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1 SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

In the myth of Philemon and Baucis, a simple home epitomizes the humility and religious piety of its occupants. Within its unassuming walls, a mortal husband and wife enjoy the spectacular honor of entertaining the gods on earth. The image of the aging wife Baucis, bowing and scraping to accommodate these otherworldly visitors, offers one of the most detailed (albeit stylized) representations in ancient Roman literature of the domestic activities that occupied many women's daily lives in antiquity. The couple's reciprocal functioning as slave and master to one another, however, evokes gender parity, a concept far at odds with the normative view (pervading much of the surviving evidence) of ancient Roman women as subservient to their husbands. The poet Ovid's (43 BCE–17 CE) use of slavery as a metaphor for another type of relationship, however, is hardly unusual: such invocation of enslavement within a description of a loving marriage testifies to the commonplace acceptance in antiquity of practices recognized as heinously immoral today.

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

The poetic style of this passage is marked by lofty diction and grammar, which dignify the description of a modest household, made of inexpensive, local materials, into which the lofty figures of the gods themselves enter. Just as Philemon and Baucis are eventually transformed into trees, their cottage is made into a temple, a dazzling ascent of an insubstantial private edifice into a lasting public monument. This architectural metamorphosis not only honors the homeowners, but retroactively justifies the presence of immortals in such a rudimentary structure: ancient Roman temples were designed to function as the houses of the gods themselves.

8.620–720

tiliae contermina quercus 620
collibus est Phrygiis, medio circumdata muro.
(ipse locum uidi, nam me Pelopeia Pittheus
misit in arua suo quondam regnata parenti.)
haud procul hinc stagnum est, tellus habitabilis olim,
nunc celebres mergis fulicisque palustribus undae. 625
Iuppiter huc specie mortali cumque parente
uenit Atlantiades positus caducifer alis.
mille domos adiere locum requiemque petentes,
mille domos clausere serae. tamen una recepit,
parua quidem stipulis et canna tecta palustri, 630
sed pia. Baucis anus parilique aetate Philemon
illa sunt annis iuncti iuuenalibus, illa
consenuere casa paupertatemque fatendo
effecere leuem nec iniqua mente ferendo.

Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

In the hills of Phrygia, there stands an oak tree,
joined to a lime tree and surrounded by a low wall.
(I've seen the place myself, because King Pittheus, son
of Pelops,
sent me to the region his father had once ruled.)¹
Not far from there is a lake: what once was habitable
countryside,
now is flowing water, frequented by gulls and
waterfowl who love the marshes.
Jupiter appeared in this place, disguised as a mortal, and
along with him
came the grandson of Atlas, the staff bearer,² with his
wings laid aside.
Looking for a place to rest, they approached a
thousand homes;
a thousand homes had barred the doors against them.
Nevertheless, one house took them in,
which was truly humble, thatched with straw and
swamp reed,
but pious.³ Baucis, an old woman, and Philemon, her
equal in age,
were wedded in that cottage when they were young,
and in that cottage
had grown old together, and they alleviated their
poverty
by acknowledging it, and by bearing it with serenity.

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*

nec refert, dominos illic famulosne requiras: 635

tota domus duo sunt, idem parentque iubentque.

Ergo ubi caelicolae paruos tetigere Penates

submissoque humiles intrarunt uertice postes,

membra senex posito iussit releuare sedili,

cui superiniecit textum rude sedula Baucis. 640

inde foco tepidum cinerem dimouit et ignes

suscitat hesternos foliisque et cortice sicco

nutrit et ad flammam animam producit anili,

multifidasque faces ramaliaque arida tecto

detulit et minuit paruoque admouit aeno, 645

quodque suus coniunx riguo collegerat horto

truncat holus foliis; furca leuat ille bicorni

sordida terga suis nigro pendencia tigno

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

There would be nothing to gain from asking about
masters or slaves in the cottage:
the entire household consisted of two people, each
obeying and commanding in turn.
And so, when celestial beings arrived at the humble
dwelling
and, with heads bowed, entered through the lowly
doorposts,
the old man, having produced a bench, onto which the
scrupulous Baucis
threw a makeshift covering, urged them to rest their
limbs.
Then she swept away the warm ashes on the hearth and
rekindled the fire
from the day before, and fed it with leaves and dry
bark,
and with an old woman's breath she summoned it into
flame.
She took splintered kindling and dry brushwood down
from the roof,
broke them up, and placed them under the humble
copper pot.
She pared the leaves of whatever vegetables her
husband had collected
in their well-watered garden; meanwhile [Philemon]
with a carving fork
lifted up a meager pork butt, hanging from a blackened
beam,

