



# Naming the nameless woman of Jerome's *Vita Malchi*



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One of the common methods for side-lining women in literature is to leave them nameless. This is the case with the woman in Jerome's *Vita Malchi*. However, this woman is also vital to the narrative and the progression of the title character, Malchus. The aim of this study was to assist in giving this important character an identity by examining the many ways in which she is actually named, firstly in terms of the roles assigned to her, and then in terms of the associations that can be made between her and other people and characters from Jerome's experience. Using a variety of literary techniques, including close-text, intra- and intertextual readings, it was possible to make many such identifications, turning the nameless woman into the nameful woman.

## Introduction

The identifying markers of the nameless woman of Jerome's *Vita Malchi* which have been noted by most modern scholars up until this point are just that she is a woman and she is nameless. As a name is one of the most important identity markers an individual can have (Giddens 2009:1121), there has been a tendency to relegate her to a secondary place in scholarship, so that she gives way to discussions on the spirituality and literary aspects of the work, and Malchus himself. A few scholars have speculated in passing about the namelessness of the woman. Both Kech (1977:209n.103) and Weingarten (2005:172) suggest that she is nameless because she is actually a representation of womanhood in general. Gray (2015:12) takes this further and suggests the namelessness of the woman invites widows, who Jerome might have intended as part of his readership for this piece, to see themselves as her and imitate her virtue. But identity is far more than just one gender marker; it encompasses any name, title, group or category that is assigned to an individual or which an individual assigns to themselves (Giddens 2001:29–30). When reading the text specifically for the character of the woman, using a variety of literary techniques, including close-text, intra- and intertextual readings, the supposedly nameless woman is actually found to have many such identifying markers. They are both explicit and implicit, and range from the roles she inhabits to associations with named literary and historical figures. These all contribute to the creation of a much more nuanced characterisation than has previously been attributed to her. Understanding this characterisation helps to illustrate her vital importance in the narrative, and the life and spiritual journey of Malchus.

## Brief outline of the story

Before beginning this investigation, it is necessary to give a brief outline of the story. The story does not occur chronologically, but actually begins when Jerome, as a young man, meets an old Syrian couple living together in the town of Maronias, and he curiously asks about their special relationship. The old man only then relates the story of his life.<sup>1</sup> Under pressure from his parents to marry, Malchus left his hometown Nisibis as a young man to join a group of monks in the desert of Chalcis. After many years, against his abbot's admonitions, he decided to leave the monastery and return home to claim his inheritance, but was taken into captivity by Saracens. Being forced, under threat of death, into marriage with a fellow captive, Malchus and the nameless woman decided to live in chastity and only pretend that they were a married couple. After many years, Malchus planned an escape and his 'wife' joined him. Being saved by a lioness which killed their pursuers, they arrived at a Roman camp and were allowed to go free. Malchus then again joined a group of monks and entrusted the woman to a convent. Malchus' account ends where he and his wife join separate monastic communities. The moral of the story is explained by Jerome in the short conclusion. He calls this work a history

1.Paragraph 1 is a prologue in which Jerome compares this work with a mock battle, a preparation for the real battle, his envisioned composition of a history of the Church. The introduction and the conclusion serve as a frame narrative for the first person account of Malchus (3–10).

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of chastity, meant to encourage virgins to preserve their chastity in the most difficult circumstances.

## Anus

When the reader is first introduced to the woman, she is given the identity marker of *anus* [old woman]<sup>2</sup> and is described specifically as a very decrepit old woman, already close to death (2.2).<sup>3</sup> Gray (2015:126) tells us that the use of *decrepita* with *anus* serves as outward proof of her chastity as she cannot be desirable. She is also obviously long past childbearing years. Malchus' account of their lives will show how these elements of her womanhood cause so much trouble for him, when he fears that she is a threat to his virginity (6.4). However, her ability to tempt a man into sexual indiscretion, or to be a sexual partner and procreator, is nullified here. She has become a safe woman in her old age.<sup>4</sup>

