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Summary

HISTORIA CASTITATIS: SPIRITUAL MARRIAGE IN ST JEROME'S *THE LIFE OF MALCHUS*

The paper focuses on a hagiographic adaptation of novelistic conventions and narrative techniques in Jerome's *The Life of Malchus, the Captive Monk* used to promote the ideal of virginal chastity. The central novelistic motif of chastity and premarital sexual abstinence is transformed in Jerome's text into the motif of lifelong celibacy, which pushes aside the institution of marriage. Legitimate marital union is no longer the final target ending the adventurous wandering of the central couple. Instead, it is a test of their ascetic constancy, which should verify the faithfulness of the vow of continence. While a desire to marry is an essential element of the romance plot and marriage represents the final happy ending, in *The Life of Malchus* the driving force is instead the aversion of the main hero to this institution and everything leads to the final separation of the main characters.

This end of the story of the married monk, reflecting the official church approach towards syneisactism, is, however, problematized by the contradiction between the frame narrative and the narrative embedded, which provides an alternative solution to the relationship between man and female ascetics. Although their separation is in general desirable, in some circumstances their living together can work, as genuine chastity can never be taken captive (*pudicitiam numquam esse captivam*), not even in a marital union. It can be transformed into a "marriage of chastity" (*coniugium pudicitiae*) in which both partners voluntarily renounce

any physical contact and undertake to live in chastity and renunciation. Thus, at least in a novelistic perspective, this opens up the possibility of an incorporeal relationship between two persons of the opposite sexes, which are united together by circumstances and forced to share the same household. In this way the author also provides an answer to the critics of his personal relationship with the rich widow Paula. The story about the captive Syrian monk and his involuntary marriage can therefore be perceived as a distinctive novelistic parable about the possibility and impossibility of spiritual cohabitation of man and woman, not affected by carnal lust.

Keywords: Jerome; hagiography; spiritual marriage; Ancient novel

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