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Christa Gray, *Jerome, Vita Malchi: Introduction, Text, Translation, and Commentary. Oxford classical monographs. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. xv, 365. ISBN 9780198723721. \$115.00.*

Reviewed by Vincent Hunink (v.hunink@let.ru.nl)

Preview

Until quite recently, Jerome's *Vita Malchi* (*Life of Malchus*) was unduly neglected. As one of the earliest hagiographical texts in Latin, written by an important patristic author, it merits attention. Moreover, it is striking for its peculiar form and content: most of the seven page text is a first person account by Malchus himself, who tells about his life as a monk, his travels and adventures after leaving his monastery, his encounter and forced marriage with a woman (a marriage that remains 'spiritual' by mutual consent), and their eventual return to a monastic life, where Malchus and his wife continue to live in chastity.

Although the text was available in translation in languages such as Italian, a reliable and normally accessible Latin text was missing until as late as 2007, when volume 508 of the *Sources Chrétiennes* (Jérôme, *Trois vies de moines*, edited by E.M. Morales and P. Leclerc), finally filled the gap. Unfortunately, the SC edition fell short of the high expectations of many scholars and was given a mixed reception (cf. e.g. the critical review by Michael Winterbottom in *Journal of Theological Studies* 59 (2008), 372-374).

Now Christa Gray offers new, welcome help for the *Vita Malchi*, with a comprehensive edition with text, translation, and full commentary. The book, based on her dissertation defended at Oxford University in 2011, has been published as a volume in the well known *Oxford Classical Monographs*.

One of the primary aims of the edition is to improve the Latin source text. Given the vast number of MSS of this popular text (no fewer than 349), a complete critical edition seemed an impossible undertaking. Instead, Gray has focused on five MSS (Neapolitanus VI D 59; Monacensis 6393; Sessorianus 41; Parisinus Lat. 5324; and Laurentianus pl.19 cod.16)—each belonging to a group of MSS considered to be important—and has collated

these for some 100 passages. This has resulted in a Latin text that shows 75 changes with respect of preceding editions (cf. table on p. 75-76), some 25 of which showing a difference from Morales 2007.

Most of these 25 cases are, in fact, of minor importance, involving just a slight change of form (e.g. 6.7 *rediret* for *redierit*; 6.8 *coniuge* for *coniugem*; or 8.2 *uespere* for *uesperi*). Among the more notable changes, I mention 2.2 *studiosi* for *studiose*; 3.8 *fili, Satanae* for *Satanae*; 4.2 *praedandum* for *praedam*; 6.5 *seruata* for *seruanda*; 6.7 "*per ego te, inquit, Iesum* for *precor te, inquit, per Iesum*; 6.8 *tetigi timens* for *tetigi, feruere timens*; 9.4 *collabor* for *cum labore*; 9.4 *clamante* for *clamare*; 9.8 *quam nostras latebras penetraret* for *quam ad nostras latebras penueniret*; 9.11 *figuramus* for *figurabamus*; and 11 *gladios inter* for *gladios et inter*.

In most cases, Gray has either corrected obvious mistakes by Morales, or chosen a more likely and better-attested reading. Fortunately Morales' division of the Latin text has been retained. The Latin text is therefore clearly a step forward, although the changes may be relevant to the specialist scholar rather than the general reader, since they hardly bear upon the general interpretation.¹

The English translation facing the Latin text is, as far as I can judge, correct and helpful, and is a welcome part of this book.

The commentary occupies the greatest part of the volume (pp. 95 to 308) and clearly draws most of the reader's attention. If I were to use a single word to characterize the commentary, I would call it traditional. On the positive side, Gray is a trustworthy guide in matters of Latin vocabulary and phraseology, grammar, names, parallel places and other intertextual references, as well as historical and other factual details. Needless to say, these are valuable resources, for which every user of the commentary will be grateful. On the other hand, the more adventurous aspects of modern interpretation (which could somehow match the adventures of Malchus himself) are largely absent. Gray is mostly silent, for example, on narratological aspects, and on matters of gender and ideology. Generally speaking, she never really seems to question Jerome's account and rather takes it for granted.

The passage where the author introduces the first person account by Malchus (2.33.1) may illustrate this. In Gray's English translation the text runs as follows:

When I enquired with curiosity about them among their neighbours and asked what their relationship was—one of marriage, kinship, or spiritual—all replied with one voice that they were holy and pleasing to God, and they added some remarkable details. When I, spurred by desire as a result, approached the man and asked him with more curiosity about the truth of the matter, I heard the following story from him. He said: "My son, I was a settler on a small farm in Nisibis, the only son of my parents. When they were trying to force me to marry on the grounds

that I was the representative of the line and the heir of the family, I replied that I wanted instead to be a monk..."