## Sancti et Deo placiti [honorary virgin or widow]

Both Malchus and the nameless woman are further called *sancti et Deo placiti* [holy and pleasing to God' 2.3] when Jerome questions the townspeople about the nature of their relationship. Gray (2015:130) suggests that the use of *sanctus* implies that the relationship between them was that of a bond of the spirit. This brings to mind the concept of *virgines subintroductae* or *agapetae*. A virgin would live with a man in a partnership, sharing a house, a room and sometimes even a bed, yet the couple conducted themselves as brother and sister (Cloke 1995:77). Although the nameless woman will be found not to be a virgin as the narrative progresses, at the end of the narrative, when Malchus and the woman escape their captors, he hands her over to virgins. Gray (2015:13) suggests that this makes her an honorary virgin as the text suggests that her constancy in chastity, even in difficult circumstances, has allowed her to overcome her previous carnality in marriage and regain the benefits of virginity. However, the woman has been married before so she is not a virgin and never can be again,<sup>5</sup> so she is also identified as a not-virgin by being placed alongside virgins. On the contrary, King (2009:213) has argued that *sancti* refers to married couples living together in chastity. So alternatively she could be considered a celibate wife. However, she has not one but two husbands and it is not her first husband she is living in chastity with, but her forced second 'husband', Malchus. A third alternative is that she could be read as having the status of honorary widow living with a holy man. Although Jerome's preference is for virginity, he does not deny that women who have chosen celibacy in widowhood or in marriage can be holy (*Adversus Helvidium* 21).<sup>6</sup>

2. All translations from the Latin by the authors.

3. All references to Jerome's *Vita Malchi* unless otherwise stated.

4. See Gray (2015:28) on her benign characterisation.

5. See Jerome's *Epistula* 22.5 where he states that God cannot raise up a virgin when she has fallen.

6. *Non negamus viduas, non negamus maritatas sanctas mulieres inveniri; sed quae uxores esse desierint, quae in ipsa necessitate coniugii virginum imitentur castitatem*. [We do not deny that holy widows, nor do we deny that holy married women are found; but those who have ceased to be wives, who imitate the chastity of virgins in the bond of marriage itself].

## Mulier and femina

The woman's most basic identifier as 'woman' occurs during her younger years as captive and actually appears as two Latin words, *femina* and *mulier*. Jerome uses the word *mulier* for her more often than *femina*. It seems that Jerome considers *femina* to be his normative word for woman in opposition to man, as Malchus uses the term at 4.1 when listing the different types of people that make up the group he joins with to cross the desert. Malchus uses the word only once to refer to the nameless woman, when he marvels at her virtue after she suggests a chaste marriage (6.8). His more common term for her before the discovery of her virtue is *mulier* or *muliercula*. In fact, the first time he mentions the woman, he calls her *muliercula* (4.3), the diminutive of *mulier*. According to Gray (2015:50–51, 182–183), the diminutive form *muliercula*, which she translates as 'hapless (little) woman', indicates scorn in this context and is often used pejoratively by Jerome. In 2 Timothy 3:6–7, young women (*mulierculae*) are mentioned who are described as 'captured women, burdened with sins, who are led astray by various desires, who are always learning, but who never arrive at the knowledge of the truth'.<sup>7</sup> Jerome uses the description of this biblical text in several of his works where he mentions *mulierculae*,<sup>8</sup> and it seems to reflect his perception that these are weak young women who can easily be led into temptation.<sup>9</sup> This gullibility in turn makes them a temptation to men who could take advantage of them. Therefore here, its use seems to infer the youth and possibly the attractiveness of the woman, foreshadowing her later vital reintroduction into Malchus' story as temptation sent by the devil.

He refers to her as *mulier* when he takes her arm to prevent the master attacking him when he refuses to marry her (6.2). She is a *mulier* again when he addresses her as *infelix mulier* [unlucky woman' 6.6]<sup>10</sup> as he prepares to kill himself rather than consummate their marriage. She is last called *mulier* when he returns from his deliberations about running away and she meets him (8.1). While *femina* was a general term used for a 'normal' woman (Parker 1997:48–49),<sup>11</sup> and *mulier* was used particularly for a low-class woman (Walters 1997:34), here Malchus seems to use the term *mulier* to refer to the woman in an indifferent manner. This suggests he is trying to distance himself from his interest in her as a woman, except when she shows her exceptional virtue and briefly becomes *femina*. According to Clark (2008:109), Jerome had a very low opinion of women in general, especially those who

7. *... captivas ... mulierculas oneratas peccatis quae ducuntur variis desideriis: semper discentes, et numquam ad scientiam veritatis pervenientes*.

