EUNUCHS AND CASTRATI

DISABILITY AND NORMATIVITY IN EARLY MODERN EUROPE

Katherine Crawford
Eunuchs and Castrati

*Eunuchs and Castrati* examines the enduring fascination among historians, literary critics, musicologists, and other scholars around the figure of the castrate. Specifically, the book asks what influence such fascination had on the development and delineation of modern ideas around sexuality and physical impairment.

Ranging from Greco-Roman times to the twenty-first century, Katherine Crawford brings together travel accounts, diplomatic records, and fictional sources, as well as existing scholarship, to demonstrate how early modern interlocutors reacted to and depicted castrates. She reveals how medicine and law operated to maintain the privileges of bodily integrity and created and extended prejudice against those without it. In consequence, castrates were constructed as gender deviant, disabled social subjects and demarcated as inferior. Early modern cultural loci then reinforced these perceptions, encouraging an othering of castrates in public contexts.

These extensive, almost obsessive accounts of appearance, social propensities, and gender characteristics of castrated men reveal the historical lineages of sexual stigma and hostility toward gender non-normative and physically impaired persons. For Crawford, they are the roots of sexual and physical prejudices that remain embedded in the western experience today.

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Eunuchs and Castrati
Disability and Normativity in Early Modern Europe

Katherine Crawford
For Kathryn. Without whom not.
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This book is for Kathryn. It is not quite an answer to her question, but I offer it in the hope that the questions and conversations will continue forever and always.
List of abbreviations

D  Digest
C  Codex Justinianus
CT  Codex Theodosianus
I  Institutes of Justinian
GLQ  Gay and Lesbian Quarterly
JHS  The Journal of the History of Sexuality
RQ  Renaissance Quarterly
SQ  Shakespeare Quarterly
MGH  Monumenta Germaniae Historica
BNF  Bibliothèque nationale de France
KJV  King James Version of the Bible
Introduction

Castrates, crossings, and pejorative sexual scripting

The French poet Paul Valéry asked of Montesquieu’s *The Persian Letters*, “But who will explain to me all these eunuchs? I have no doubt that there is some secret and profound reason for the almost obligatory presence of these persons so cruelly separated from many things, and in some way, from themselves” [Mais qui m’expliquera tous ces eunuques? Je ne doute pas qu’il y ait une secrète et profonde raison de la présence presque obligée de ces personnages si cruellement séparés de bien des choses, et en quelque sorte d’eux-mêmes] (Valéry 1929, 67). To reframe and expand Valéry’s query, why do people keep writing about eunuchs? Why are they characters in books and on television shows? Why do historians, literary critics, musicologists, and other scholars devote so many articles and books to what was (is) a presumably small fraction of the male population? As a topic, castration generally makes people uncomfortable, and yet, castrated men figure in law, medicine, and literature; on the theatrical stage, on the opera stage; and in psychoanalytic, gender, and queer theory.

How did men who have either been born without functional genitals or suffered from the damage or destruction of them come to occupy such a range of cultural positions? One answer in part might be that eunuchs and castrati served a variety of high profile roles in the past, as the range of meanings associated with common terminology suggests. “Eunuch,” from the Greek εὐνόχος and the Latin *eunuchus* and derived from the Hebrew *sārīs*, can refer to a castrated man generally, a harem attendant, or a court officer. “Castrato” more specifically refers to a male castrated as a boy to retain a high singing voice, and typically describes opera singers. Both terms accumulated negative connotations over the centuries. I recognize disabled people have resisted labelling that identifies them by their disability, but I will generally use the term “castrate” except in quotations or when a specific identifier is more appropriate (Reusch in CC, 30–31). I do this in order to challenge the ways that the population of men who were deliberately castrated has often been rendered invisible.