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*

seruatoque diu resecat de tergo partem

exiguam sectamque domat feruentibus undis. 650
interea medias fallunt sermonibus horas
sentirique moram prohibent. erat alueus illic

fagineus, dura clauo suspensus ab ansa;
is tepidis impletur aquis artusque fouendos
accipit. in medio torus est de mollibus uluis 655

impositus lecto sponda pedibusque salignis;

uestibus hunc uelant quas non nisi tempore festo

sternere consuerant, sed et haec uilisque uetusque

uestis erat, lecto non indignanda saligno.
accubuere dei. mensam succincta tremensque 660

ponit anus, mensae sed erat pes tertius impar;

testa parem fecit, quae postquam subdita cliuum

sustulit, aequatam mentae tersere uirentes.

ponitur hic bicolor sinceræ baca Mineruae

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

and he cut a small piece from the edge of this long-saved meat,
chopped it up, and submerged it in the boiling water.
They whiled away the intervening time by chatting
and paid no heed to the delay. Nearby, there was a
beechwood tub
suspended from a nail by a sturdy handle.
This was filled with warm water and used as a footbath.
In the center of the room there was a mattress made of
soft sedge grasses,
positioned on a couch with a framework and legs made
of willow wood.
They overlaid this with a coverlet, which they were
not in the habit of spreading out,
except on holidays; but even this coverlet was of low
quality
and threadbare, well suited to the willow couch.
The gods arranged themselves comfortably on it. The
old woman, trembling,
and with her clothing hiked up, put the table in place.
But one of its three legs was uneven;
so, she evened it out with a fragment of pottery, which,
after having been inserted,
eliminated the slope, and she swabbed the smooth
surface with green mint leaves.
Upon it she placed half-ripened olives, the berries of
truthful Minerva,

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*

conditaque in liquida corna autumnalia faece 665

intibaque et radix et lactis massa coacti
ouaque non acri leuiter uersata fauilla,
omnia fictilibus; post haec caelatus eodem

sistitur argento crater fabricataque fago

pocula, qua caua sunt, flauentibus inlita ceris. 670
parua mora est, epulasque foci misere calentes;

nec longae rursus referuntur uina senectae

dantque locum mensis paulum seducta secundis.

hic nux, hic mixta est rugosis carica palmis

prunaque et in patulis redolentia mala canistris 675
et de purpureis collectae uitibus uuae;
candidus in medio fauus est. super omnia uultus

accessere boni nec iners pauperque uoluntas.

Interea totiens haustum cratera repleri

sponte sua per seque uident succrescere uina; 680

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

and some autumnal cornelian cherries preserved in the
lees of wine,
endives, a radish, a hunk of cheese, and eggs,
gently roasted in the warm ashes,
all served on terracotta. After these courses, an
engraved mixing bowl
of equally costly material was set down, with cups
made of beechwood
that were coated with yellow wax on the inside.
After a brief delay, the hearth sent forth steaming
dishes of food, and
the wine, which had not matured for long, was brought
out again,
and, moving this aside, they made a small space on the
table for the fruit course.
In it there were nuts, Carian figs commingled with
wrinkled dates, and
plums, and gaping baskets of fragrant apples,
and purple grapes just picked from the vines;
in the center of the table was a raw comb of clear
honey. Exceeding all this were the obliging faces
of the hosts, and a goodwill that had nothing crude or
impoverished about it.
Meanwhile they see that the bowl for mixing wine, as
many times as it was drained,
became full again spontaneously, as the wine welled up
on its own.