8. *Commentarius in Isaiam* 57.6; *Commentarius in Isaiam* 64.4; *Commentarius in Ezechielem* 43; *Epistula* 22.28; *Epistula* 133.4; *Adversus Vigilantium* 3.

9. However, there are also more positive references to *mulierculae* by Jerome. In *Epistula ad Praesidium* 4, he says: *'Sectemur saltim mulierculas, sexus nos doceat infirmior'* [Let us at least follow the young women, let the weaker sex teach us]; and the following in *Epistula* 127.5: *'Rideat forsitan infidelis lector me in muliercularum laudibus inmorari'* [Perhaps the unbelieving reader would laugh at the fact that I am dwelling on the praises of weak women].

10. Dido is described as *infelix* four times in Book 1 of Vergil's *Aeneid*, at 1.68; 1.450; 1.529 and 1.596. See Weingarten (2005:171–174) on parallels between the *Vita Malchi* and the *Aeneid*, as well as the later discussion of the woman as Dido.

11. This was also true of the term *puella*.

chose not to live a chaste life, deeming them to be typically weak. So a chaste woman who chooses chastity raises her above the common and may make her worthy of a special term. On the contrary, Arjava (1989:13) suggests that Jerome often praised chaste women excessively, which could also explain the introduction of a special term.<sup>12</sup>

## Wife

### *Captiva and conserva*

Another identity marker that the woman is given is that of wife. When she is first reintroduced into the narrative as anything more than a passing reference to a *captiva* [female captive' 4.3] in 4.3, Malchus calls her *captiva* again, as well as *conserva* [female fellow-slave' 6.2], when she is being presented to him by their Saracen master. In return for Malchus' diligence and in hopes of securing his further loyalty (6.2), the master intends the woman to be a reward, in the form of, Malchus assumes, a wife (*coniunx* 6.3). While *conserva* can sometimes refer to an informal wife, Gray (2015:208) argues that in this case, '*conservam* is not sufficiently strong to carry the implication of wifehood' and that it is the act of the master in handing over the woman which implies that she is his wife. The use of *captiva*, which has sexual connotations more often than the more usual *capta*, may have been intended to hint at the conjugal purpose of the handing over, without mentioning it explicitly (Gray 2015:209). As the woman is a captive, she has lost personhood and can be handed over like an object. As a slave, she could also be said to have lost her previous identity markers, as part of the enslavement process was for slaves to be stripped of their humanity by the loss of identity.

### *Uxor and coniunx*

Her first explicit identification as wife is actually as the wife (*uxor* 6.2) of another, for Malchus tries to tell his master that, as a Christian, he cannot take the wife of a living husband as his own. From the use of *captiva* and possibly *conserva*, and as Malchus eventually takes her to a cave to consummate the 'marriage' (6.3),<sup>13</sup> we are expected to understand 'wife' as sexual partner. Lenski (2011:239) suggests the Saracen master was probably also hoping for them to procreate as this was part of the keeping of slaves among Syrians at the time.<sup>14</sup> Malchus obviously does not want a sexual partner. As a monk, to be presented with a, presumably, nubile woman and commanded to marry and consummate that marriage (6.2) is a painful attack on Malchus' chastity, especially when considered in the light of previous events. Malchus has already managed to avoid marriage once (3.1) but he is not

12. However, see Clark (2008:110) who argues that Jerome praised women by denigrating them, couching his praise in terms of women having overcome their natural weakness. We do not immediately see a correlation between Jerome's use of *femina* and forms of *mulier* in the *Vita Malchi* and his *Epistulae*, for example. However, it should be noted that Jerome uses the word *femina* far less across his letters, which warrants further investigation.

13. See Gray (2015:40) on the legal language of this passage which seems to legitimise the marriage, but as it is all subterfuge, the 'legal wedding' is undermined because it is not consummated.