Still, even considering their prominence as officers, harem attendants, and singers, castrates are a numerically small group that of necessity does not reproduce itself. The attention to castrates, sometimes bordering on fascination,
in the twentieth century rests heavily on Sigmund Freud and his theory of psychosexual development in which castration played a central role. In *On the Sexual Theories of Children* (1905), Freud posited that both male and female children assume that everyone has a penis, and that castration, or the fear of it, determined both male and female gender and sexual maturation. The male child fears losing his penis by castration, while the female child considers herself to have been already and irrevocably mutilated. This leads the girl to penis envy, and the boy to sublimation and, if all goes well, heterosexuality (Freud, *Standard Edition 7*: 135–243). Of course, for Freud it did not always go well, but the ideal of heterosexuality as man/woman or male/female had, and has, normative standing.

For my purposes, two problems mark Freudian attention to castration. First, Freud did not recognize that his views were culturally located. If castrati were no longer on the opera stage in Freud’s Vienna, they were still ghosted in the voices of women who sang their parts. If Ottomans no longer posed a threat to the Hapsburg dominion in which Freud lived, the racialized sexual exoticism of the harem still swirled about the reputation of the sultan and his empire (Alloula 1986; Yeğenoğlu 1998; DelPlato 2002; Roberts 2007; Beaulieu and Roberts 2002). Second, Freud’s notion of castration hinged on the fear that men feel about damage to their vulnerable genitals, but the theory nonetheless subordinated actual physical debility to presumed psychic damage. To take just one highly influential theoretical intervention in which this is apparent, Laura Mulvey’s feminist psychoanalytic account of the male gaze features castration as a central theme. Mulvey’s 1975 article, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” argued that phallocentrism “…depends on the image of the castrated woman to give order and meaning to its world” (1999, 833). The male gaze creates the protagonist as active, and the (female) object of his gaze as passive. Male scopophilia enables his erotic control, while at the same time the protagonist’s fear of castration is staved off by voyeuristic, often fetishistic attention to the female character. Mulvey’s central examples, *Rear Window* (1954) and *Vertigo* (1958), both directed by Alfred Hitchcock and starring Jimmy Stewart, feature protagonists who are disabled, but not actually castrated. Jeff Jeffries in *Rear Window* is immobilized in a cast and confined to a wheelchair; Scottie Ferguson in *Vertigo* has a phobic fear of heights. For Mulvey, disability in both films is a kind of impotence or castration, but actual castration is off the table.

Although psychoanalytic accounts avoid actual, physical castration, they have inspired attention to castrates that considers their gendered and sexual location. Literary critic Gary Taylor has taken up castration as a matter of masculinity through readings of Freud, Augustine of Hippo (354–430), and Thomas Middleton (1580–1627). Freud’s theory, as Taylor has emphasized, posited complete ablation of the penis and testicles, but castration in most classical and early modern contexts referred to the loss of the testicles. For Taylor, Freud’s “regime of the penis” replaced the earlier “regime of the scrotum” (2000, 96, 108). The shift in emphasis is crucial to understanding
changing concerns about castration: Where reproduction was the primary (legitimate) purpose of sex in early modernity, pleasure became central in modernity. Although his interest is in masculinity, Taylor points to the fundamental structure of sexual identity for much of human history: Men and women were defined by their relation to reproduction – as were castrates. Sexual identity in terms of the modern notion of preference and pleasure was not operative for early modern castrates, but understanding how sex shaped social and cultural identity was.