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*

attoniti nouitate pauent manibusque supinis

concipiunt Baucisque preces timidusque Philemon

et ueniam dapibus nullisque paratibus orant.

unicus anser erat, minimae custodia uillae,

quem dis hospitibus domini mactare parabant; 685

ille celer penna tardos aetate fatigat

eluditque diu tandemque est uisus ad ipsos

confugisse deos. superi uetere necari

“di” que “sumus, meritasque luet uicinia poenas

impia” dixerunt; “uobis immunibus huius 690

esse mali dabitur. modo uestra relinquit tecta

ac nostros comitate gradus et in ardua montis

ite simul.” parent ambo baculisque leuati

nituntur longo uestigia ponere cliuo.

tantum aberant summo quantum semel ire sagitta 695

missa potest; flexere oculos et mersa palude

cetera prospiciunt, tantum sua tecta manere.

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

Stunned and terrified by this strange novelty, and
turning the palms of their hands upwards,
Baucis and Philemon began to recite their prayers
fearfully,
and begged forgiveness for the improvised banquet.
There was one single goose, the guardian of their tiny
estate,
which they were preparing to butcher, as a sacrifice for
their divine guests.
Swift-winged, he wore out a couple who were slowing
down from old age,
and evaded capture for a long time; at last, he appeared
to flee
for refuge to the gods themselves. The heavenly beings
forbade that he be killed.
“We are gods,” they said. “This wicked community
will suffer the punishments
they deserve, but you will be exempt from this
hardship.
Simply leave your home behind, follow our footsteps,
and proceed onto the high peaks of the mountains.”
Both complied and, leaning on their walking sticks,
they struggled to place each step they took up the steep
slope.
When they were a bowshot’s distance from the summit,
they cast their eyes around and saw that
every other house was engulfed in swamp, and only
their own dwelling stood fast.

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*

dumque ea mirantur, dum deflent fata suorum,

illa uetus dominis etiam casa parua duobus

uertitur in templum; furcas subiere columnae, 700

stramina flaescunt aurataque tecta uidentur

caelataeque fores adopertaque marmore tellus.

talìa tum placido Saturnius edidit ore:

“dicite, iuste senex et femina coniuge iusto

digna, quid optetis.” cum Baucide pauca locutus 705

iudicium superis aperit commune Philemon:

“esse sacerdotes delubraque uestra tueri

poscimus, et quoniam concordēs egimus annos,
auferat hora duos eadem, nec coniugis umquam

busta meae uideam neu sim tumulandus ab illa.” 710
uota fides sequitur; templi tutela fuere,

donec uita data est. annis aeuoque soluti

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

While they were awestruck at these houses, and
weeping abundantly for the fate of
the people they knew, that antiquated cottage of theirs,
cramped even for its two masters,
was transformed into a temple. Columns replaced the
split stakes;
the thatch grew yellow, so that the roof appeared
gilded;
the double doors were emblazoned with relief, the
ground veiled in marble.
Then with a serene expression Jupiter, son of Saturn,
said to them:
“Tell us, upstanding old man and wife worthy of such
an upstanding husband,
what you would like.” After he had exchanged a few
words with Baucis,
Philemon disclosed their communal verdict to the
heavenly beings:
“We request to become priests, and to safeguard your
shrines,
and because we have spent our years in harmony,
may the very same hour carry us both off, so that I
may never see
the grave site of my wife, nor be buried by her.”
Their prayers were met with a guarantee. They were
the protectors of temple,
as long as they lived. Weakened by their years and the
extent of their lifetime,

OVID, *METAMORPHOSES*

ante gradus sacros cum starent forte locique

narrarent casus, frondere Philemona Baucis,

Baucida conspexit senior frondere Philemon. 715

iamque super geminos crescente cacumine uultus

mutua, dum licuit, reddebant dicta “uale”que

“o coniunx” dixere simul, simul abdita texit

ora frutex. ostendit adhuc Thyneius illic

incola de gemino uicinos corpore truncos. 720

SIMPLICITY IS BLISS

while they were standing out in front of the hallowed
staircase⁴ and happened
to be recounting the story of the place, Baucis caught
sight of Philemon budding leaves;
Philemon, elder of the two, stared back at Baucis
budding leaves;
and now with the crowns of trees growing above their
coupled faces,
while they still could, they repeated declarations felt by
both alike:
“Goodbye, my spouse,” they said in unison, and in
unison bark concealed
their covered mouths. Even now, in that spot,
Bithynian⁵ locals point out
two tree trunks side by side, growing from their
coupled form.