14. Weingarten (2005:189) suggests that Jerome contrasts the chaste hero, Malchus, to the Saracens as worshippers of Venus, the goddess of sex, by suggesting this marriage also makes the couple more pleasing to their masters.

immune to temptation, as his wish to leave the monastery and take up his inheritance proves (3.5). Being positioned as his wife turns the woman into the physical embodiment of this temptation. However, as an identity marker, this is fleeting.<sup>15</sup> After a rather confused passage, during which Malchus seems to accept the woman in order to prevent the master killing him (6.2), but then decides to kill himself to preserve his chastity (6.4–6), the woman makes clear that she has no intention of being his sexual partner, as captivity has taught her to choose chastity as well (6.7). She states that even if she were to be returned to her rightful husband she would remain celibate and that she would *also* choose death rather than lose her chastity. She therefore suggests a marriage of the spirit rather than the body.<sup>16</sup> Malchus is dumbfounded by this speech and the woman's virtue and says that he loves her even more than a wife (6.8).<sup>17</sup> Afterwards, he makes it clear that he never touches her in any way.

The woman is therefore a wife in affection and shared living quarters but not in the manner of a sexual partnership or procreation, which is an important part of the usually accepted definition of wife. She was such a wife to her previous husband, but as firstly, she has been separated from him, probably for life; secondly, captivity has taught her ascetic chastity which she decides she has no intention of denouncing; and thirdly, Malchus has rejected her as a sexual partner and accepted her instead as something better than a wife, the sexual aspect has been removed from her identity as wife, which means that in a way she is also a not-wife. In addition, Malchus will later reject even their spiritual marriage and hand her over to the virgins (10.3), so she is also a not-wife in that respect.<sup>18</sup>

## Sister

As part of her suggestion for Malchus and herself to have a spiritual rather than a physical marriage, she suggests that they live together as brother and sister<sup>19</sup> and that the affection which is to convince the masters that the relationship is physical flows from such a bond (6.7). As they do live together so closely and as the woman enters into all of Malchus' concerns as a sister should,<sup>20</sup> and with sexual duties not being an issue between them, sister seems like it could be an important identity marker for her. However, in the last line

15. Gray (2015:28) suggests that the trajectory of the woman from temptress to paragon of chastity is an innovation of Jerome's. See also 239.

16. This is surprising as Jerome's antipathy to such marriages was well known (*Ep.* 22.14.1–2; *Ep.* 117). See Cloke (1995:78–79); Rebenich (2002:188n.16); Burrus (2004:33–34); and Gray (2015:129–130).

17. See Gray (2015:243) on possible interpretations of these lines. See also Burrus (2004:36).

18. Although she is never referred to overtly as a mother, even to state whether or not she left any children behind, her previous marriage and the fact that the woman only chooses chastity after her forcible separation from her husband through capture (6.2; 6.7) suggest that motherhood could have been part of her life and one of her identity markers. However, as the procreative aspect of wife has been removed from her identity marker as wife to Malchus, the possible identity marker of mother which a married woman could have is also removed. This makes sense in light of Jerome's view of motherhood, as he praised women who put the love of God before the love of children (*Ep.* 39.5.5; *Ep.* 108.6.3). See Clarke (1979:51–52).

19. The brother–sister markers can also be meant in the sense of brother and sister in Christ, having the same heavenly Father and they would stay as such even if they are in separate monastic settlements.

20. She agrees to flee with him at 8.1, but this is also wifely behaviour.



of Malchus' narrative, he rejects her as a sister, stating that he loves her as a sister but does not entrust himself to her as a sister (10.3). Thus, the woman also becomes a not-sister.

When one realises that many of her identity markers are as negative as they are positive, and as such that many of the basic characteristics of 'woman' are actually removed or nullified for her, one finds that she cannot be a generic woman. In denying her the full range of gender identity markers, Jerome is no doubt intending to pay a compliment and depict her in the best possible light as an ascetic, Christian woman.