Because of the overwhelming dominance of reproductive sex as legitimate, scholars across many disciplines have been attracted to castrates as individuals who embody sexual and gender non-normativity. With their non-binary physicality, castrates offered historians, literary critics, and musicologists ways to think about how gender flexibility functioned in the past. To highlight here just some of the salient interventions with more detailed discussions of particular areas of scholarly inquiry in the relevant chapters below, historians have concentrated on the gender liminality of castrates. For Kathryn Ringrose, Byzantine castrates served as a third gender mediating between the other two. With their distinctive beardless, elongated appearance and specific habits of dress, Byzantine castrates mediated gender boundaries that constrained “normal” men and women. Ringrose emphasizes that the separation of castrates from family obligations and their incapacity for procreation made them “perfect servants” both at the Byzantine court and in religious contexts. As “an alternative gender category,” Byzantine castrates flourished until the twelfth century, when a more rigid gender binary began to prevail (Ringrose 2003). Like Ringrose, Shaun Marmon understands castrates for their liminality. Castrates in Islamic contexts traversed gender boundaries, but also the worlds of the living and the dead. Countering the propensity to vilify both Islam and castrates, Marmon traces how castrates in premodern Islamic society utilized corporeal ambiguity to maintain their role as guardians of the holy site of Medina and the tomb complex of the Prophet Muhammad. Gender is less explicit for Marmon, but the mediating function is enabled by the castrate’s physical ambiguity (Marmon 1995). In Shaun Tougher’s view, castrate mediation was also less about gender, and in the case of ancient Rome, more about sex and power. Castrates could signify lack in ways that highlighted the fertility or fecundity of emperors, and could indicate the literally transformative power of the ruler to change (male) bodies into something else. On these terms, castrates came to symbolize royalty, and once associated with courts and rulers, were difficult to dislodge (Tougher 2002). In a more gender-inflected analysis, Mathew Kuefler has traced the elaboration of voluntary male chastity under Christianity in terms of the notion of the “manly eunuch.” In the context of the late Roman crisis in masculinity, Christianity offered voluntary sexual continence as a marker of superior masculinity. Becoming a “eunuch for the kingdom of heaven’s sake” [Matt. 19:12, KJV] was better than actual castration in this model, enabling Christianity to associate sexual self-control with the religious power structure that was the Catholic
Church (Kuefler 2001). In multiple contexts, then, historians have come to understand castrates as mediating figures. Their ability to cross—or “trans”—was a function of gender ambiguity that served instrumental purposes.

Castrated singers were of course actually instruments. Moving past an earlier focus on specific musical works and in line with efforts to analyze the role of the singer in music history, several musicologists have situated castrati in terms of their problematic relationship to gender and sexual norms within the history of music and musical performance. Dorothy Keyser mapped out how cultural understandings of castrati determined viewing practices around cross-dressing on stage (Keyser 1987/1988). Roger Freitas has provided a model for how to proceed with a queer analysis of castrate sexuality in his excavation of the life and loves of the castrato Atto Melani (Freitas 2009; 2003). Combining musicology with a cultural anthropology approach, Martha Feldman has extended the interest in singers to nuanced questions of vocal production that locate the castrato in social context. Understanding the castrato as a hybrid figure in terms of reproduction, economics, and representations, Feldman is especially interested in castrati within the patronage system, arguing that they were imbricated in “male social reproduction” in various ways (Feldman, 2015, xvii). The castrato, it seems, is no longer “a shadowy tale in the history of music,” but has moved to a central position in scholarship on the voice, the history of singing, and the processes of music production (Bergeron 1996, 167). The musicologists offer a rich abundance of analytic attention to castrati, which tends to understand castration as enabling. But castration was also disabling: castrates were denied entry into the routines of social life.

Critics have answered Paul Valéry by highlighting the disproportionate symbolic importance of castrates in matters of sexuality and gender, demonstrating their singular liminality as they mediated gender boundaries and binaries, and emphasizing that their unusual and astonishing vocal gifts confounded gender expectations. The essay that is this book does something different: it takes up the combined claims that castrates were (often deliberately) physically and socially disabled castrated men who were effectively transgndered medically and culturally. The combination of disabling and transgendering put castrates at odds with normal and normate social and cultural values, and, I will argue, served as an epistemological point of origin for pejorative notions of deviant sexual identity.