Gray's commentary on these lines comprises some 11 pages. It opens on fairly long notes concerning 'curiosity' (a well known motif from e.g. Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*) and the concept of 'spiritual marriage'. We are also given numerous parallels for the phrase *uoce consona*, notes on the Christian concept of *sancti*, the connecting relative *qua cupiditate*, the verbal form *adorsus sum* from *adorior*, the vocative form *mi nate*, the name Nisibis, the word for 'small farm' (*agellus*), and the historical and social aspects of 'settler on a small farm' (*colonus*), as well as a number of notes on legal and judicial matters involving inheritance, representing a family line, and, inevitably perhaps, the use of the word *monachus* for 'monk.'

To be fair, there is somewhat more as well. Thus, on the phrase 'they added some remarkable details', Gray observes that this remains vague and that the words Jerome hears confirm his own impression: the tale has something of the miraculous. And next, it is stated that the mysterious account increases both Jerome's curiosity, and makes the reader impatient to hear more. Now this is not wrong, of course, but I suggest some further points might be made here. For instance, what exactly is the relationship between 'Jerome' and these neighbours? Who were these neighbours anyway? Could they be just in the author's imagination? Are we to believe Jerome at face value, that is, that he personally went around and gathered information before asking the man himself? Does this not rather seem an element of literary composition, just like the neighbours' 'unanimous' statement of the couple's holiness? And what about Jerome's use of *cupiditas*? The word has an obvious sexual ring, which makes its choice in this context intriguing, to say the least. Gray restricts herself to a parallel in Apuleius Met. 2.1 *nimis cupidus cognoscendi quae rara miraque sunt*, which, though correct, does not seem enough here.

Then again, Gray plausibly observes that Jerome stresses the reliability of the old man's words, so as to underscore the trustworthiness of his own account, and she duly marks the exact point of transition from Jerome's frame to Malchus' narrative. But not a word is lost on questions as to the exact relation between primary and secondary narrator (terms not used by Gray), the reasons for the narrator to present the tale as a first person account, and the possibility or even likelihood of complex focalisation by the primary narrator in the pages that are to come. And to put yet one small step further, why does 'Jerome' not say anything about meeting the old woman? Why was she not asked to take some of his questions? She was present, so he says, and she surely must have been available for a short conversation, if need be in the protecting company of some of her virgins.

Finally here, Malchus' first person account starts with details on family life, economics, and law. But to what extent does this determine the reader's image of his character? What other details in his account further 'construct' his persona as, somehow, a real Roman or biblical man, rather

than a common Syrian? Gray does not mention such questions, which perhaps do not even need clear-cut answers but deserve to be put in a commentary of such length. The ancient author is probably manipulating his material, and readers should be encouraged to question his account at any level rather than take everything at face value.

At times, however, a more critical stand does emerge in Gray's commentary. Thus, at 2.2, shortly before the passage just quoted, she inserts a lengthy note about 'There was also a companion of his to be seen', which involves a possible contradiction between the frame text referring to a *contubernium* and Malchus' own account in 10.3, which will mention his eventual return to 'monks' and his handing over the woman to 'virgins', thereby suggesting they live separately. Some scholarly attempts to solve the inconsistency are discussed, including a daring proposal by V. Burrus to simply accept the contradiction as representing the fundamentally inexplicable secret of 'chaste marriage'. (I would add that it could also be a conscious move by the narrator to arouse readers' initial sexual interest, only deliberately and teasingly to disappoint them, or bring them to a higher, spiritual level, at the end of his text.). More notes like this, with food for thought, would have been welcome.

However, all in all there seems little reason for complaint. The present situation for those interested in the *Vita Malchi* is incomparably better than in past decades and even centuries. Gray offers a sound text and translation and a wealth of helpful material to approach this text. Perhaps it is not fair to expect all relevant questions to be included straight away. There is room for further inquiry here, and the commentary will no doubt stimulate further research.

On a final note, I add that Gray's introduction (pp. 1-76) covers wide fields, perhaps more so than in the average introduction of a commented edition. It has short sections on 'structure and plot', 'date and dramatic composition', 'dramatic date', and 'historical value'. Furthermore, there is a paragraph on 'audiences', which does not, however, deal with any implicit readers within the text, but with groups of ancient persons for whom the text was meant. Likewise, the section on 'purpose' remains somewhat elementary. But the large section, 'literary form and texture' (pp.15-42), is rich and useful, with paragraphs devoted to various genres in literature, both Christian and non-Christian (e.g. epic, novel, historiography, comedy). Language and style are also treated at length (pp. 42-68). A large bibliography and three indexes conclude the volume.

In sum, Gray's book offers much valuable material that allows a wide academic readership to approach this short, highly readable, and interesting early specimen of Latin hagiography. It is a great text to read with students! Classicists and church historians will be grateful for this new publication, which should be in any serious library of Latin patristic texts.

Notes:

1. On a minor note, I wonder why 'punctuation has been adjusted in line with Anglo-Saxon conventions' (p. 75), and why some spellings have been regularized (*eremus* for *heremus*. Surely, in a scientific publication aiming at an international audience the reason for such emendation is not self-evident.

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