## Anima

With the main identity markers of 'woman' removed from her identity, it becomes possible to see other identity markers. It is noticeable that when Malchus addresses his *anima* [soul],<sup>21</sup> a concept denoted by the masculine<sup>22</sup> but a word that is grammatically gendered as feminine in Latin, asking it what they should do (6.5)<sup>23</sup> to help preserve his chastity (6.4–5), the woman answers with exactly what he needs to hear, suggesting a way for him to avoid both death and losing his chastity (6.7).<sup>24</sup> This opens the possibility that another of her identity markers is as a physical manifestation of the better part of Malchus, specifically here, giving his soul a voice. While Malchus temporarily becomes the lamenting, effeminated protagonist of ancient novel,<sup>25</sup> she becomes the logical, sensible, masculine character that takes charge and solves problems (6.7).<sup>26</sup>

That she might be the physical embodiment of a part of Malchus is not so far-fetched when one further considers the depiction of the woman and their relationship in the rest of the narrative. The next time they are reported interacting, Malchus has conceived a desire to escape captivity and return to his monastery (7.1–7.3). When he relates his deliberations to the woman and asks her both to flee with him and keep silent, she agrees with everything he says (8.1). He does not even bother to report her actual words but instead indicates

21.Gray (2015:231–232) points out that *anima* could be used to address people, often women. While this might argue for the word then being interpreted as Malchus addressing the woman, Gray feels that the use of the second person in the next sentence precludes this. However, we would argue that this usage here foreshadows the woman answering as the possible voice of his soul.

22.See Arjava (1989:11) on Jerome's occasional interpretation of the soul as being denoted by the masculine and the body as being denoted by the feminine as a method of softening Scripture's harsh opinion of women.

23.Jerome is fond of this wording and uses it in *Epistula* 60.5.1 and *Epistula* 108.27.1 (Gray 2015:231; Weingarten 2005:192).

24.Gray (2015:237, 239, 240–242) also notes similarities in tone, wording and themes between the speeches of Malchus and the woman.

25.While laments are a stock characteristic of both the male and female lovers in ancient novels, the passive suffering which prompts these laments is seen as a traditionally feminine trait (Haynes 2003:97). See also Gray (2015:223–224, 227) on laments in the ancient novel and the *Vita Malchi*.

26.Haskins (2008:166–173) has noted this gender role reversal in the 2nd century CE Latin novel Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*, when several female characters temporarily take on masculine characteristics as the male in their respective stories become temporarily effeminated. Weingarten (2005:83–102) suggests that Jerome made use of Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* in his *Vita Hilarionis* and points out many parallels. It is therefore possible that Jerome was using a similar technique to that in Apuleius as he was familiar with his work. However, see Adkin (2011), who emphatically refutes Weingarten's arguments, stating that '[t]here is no evidence that Jerome had read any work of Apuleius' (75).

her agreement in staccato phrases. From that point (8.2), she ceases to be a separate person in the narrative.<sup>27</sup> Every time Malchus describes their activities to plan their escape, as well as their actions and thoughts during the actual escape and the adventures they meet, Malchus refers to them as 'we'.<sup>28</sup> He never refers to them as 'both of us', or 'she and I' or indeed the woman on her own. His 'we' could be changed to 'I', excising the woman from the narrative, and the plotline would still make perfect sense.

Gray (2015:238) argues that the speech of the woman in response to Malchus' lament shows her as an agent in her own right, but as the woman tells Malchus what he most wants to hear in relation to his address to his soul, and in light of Gray's (266) admission that the woman later loses all agency in the text, we cannot read the woman entirely as an independent individual and feel it only strengthens the argument that she is also a physical manifestation of a part of Malchus. The woman herself also suggests that Malchus 'love the bond of the soul' (*animae copulam amato* 6.7) with her, rather than that of the body. If she is not just a woman but also a part of his *anima*, this makes additional sense as she is asking him to love the stronger part of himself, which will later manifest in him with the urge to escape, as she, in turn, sinks into submission.

## Elizabeth

In addition to the roles that provide identity markers to the woman, she is also associated with several biblical and literary figures, both positively and negatively, which provide further characterisation. The only figure she is specifically compared to is Elizabeth,<sup>29</sup> the mother of John the Baptist. The explicit comparison relates to the fact that she and Malchus are just as religious as Zechariah and Elizabeth were, wearing out the threshold of the church (2.2). Obviously, the couples are also similar in their extreme old age and cohabitation. This comparison indicates that the nameless *anus* is very religious and holy and spends her old age in the company of a pious husband. However, it is specifically mentioned that Zechariah and Elizabeth had a child. The fact that the woman does not have a child with Malchus further emphasises her chastity.