1. Male castration and/as disability

Scholars of disability studies suggest the question: What does it mean to understand castrates as disabled subjects? Disability scholars have offered several ways to answer this question. From the medical model, I assume that castration is a biomedical event that affects quality of life. The medical model of disability typically assumes that curing disability is both an option and an objective. But castration was imposed medically and rendered the body as disabled. Hence, I rely on the social model of disability as well. This model
posits that disability is caused by how society is organized, and understands the need to remove barriers that limit access, independence, and equality. Many men and boys were deliberately castrated, and thus disabled relative to the normative expectations about men and reproductive potency. Many more men probably suffered genital impairment from injury or disease, although these men are less accessible to the historical record. Given that aspects of masculinity were defined by strength and potency understood in part as a function of the testicles, intentionally damaging them and destroying their efficacy was a significant form of social disability. Lennard J. Davis has argued that “normalcy must constantly be enforced in public venues...must always be creating and bolstering its image by processing, comparing, constructing, deconstructing images of normalcy and the abnormal” (2010, 14). Davis notes that the word “norm” dates to 1855 and its cognates, “normality” and “normalcy” appeared in 1849 and 1857 respectively. Notions of human norms, and thus disability with respect to them, are in part the result of the rise of statistics and the development of eugenics in the nineteenth century (ibid., 4–8).

Castration was a social disability in the sense that many of the barriers associated with it were conventional. The alterations to the body had effects and consequences, but neither the medical nor the social model alone can account for how castrates negotiated their way in the world as genitaly altered men. Critical or “crip” disability studies combines concerns that the medical model reduces disability to (correctable) impairment and works to understand disability in terms of institutional and systemic efforts that dis-able persons in various ways. This project seeks to understand the medicalization involved in the intentional disabling of boys and men in terms of the institutional structures that justified and encouraged castration.

The close association, which is really antipathy, between eugenics and disability points to a further intersection with this project: the eugenic program of “improving” humankind rested heavily on reproduction; castration forestalled reproduction. In eugenic terms, sterilization was to prevent “undesirable” people from reproducing and had been part of public health discourse, medical practice, and legal discussion since at least Francis Galton in the nineteenth century. In his history of involuntary sterilization, Philip R. Reilly notes that two-thirds of state legislatures enacted sterilization laws to prevent socially or physically “undesirable persons” from reproducing (Reilly 1991, x). Castration in the United States had another complex relationship to eugenics in the form of the lynching of black men accused of raping white women. As part of the lynching “ritual,” mobs deliberately and theatrically castrated black men as a form of Biblical revenge for his “crime” (Hale 1998). Legal castration, while considered by a number of states, was almost entirely rejected as too brutal a punishment.

The deliberate sterilization of men places castration within the bailiwick of eugenics and within disability studies more broadly. In her essay about race and disability, Michelle Jarman has pointed out that the widespread cultural understanding of disability as a personal misfortune enables people to
overlook or dismiss violence against disabled persons (SD, 90). Jarman’s subject is twentieth-century eugenic castration, but her argument propagates in two directions with respect to the history of castrates. First, when castration as a deliberate practice was utilized to create beautiful voices, people at the time looked past the problems that infertility would cause in a culture devoted to reproductive sexuality (Neubert and Cloerkes 1994, 41–44). In Italy, where castration of boys was carried out and where Catholic notions of celibacy (a form of non-reproductive sexuality) retained cultural power, observers regarded castrates with a simultaneous shrug of indifference and embarrassment about the process of castration. Elsewhere in Europe, commentators often bracketed castrates as apart from communal norms. A castrate might be absorbed back into his natal family, but his contribution to the next generation was monetary, rather than genetic or biological.

The castrate exemplifies another aspect observed by disability scholars: the tendency to regard disabled people as at once sexually deficient and sexually excessive (Mollow in SD, 286). As we shall see, critics routinely applied these contradictory characterizations to castrates, enabling the development of a double bind in which castrates were simultaneously incapacitated and held responsible for sexual transgressions of all sorts. Part of the reason for this simultaneity rests in how contemporaries understood sexuality as an aspect of masculinity. Todd Reeser has argued that early modern masculinity operated on a ternary model in which masculinity was the (unstable) point between excess and lack, both of which were defined as feminine. Early modern gender norms cast women as lacking control over their desires and prone to lustful behavior. In contrast, critics believed men to be moderate, self-controlled, and in matters of sex, considerably less libidinous than women. As sexually disabled men in a cultural environment that privileged potent masculinity, castrates were literally lacking in testicles, but thought to be inclined to sexual excess. Although highly variable, masculine ideals have hegemonic power whatever their particular historical manifestations. Within early modern gender schemes, castrates did not have access to several definitional aspects of masculine embodiment.

