may he practise
 what he preaches.
 Stern, may he soothe; gentle, may he make
 rough ways known.
 May he personally mortify them, may he add scourges
 to words in moderation,
 May he wash the sores of guilt, or let their
 author cleanse them.
 Although a man might be secure and happy
 following wicked ways,
 God imposes a heavier judgment on his bold deeds,
 And His great forbearance continues the prosperity
 of the wicked.
 One who is now tormented does not know how much
 he is being purified.
 When He rages and strikes us now, God seeks
 to spare hereafter.

You will relate these words and return here yet once more;
Go! See your flock again, order them to respect the rule,
And while you stand at the altar, pray
for this sinful woman'.

After she spoke so, she went back, and the waves yielded
to her as she went;

She walked above them with dry feet, proving that she
was a servant of God,

And, while Zosimas stood there
in amazement, she vanished.

He went home in haste; and, far away from the
woman, he was

Her companion in sincere prayers, and he was mindful
of the woman.

This woman haunted his mind; she alone possessed him
entirely as he

Complained because the year was so long and because it
passed so slowly.

Finally, the year elapsed; the father went forth
and sought her.

When he had gone beyond the gates, he bore
hardships without toil.

With every effort possible, he traveled the roads
on foot, he searched

Other places with his eyes, and, weeping, he prayed
these words and more:

'O Christ, form of the Father, Father and only offspring
of the Mother,

Hear me as I weep; guide me, I pray, as I
follow desolate tracts.

Show to an old man this woman on whose account I have
come with You as guide,

The woman whom I wish for, whom I seek, in whose
heavenly prayer I hope.

Although she now serves in earthly camps, she
inhabits the heavens,

And now as companion of the saints above she scorns
the fleeting nature
Of things; now united to God she seeks this fruit
from her wedding:
Long-lived fruit, the fruit which endures for all time.
Woe to me, woe to a wretched man; through trackless
places in vain
I seek one for whom a populous home is in hiding places
with one inhabitant;
For whom a house is the desert, bedchambers are
an open cave;
For whom modesty is a veil, a companion is an angel,
halls are the open sky.
Where shall I go or what shall I do? Shall I
follow the tract
Scorched by the sun? Many torments—old age,
thirst, heat, sands—
Are opposed to these undertakings, and my
wishes are hindered'.

Having complained so, sorrowful Zosimas cast
his eyes about;
He did not know whether to hurry, and, unsure what way
to choose, he stood fast.
He cried out, he listened, but no voice, no echo
resounded;
No sound was heard, no trace of feet was
found, and while
He wandered about, while he doubted everything in sight,
A ray from above led forth his cold and listless limbs
As if it were his guide and his leader.
Rejoicing in this sign and worshipping the
Lord God, he ran
To that place. He found her whom he sought with prayers
and on foot,
But she was already dead, already joined in fact
to Christ, already

In the castles above, already glowing more brightly
than the stars.

Her flesh to be glorified, purer than melted gold,
Lay covered as was proper for a woman.

How sad was the monk's grief! What was his
anxiety of heart?

What were the groans of his torn soul? What
were his words?

At one moment he sighed, at another he
looked all around;

Now he fixed his eyes on the heavens and did
not utter complaints.

Prostrate, he mourned and respectfully clung to her heels.

He wept over them and apportioned faithful kisses
to those holy feet.

With vows and voice he asked that he not turn back,

Considering it a great gift to attend her corpse
with his corpse,

And with the same death to live and be buried together.

While he grieved and wavered in doubt about her name,

A name found in the sand lifted up the
old man's countenance,

And the gloom of his mind vanished at these instructions:

'Holy Father, I ask that the bones of Mary the
Egyptian be interred;

Let her be buried in the soil, let her ashes be
added to ashes.

As soon as you gave the Body of Christ and His
chalice to her,

The first light of the second day freed the woman
victorious over the world.

After the evening had been spent with the mysteries
of Holy Thursday,

Heavy darkness crept in since the light receded
with the sun'.

By these words doubtful Zosimas finally recognized

Her name and her last day. Who was the author
of this writing?
For he knew that the woman had read nothing, had learned
Nothing of these studies, nor was she even
mindful of them.
From this source he also ascertained that,
when the sacraments
Had been delivered, Mary had been transported here
in a moment
And then had died where he had arrived, weary after a
thirty days' journey,
And had declared that he was overcome by toil.
By weeping he showed the new wounds of his heart.
He sat by the lifeless woman, and the tears of his
abundant sorrow
Overflowed; angry at death, he applied himself
to the duty of mercy.
He sang her praises, he covered her limbs, he
closed her eyes.
Now he embraced the soles of her feet, now he did
homage to her head,
Her hair, her face. Her care for these had been lack of care.
Their splendor was scorn, squalor and want.
The woman was clean enough from tears
summoned by piety;
She was washed by grace since she was a companion to
the saints in glory.

He attended to her burial, devoted himself to this; these
were his concerns,
But he did not know what to do: the hard ground was rigid.
Many things weakened the old man; toil and heat and
thirst tormented him.
His strength yielded to his years, his arms
to winding sheets;
'There was no mattock at hand, nor any hoe.

While he was grieving and groaning, a new event took
his breath away:

His eyes became dry, because better things were
readied through hope,

For a lion, like one mourning and honoring
the dead body,

Promising submissiveness and setting aside
his fierce wrath,

Came with his neck bowed, and with his
proud ferocity set aside,

The humble beast began to lick her holy feet.

The old man marveled at such a comrade and
one so devoted.

He attributed it to the woman's merits that the wild
beast was gentle,

That the lion was mild, that her name adhered to the sands,
That a light had shone above and, going before,

had led him,

That no wild animal had disturbed her though
she was unguarded,

Nor had a bird torn her flesh though she was unburied,

Neither had the great, raging heat nor the entire
year dissolved her.

Now he imagined what glory remained
through their incorruptibility

For the limbs of the one lying there under the hot winds.

Likewise tried by so many and such great
hardships, he recalled

All God's gifts; he went over what he might say

While he passed on commands to his comrade
in such words:

'My companion, we are urged and admonished
to bury this woman

Whom the world knows not, for whom it was greater to
be inferior in the world.

But if you have come, sent in Christ's name, if you will be
A servant, dig a grave, and, afterward, go back.

Cast off your frightfulness and forget
your accustomed fury.

What you shall do for this woman becomes
praise of Christ'.

With these words not yet finished, and with his ferocity
and threats abandoned,

The lion came gently forward and was ready to obey him,
And without delay, in the brief space of a fleeting hour,
He fulfilled the command, completing the hurried task.

Meanwhile, the monk lay prostrate before her holy limbs.

No garment covered him except a worn, old cowl
Which, now weather-beaten, scarcely clung to him.

With these coverings he wrapped the limbs of the
one lying there,

Namely the great treasure, the one
already bearing something

Of the splendor, something of the solemn fragrance,
Something excellent from the nectar of the gods.

The woman blessed by the reward of her holy labors
Was carried to the grave and buried with the
wild beast's help.

Then the old man turned back; he ordered the
lion, his servant,

To depart. At home he told what he had seen; he abhorred
Sparing sins. He reproved, he encouraged:

he promised blessings,

He threatened hardships. So, when he had lived one
hundred years, he died.