## Sarah (and Rebecca)

We believe there is also an indirect, but important allusion to Sarah, the wife of Abraham.<sup>30</sup> Abraham and Sarah, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, are also described as old people<sup>31</sup>

27.She is also no longer an agent in her own right, as noted by Gray (2015:266).

28.Even Gray (2015:282), in discussing them, attributes a single thought to them as one being. See also Weingarten (2005:esp.174) who does not treat the woman as a separate person.

29.Malchus, however, is explicitly compared to Adam, Jacob and Moses and there are strong allusions to Joseph and Daniel. See Kritzing (2015:210–219).

30.Gray (2015:24–25) and others, for example, Fuhrmann (1977:74), point out the fact that the references to classical authors are hidden in the *Vita Malchi*, but it seems as if Jerome also hides biblical references.

31.Genesis 18:11: 'Erant autem ambo senes, provectaeque aetatis, et desiderant Sarae fieri muliebria' [But they were both old, of advanced age, and Sarah was past the age of childbearing].

and, like Elizabeth, Sarah was very old and past the age of childbearing when she gave birth to Isaac.<sup>32</sup> But there is something else in the story of Malchus and his 'wife' which reminds us of Abraham and Sarah, namely the mentioning of a brother-sister relationship between them. Abraham asked his beautiful wife Sarah on two occasions to pretend to be his sister: in Genesis 12:12–19, it is described how Abraham, out of fear of being killed by the Egyptians, asked Sarah to lie on his behalf.<sup>33</sup> Although she was then given in a pseudo-marriage to the Pharaoh, Jerome (*Hebraicae Quaestiones in Genesim* 12:15–16) emphasises the fact that Sarah's chastity was preserved.<sup>34</sup> In Genesis 20:1–18, a similar incident is described, when Abraham told Abimelech<sup>35</sup> that Sarah was his sister. When God appeared to Abimelech in a dream and told him that Sarah was married and that he should not touch her, he returned Sarah to Abraham.<sup>36</sup> Interestingly, a similar story is related in Genesis 26, but this time it was Isaac who told the same lie about his beautiful wife Rebecca being his sister. Although in the *Vita Malchi* it is the woman who suggests the brother-sister relationship, it seems to call these biblical passages to mind and to compare Malchus' 'wife' with Sarah.<sup>37</sup> In the biblical narratives, the husbands, Abraham and Isaac, and their wives, Sarah and Rebecca, pretend to be brother and sister because they are afraid of being killed. In the *Vita Malchi*, it is the reverse: Malchus and his wife pretend to be husband and wife to escape death, while they are living as brother and sister.

## Mary

Although there is no clear reference or allusion to the virgin Mary in the *Vita Malchi*, there are striking similarities in the circumstances of Malchus' 'wife' and Mary.<sup>38</sup> Both are, in

32. Both Elizabeth and Sarah are described as barren and childless, before they got children at a very old age. Luke 1:7: 'Et non erat illis filius eo quod esset Elisabeth sterilis, et ambo processissent in diebus suis' [And they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren and they were both advanced in years] and Genesis 11:30: 'Erat autem Sarai sterilis, nec habebat liberos' [But Sarai was barren and she had no children].

33. The exceptional beauty of Sarah as a young woman is specifically mentioned in Genesis 12:11: 'Cumque prope esset ut ingrederetur Aegyptum, dixit Sarai uxori suae: Novi quod pulchra sis mulier' [And when he was about to enter Egypt, he said to his wife Sarai: I know that you are a beautiful woman] and Genesis 12:14: 'Cum itaque ingressus esset Abram Aegyptum, viderunt Aegyptii mulierem quod esset pulchra nimis' [When Abram therefore entered Egypt, the Egyptians saw that she was a very beautiful woman]. However, nothing is said about the physical appearance of the nameless woman.

34. In *Epistula* 22.41, Jerome also includes Sarah among the chaste married women: 'Tunc et alius castitatis chorus occurret: Sarra cum nuptis venit; ...' [And after these, yet another company of chaste women will meet you. Sarah will come with the wedded; ...]. In *Adversus Iovinianum* 1.5, Jerome says that Sarah is a type of the church, which is interesting, since the *Vita Malchi* is called a *historia castitatis* [history of chastity], written as a finger exercise for the more comprehensive *historia ecclesiae* [history of the church].