Like many forms of disability or impairment, castration results in physical changes that were (are) believed to alter the relationship of the body to the expression of gender that body is capable of presenting. Also like many disabilities, the alterations to the body were both visible and not. Pre-pubescent castration created physiological effects that could appear on the body, but whether these were entirely legible, I will argue, is actually significant. Because of their low androgen levels, castrated men (and hypogonadal men generally) had less circulation to the skin and their levels of hemoglobin in the blood tended to be lower. Because of decreased melanin and increased carotene, castrates were inclined toward pallor or sallow skin, which was soft and prone to fine wrinkles. If castration was before puberty, the long bones of the arms and legs tended to elongate as they matured because the absence of androgens slowed epiphyseal closure of the bones. Castrates with long limbs
were often susceptible to osteoporosis, along with curvature of the spine, as they aged. If some castrates were unusually tall, many were also inclined toward a female fat distribution pattern, with a tendency toward larger hips, buttocks, and breast tissue (gynecomastia). To the envy of some men, castrates did not go bald (Ali and Donohoue 2011, 577.1). Although some historians have emphasized that castrates were legibly different in appearance, I have my doubts. Almost every element could be found in men with intact genitals, and many castrates could and did “pass” in many contexts. Disabilities can be invisible depending on context, and which bodies and minds are marked as disabled has been a contested and contentious issue. Issues of mental “competency,” for instance, have been especially fraught.

Except for castrated singers (who revealed themselves on stage often in dazzling ways), the more telling differences were the most hidden. Castrates had feminine pubic hair patterning. The penis tended to be small. Medically, the castrate’s ability to achieve coitus depended on what sort of procedure had been performed and when. If the testicles were disabled but the spermatic cords left alone, the castrated man could have erections and ejaculate. He would be sterile, but he could engage in intercourse. Bilateral orchiectomy, which involves the removal of the testicles, effectively caused permanent sterility, and when done early (by age seven), usually resulted in impotence but engorgement was possible, especially if the neurophysiology was undisturbed. When performed later (on boys nine or older but generally pre-pubescent), the results were sterility, but some subjects could attain erection, intromission, and ejaculation of sterile seminal fluid. Testosterone necessary for erection can be produced in interstitial cells in sufficient quantity to facilitate these functions. Similarly, bilateral subcapsular evacuation of the testicles – which seems to have been the preferred operation in early modernity – resulted in sterility, with residual testosterone produced in the lining of the testes enabling erection and ejaculation. Bilateral vasectomy, which involves excision of the vas deferens entirely or in part, results in sterility and impotence if the blood vessels are destroyed. Neither vasotomy (cutting into or across the vas deferens) nor vasostomy (cutting an opening in the vas deferens) necessarily result in either sterility or impotence because the area can heal sufficiently to recanalize (Melicow 1983). The hormonal effects of low androgen levels can affect the texture and color of the skin, as well as cause female hair patterning and fat distribution (Cheney 2003, 31, 161–166). Urologists have determined that erectile capacity is far less dependent on testosterone than is the sex drive (Campbell’s Urology, 1986, 708). Removal of the testicles reduces testosterone drastically, but serum follicle stimulating hormone and luteinizing hormone can rise after castration, causing the adrenal glands to produce extra testosterone. The amount is comparatively small and idiosyncratic in its effects on individuals, but it can support erection and ejaculation. In early modern contexts, the visibility of genitals was limited, and the recognition of what we would now identify as hormonal differences lacked a consistent vocabulary.
Historians of disability point out that multiple reactions to disabled people operated in the past. To take one relevant example, local communities generally considered early modern “idiots” to be asexual, but colonialist and eugenic discourse considered many of the mentally impaired to be sexually uncontrollable. Even more basically, referring to “disabled people” historically might be seen as problematic. The notion of disability did not really apply until eugenics (negatively) and the disability rights movement (positively) categorized people by impairment and notions of productivity. Until then, communities routinely provided support for individuals with physical and/or mental deficits (Nielsen 2013). Economic productivity became a crucial marker in the twentieth century. Sarah Rose argues that the ability to work marked those who were not able to do so as disabled. Rose sees the late nineteenth century as the crucial period in which many with physical or mental impairments who had been contributing members of the farm, household, and wage economies were removed to the margins of society and marked as disabled.

