

Memorial Minute for Thalia Pandiri
Written by Justina Gregory
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Thalia Pandiri joined the Smith faculty in 1968 after undergraduate study at the City College of New York, graduate school in classics at Columbia, and a two-year prize fellowship at the American Academy in Rome. She taught at Smith for an astonishing fifty-six years, retiring in 2024.

It is an indication of Thalia's versatility and intellectual range that she was at home in four different academic contexts. Her initial appointment came in Smith's classics department, where she mainly taught Greek — not only the classical language but also, when staffing allowed, New Testament and modern Greek, each requiring a different set of historical and linguistic tools. Thalia also taught Latin— again, not only the classical language but also medieval Latin. She had a particular interest in medieval women writers, publishing an interpretative essay, accompanied by a translation, on the autobiography of Elisabeth of Schönau, a twelfth-century Benedictine visionary.

Thalia's command of European languages and literatures extended well beyond Greek and Latin. From 1983 on she divided her appointment between Classics and Comparative Literature, the interdisciplinary department that has now been renamed World Literatures. Thalia taught the department's foundational survey, "Classics of the Western Tradition in Translation," which in two semesters guided students all the way from Homer's Bronze Age Greece to Tolstoy's nineteenth-century Russia. This course was introduced into Smith's curriculum after the Second World War, in an era when surveys were the norm

for every department and concepts such as “classics” and “Western tradition” seemed straightforward and unproblematic. The course is still offered today, albeit with some changes in the syllabus, and I’m confident that it remains both arduous and exhilarating for teachers and students alike. Thalia also developed her own offerings for the Comparative Literature department, most notably the famous course on maternal filicide that was known to generations of students as “Murdering Moms.” Reflecting on Thalia’s decades in the Department of Comparative Literature, Ann Jones concludes that she “managed to keep us on an even keel between old and new.”

Beyond her two official affiliations, Thalia was an honorary adopted member of Smith’s Italian department; she twice directed the junior year in Florence and participated in many departmental searches. As Giovanna Bellesia remembers, Thalia’s Italian was so fluent that native speakers refused to believe that she wasn’t one of them. When told that her name was “Thalia,” they insisted that no, it must be “Itala” instead.

A standout among Thalia’s publications is her article on *Daphnis and Chloe*, a Greek novel of the second century CE, which comes to grips with the genre of pastoral. Her most consistent scholarly engagement, however, was with translation. Thalia’s fourth academic home was the five-college seminar on literary translation and its associated journal, *Metamorphoses*. She became the journal’s editor in 1999 and served in that position for over twenty years. Thalia enlisted collaborators from the five colleges to publish special issues with a focus (to name only a few examples) on sub-Saharan, Brazilian, and Chinese literature; she included her own translations, both prose and

poetry and usually, though not always, from modern Greek, as well as those of Valley colleagues. Under her direction the journal attracted submissions from emerging and established translators the world over.

Complex individuals like Thalia are often described as “combining” various opposed traits. But Thalia wasn’t a combiner; she was a shape-shifter, as adept at transformation as Proteus, the prophetic sea god in Homer’s *Odyssey* who successively assumes the forms of a lion, a snake, a leopard, a wild boar, water, and a tree in his bid to evade being captured for questioning. Thalia’s affinity for translation, which is itself a form of shape-shifting, was no coincidence, nor was it accidental that the journal she directed was called *Metamorphoses*. Conversation with Thalia was an adventure because you never knew what to expect; she could be profane on one occasion and decorous the next, abrasive on one occasion and accommodating the next. But through all her transformations one trait held constant. As Craig Davis sums it up, Thalia possessed “a heart more gold than she let on or would ever care to admit.” She was quick to intuit if anyone, whether student or colleague, was struggling, and she was generous, imaginative, and tireless in devising help.

Thalia is survived by her children, Dimitri and Lydia. They, and we, have lost someone remarkable.