35. The name Abimelech, meaning 'My father is king', shares the 'mlk' stem with the name 'Malchus' and it is perhaps no coincidence.

36. See also Genesis 20:3–4: Venit autem Deus ad Abimelech per somnium nocte, et ait ille: 'En morieris propter mulierem quam tulisti: habet enim virum'. Abimelech vero non tetigerat eam, et ait: 'Domine, num gentem ignorantem et iustam interficies?' [But God came to Abimelech in a dream one night and said to him: "You are going to die, because of the woman you have taken: for she has a husband." But Abimelech had not touched her and said: "Lord, will you kill an ignorant and innocent nation?"]

37. The reference to the Saracens as Ishmaelites in 4.2 reminds the reader of Abraham's story and also of the story of Joseph who was sold by his brothers to Ishmaelites. See Gray (2015:174). Malchus is compared to Joseph, who was regarded as the ideal male type of chastity, while his 'wife' represents the exact opposite of Potiphar's wife, who tried to seduce Joseph.

38. We give acknowledgement to D.F. du Plessis who first noted possible similarities between the woman and Mary in an undergraduate assignment for a Latin course taught by one of the authors.

their own specific way, champions of chastity, and even though the nameless woman has been married before, she is now in a special pseudo-marriage, somewhat similar to the relationship between Joseph and Mary.<sup>39</sup> Jerome's *Adversus Helvidium* is also known as *De Perpetua virginitate beatae Mariae* [About the perpetual virginity of Blessed Mary], and many of the themes addressed in this work also feature in the *Vita Malchi*, for example, chastity, virginity, marriage, second marriage and pseudo-marriage.

## Dido and Thisbe

The story of this couple is also compared to, or rather contrasted with, the love stories of Aeneas and Dido and Pyramus and Thisbe, the first of which is already well attested.<sup>40</sup> After the hero of Vergil's *Aeneid*, Aeneas, and his men, on their way to Italy, land in Carthage, they are welcomed by Dido, the Carthaginian queen. Aeneas and Dido fall in love and, being forced into a cave during a thunderstorm, the two of them make love. Dido considers their relationship as a marriage, but for Aeneas it is just a love affair. When Aeneas is reminded by Mercury of his divine calling, he decides to leave Dido behind and sail to Italy. Enraged and saddened, Dido commits suicide. The story of Pyramus and Thisbe, according to Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (4.55–92), is about a young man and beautiful young girl from Babylon, who live as neighbours in adjacent houses which share a common wall. They are madly in love, but their parents disapprove of their relationship and their only means of communication is through a thin crack in the wall shared by both houses. They decide to escape and meet each other after dark at a specific landmark outside the city. Thisbe arrives first, but when she sees a bloodied lion she flees into a cave and hides there, leaving her veil behind. When Pyramus arrives and sees the tracks of the lion and Thisbe's blood-stained veil, which the lion has savaged, he assumes that she has been killed and commits suicide. When Thisbe returns and finds Pyramus, she kills herself with the same sword.

The nameless woman, also finding herself in an unsanctified relationship with a man, importantly not one of her own making, by contrast, does not commit suicide but instead prevents the suicide of Malchus, and their own deaths at the hands of the master, with her plan for them to live in a chaste marriage. The desire of Dido and Thisbe, driven by erotic love, to marry and live happily ever after with their husbands ends in tragedy for them, but their desired happy ending actually transpires, in an unexpected way, for the woman and Malchus. These associations highlight that the woman's chaste relationship with Malchus instead saves lives and leads to a long life. This Christian ascetic way of life proves to be a much better option than the lifestyles of the characters of classic Roman literature, or indeed that of the Saracens. The woman is therefore marked as an anti-Dido, and an

39. In *Adversus Helvidium* 19, Jerome asserts that Joseph was Mary's guardian rather than her husband and that he stayed a virgin with her.

40. The similarities and differences between the three narratives are described in detail in Kritzinger (2017:159–169).

anti-Thisbe, a direct contrast to pagan Eastern ideals, and instead a representative of chaste Christianity.

## Paula

But the nameless woman is not only compared to biblical and literary figures;<sup>41</sup> she also represents holy women from Jerome's own world and, in particular, his widow friend, Paula.