But the deep origins of exclusion abound in pre-modern contexts and economic organizations. As Colin Barnes has noted, the emphasis on corporeal “perfection” in classical antiquity and Jewish ritual are just two expressions of the complex formulation that rendered imperfect bodies and minds as problematic. Early modern attitudes included a tendency to link physical deformity with evil and impairments, either physical or mental, as divine retribution for sin. Theologians depicted witches as deformed women. Shakespeare rendered Richard III as a monster of body and mind signaled by his deformity. Treatment of individuals suffering from mental disorders was notoriously brutal (Barnes 2010). Bias against disabled individuals was (is) culturally deeply ingrained (Thomas 1982).

Considering castrates as disabled opens an avenue to analyze how ambivalence was constructed in the past. Castrates were often ridiculed, demeaned, and openly regarded as freaks, but they could be valued for their disability. The classic case is the harem guard, considered to be the “safe” protector of female sexual virtue (although this was more complicated than the popular understanding suggests). This kind of castrate was often literally valuable: harem guards were usually slaves and quite costly to purchase. The other obviously valuable castrate was the castrato singer, whose voice – created by a combination of castration, years of training, and a certain amount of luck – enabled some to make fabulous fortunes and many to support themselves and their families through their musical abilities.

Understanding castrates historically reveals how paradigms of disability were constructed around a particular kind of person whose body was both known and unknown to his contemporaries. One recurrent issue that runs throughout this project is the uncertainty of knowledge about the castrate. From theologians who debated for centuries whether a castrate could engage in sexual congress, to theater audiences who were treated to “real” and “fake” castrates (all played by presumptively “normal” men); from medical theory
that posited very different modalities of corporeal change because of castration, to ecstatic and/or violent responses to acknowledged castrati on the musical stage, the disabled body of the castrate was always only partially known and understood.

I presume that historical Understandings of impairment – here, bodily and associated with sexual capacity – continue to shape modern conceptions. Castrates are no longer surgically engineered for public purposes, but changing historical conditions have enforced and reinforced the repression of disability difference embodied by the castrate. Following Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, my intention is to challenge the “ablest silence” embedded in early modern culture and accounts of it by modern critics. I understand this project as a contribution to disability activism in that castrates encountered institutional and attitudinal barriers and the construction of their disability made protest or resistance next to impossible. This essay reveals the astonishing amount of labor that went into erecting and maintaining these barriers. Where modern disability activism has raised awareness and challenged ableist assumptions, the normative repression of difference constructed around castrates hindered, perhaps prevented, both self-acceptance and collective action. I take understanding how this happened as part of challenging not just invisibility, but the mechanisms of concealment created by multiple regimes of knowledge.

2. Transsexuality

As suggested above, castration meant that men lacked a crucial aspect of the male body, which made their behavior and appearance more feminine. Castrates became like women. In sexual terms, this made them lusty, libidinous, and irrational – all significant disabilities relative to normative masculinity. Accordingly, in many contexts, intact people treated castrates like women, or at least as deficient men. I am not arguing that castrates were transsexuals, although early modern medicine kind of thought they were. I am arguing that explaining the castrate and locating him in culture created patterns of gender thinking about genitally altered bodies. Castrates did cross boundaries, including corporeal, gendered ones. In this sense, they were transgendered, and in most (perhaps virtually all) cases, the castrate had little or no say in the decision to castrate or its transgendering consequences.