There are striking parallels between the lives of Malchus and his 'wife' and that of Jerome and Paula.<sup>42</sup> Paula was married and had five children, but after the birth of her fifth child, she committed herself to marital abstinence. After her husband's death, she, now 34 years old, devoted herself, as chaste widow, to God (Rebenich 1992:155). Malchus' 'wife' not only lives with Malchus in a chaste 'pseudo-marriage' but also states that she would preserve her chastity even if her (first) husband should return. It is clear to see that these two women share the same ideal of absolute chastity, in other words, sexual abstinence, even while they are still married. Malchus and his 'wife' joined separate monastic communities in the East after their escape and Paula and Jerome similarly lived in separate monasteries in Bethlehem until their deaths; Paula in 404 and Jerome in 420 (Weingarten 2005:1, 15–16).<sup>43</sup> The 'spiritual bond' relationship of Malchus and his companion can perhaps be regarded as Jerome's justification for his close (but chaste) relationship with Paula. Jerome wants to persuade his opponents that even if their relationship might look like a marriage, they are brother and sister in the eyes of God. Perhaps, the identification of the nameless woman with Paula tells us more about Paula than about the nameless woman, but it seems clear that she represents married women or widows, who have decided to dedicate themselves to a life of absolute chastity.

## The main textual inconsistency

This reading of the now name-full woman suggests a few possibilities for explaining the most confounding element of the *Vita Malchi*, namely the inconsistency between the beginning of the narrative when Jerome first observes Malchus and the woman living together in a spiritual marriage (2.1–2), and the end of the narrative when Malchus states he handed the woman over to the virgins (10.3) so that he could return to his life in a community of monks.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps, the reason can be found when one considers the possibility that the woman is not just an individual but also a part of Malchus. Malchus could not live without a part of himself.<sup>45</sup>

41.Gray (2015:25–30) mentions among others the following female characters from ancient novel who somehow experience similar adventures as the 'wife' of Malchus: Charite (Apuleius' *Metamorphoses*), Leucippe and Melite (Achilles Tatius' *Clitophon and Leucippe*).

42.These parallels have been pointed out by De Vogüé (1993:78) and Weingarten (2005:192), and discussed in greater detail by Kritzingner (2015:220–221).

43.See Kelly (1975:91–94, 109, 113–115) for a discussion of their relationship and controversies surrounding it.

44.For a summary of the debate on the inconsistency between the couple living together at the beginning of the text, but at the end of their lives, and Malchus' assertion that on his return to his monastery he handed the woman over to the virgins, see Gray (2015:125–126). See also 10 and 304.

45.See Burrus' (2004:39) interpretation of their lack of separation as Malchus' captivity by his queer wife.

Another wildly different possibility relates to the association of the woman with Paula. Despite the similarities between them, there is one important difference, that is, Jerome and Paula did not move in together, but stayed in their separate monastic communities. We know that Jerome (*Ep.* 22.14.1–2) personally criticised the practise of people living together in a chaste marriage. Although he seems to condone it when it is mentioned in the frame narrative at the beginning of the *Vita Malchi*, he chooses rather to leave it out in the conclusion. Our guess is that Jerome has suggested a better ending for the couple as he deems a life in separate monastic communities to have been the most appropriate culmination to their chaste lives. While the mentioning of their cohabitation in the beginning of the narrative shows that, in their special case, Malchus and the woman were able to live in absolute chastity during the final stage of their lives, ending Malchus' account at their joining of different monastic communities provides readers with an example to follow.

## Conclusion

From this study, the supposedly nameless woman is found to be anything. Indeed, she has so many names that it is impossible to choose only one for her. From a host of identity markers and associations, both in the positive and in the negative, the woman of the *Vita Malchi* is discovered to be an *exemplum*, an ideal of Christian womanhood. She embodies chastity and the monastic ideal. For the most part, she is also submissive to the male in her life, except when her Christian ideals are threatened, when she shows herself a tower of strength, even to the point of martyrdom. She may have no official name, but the narrative is as much about her example to Christian women, especially married women and widows, as Malchus is an example to Christian men.

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### Authors' contributions

S.L.H. wrote the first half of the article on roles. J.P.K.K. wrote the second half on literary and historical associations. Both authors contributed equally to the editing of the article as a whole. S.L.H. did the styling or formatting of the final document.

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