The obvious link between castrates and transsexuals is that male-to-female (MtF) transsexuals who choose (and can afford) surgery are often castrated. In fact, the most radical form of castration – complete ablation of the penis and testicles – is perhaps the stereotypical sex reassignment surgery in “popular” accounts. As scholars have pointed out, many MtF individuals do not have surgery, but along with the characterization of a “woman trapped in a man’s body” or a “man trapped in a woman’s body” for female-to-male (FtM) transsexuals and the flamboyant drag queen, these are prominent aspects of transsexuality that continue to circulate. The medical culture and
gender theory of modern transsexuality that has made these elements available are both relatively new, but the historical perspectives offer ways of destabilizing gender binaries around transgender and transsexual ideas in a variety of contexts (Bettcher 2014; 2012). Mary Weismantel, for instance, has challenged the heteronormative reading of the archeological past, pointing to several finds that defy the modern male/female dichotomy in most things social and cultural. Gabriela Cano understands the hero of the Mexican Revolution Amelio Robles (born Amelia Robles Ávila) in transgender terms. The complicated gender crossings of Charles-Geneviève-Louis-Auguste-André-Timothée d’Éon de Beaumont (1728–1810), known as the Chevalier d’Éon, involved both transvestism and transgender understandings of the self. Broadly, work on “third sex” individuals in Native American culture, histories of intersex individuals (until recently usually called hermaphrodites), and records of cross-dressers “passing” (or not) have contributed to crucial rethinking of presumptions that the gender binary is natural (Jacobs et al. 1997; Von Stackleberg 2014; Steinberg 2001).

Understandably, trans activists and theorists have been especially engaged in the project of creating political, legal, social, and cultural space for trans people in contemporary culture. The historical questions have often been framed in terms of finding progenitors from heroic gender resistors to victims of intolerance. Their suffering reveals why we have to insist on more and better structural support for all transgender people, without distinctions of class, race, or nationality. The direction of discussion is in terms of individuals at odds with normative structures positioning themselves or aspiring to position themselves in terms of their understanding of their gender and/or sexuality in trans terms.

But castrates historically were almost always produced against their will or because they had a medical condition that necessitated castration. Whatever the castrate thought of his gender or sexuality before castration, after it, he was medically, culturally, and socially located as neither male nor female, and not in a good way. Commentators deployed “scientific” “facts” of feminization against castrated men, and these “facts” contributed to a template for gender disparagement of non-conforming men more broadly. Understanding castrates in terms of trans theory and trans politics is part of the goal; revealing how ideas about changing gender were imbricated in the politics of early modern castration can in turn support trans activism aimed at unpacking the pejorative lineages of transphobia.

3. Sexual impairment and the making of modern sexuality

Although my chronological and geographical focus is on early modern Europe, this project analyzes how castrated men figured in the development and delineation of central questions about modern sexuality. It ranges back in time to Greco-Roman sources and forward to fictional castrates in the twenty-first century. I consider castrates as harem attendants, especially in the
Ottoman Empire, but I do not work extensively in Ottoman sources. Nor do I venture into the historical sources regarding Indian and Chinese castrates or deeply into Byzantine ones. I confess to my own linguistic limitations, but I include travel accounts, diplomatic records, and fictional sources as well as scholarly analysis of castrates in these cultural contexts. I am recurrently concerned to put geographically, chronologically, and culturally distant locations in conversation with perceptions of castrates in Europe from early modernity forward.

Part I, “Inceptions,” lays out the medical, legal, and religious frameworks that determined the possibilities for castrates in early modern culture. Opening with ancient understandings of castration and its effects, Chapter 1, “Making Defective Men: Physiology, Medicine, and the Therapeutics of Castration,” analyzes how Hippocratic, Aristotelian, and Galenic traditions understood castration to alter male physiology in the direction of the feminine. Early modern medical practitioners knew that castration caused sterility, but how it did so and what additional effects might result from castration were in dispute. Castration was also a therapeutic technique, but the drastic effect of sterility made some physicians leery of its value, even as the “medical exception” allowed castrates to be created in numbers while evading laws that forbade castration.

As they are crucial not only to medical understandings of castration but also to the status of castrates, the legal dilemmas around castration are the focus of Chapter 2. “The Castration Conundrum: Civil Law Creates Sexual Disability” loops back to antiquity, concentrating on Roman civil, secular law. Roman law allowed some castrates (called spadones, and referring to men who lost function of their genitals) to marry, make wills, and manage their family lineages. At the same time, laws against castrating humans established castration as formally unacceptable. With the breakdown of the Western Roman Empire, castration became part of the punishment structure throughout the Middle Ages, with some laws favoring it over other forms of bodily mutilation or capital punishment. The association with punishment and the purpose of castration – to render a man incapable of generation or advanced standing in his community – colored the reception of laws around castration when Roman law was revitalized in the twelfth century.

Chapter 3, “Marrying Castrates, or: How to Make a Disabled Social Subject,” continues the general argument of Chapter 2, focusing on how barring castrates from marriage created social disability. Drawing on the medical tradition, theologians debated the effects of castration on sexual capacity. Some allowed that partial function was sufficient for marriage, while others privileged reproductive capacity in ways that barred castrates from marriage. For the most part, theologians maintained flexibility on the question – until
deliberate castration for musical purposes became socially significant. In response to the variety of standards, Pope Sixtus V issued a brief, Cum frequenter (1587), forbidding castrate marriage. Although the papal brief left a small loophole, subsequent theologians rapidly closed it, confirming the social disability of castrates.

Medicine, law, and theology described castrates as physiologically trans-gendered and bracketed outside of social norms. Part II, “Negotiations,” examines how castrates, as disabled and transgendered, figured in different cultural venues. Castrates as characters in plays, on the opera stage, as exotic and racially marked castrates in travel narratives, and in poetry and fiction refracted anxieties and desires. The fears and fantasies of altered bodies and their (im)possibilities cumulated into a formidable archive of pejorative scripting against castrates as sexually and gender non-normative, dangerous, and often, repellent.

Within early modern popular culture, castrates as characters on stage brought man-made sexual disability to broader audiences and explained to viewing (and sometimes reading) publics what made castrates special – and peculiar. Chapter 4, “Playing the Eunuch,” traces how castrates were depicted on stage, how they were believed to behave, and how those depictions changed over early modernity. Their gender and sexual mobility enabled creative theatrical plotting, but also instantiated castrates as feminized, unreliable, and unstable in their gender and sexual performance. As for the opera stage, Chapter 5, “The Spectacular Crossings of Castrati,” follows the emergence of castrates as singers, from qualms over castration for singing purposes to the eruption of hostility toward castrates as disrupting gender expectations and threatening notions of sexual propriety. As gender boundaries grew more rigid over the eighteenth century, concern grew into rejection of the castrate as aberrant and unnatural.

If theater and opera provided narratives of castrates as deviants, encounters of westerners with castrates in the Muslim world, especially in the Ottoman Empire, provided additional layers of racialized disability. Chapter 6, “Exotic Others: Racial Mappings on the Castrate Body” examines how these encounters gradually produced a narrative of radical othering. Black and Muslim castrates could not be readily accommodated into western social vocabularies. White, Christian castrates functioned as a connector in that they could be incorporated into western understandings of genitally disabled men, but they were also contiguous with black castrates, whose genital difference was extreme in a way that excused western castration in comparison. At the same time, the continuum of castrates became increasingly unbearable. Exotic castrates were used as markers of the difference between east and west, but they also reminded westerners of the vitiated consent with which castrates were produced, undermining the certainties of cultural difference.

In cultural terms, castrates were prone to conflate the physical and social, the libidinal and mercantile, and of course the masculine and the feminine around the castrated male body. The extensive, almost obsessive accounts of appearance,
social propensities, and gender characteristics of castrated men reflect anxiety about the unreliability of the altered – disabled and transgendered – body. In recognizing castrates as disabled because of the (deliberate) alteration of their genitals and transgendered because forcibly dislocated from the physical and social expectations of the biological sex, we can see the historical lineages of sexual stigma and reconstruct the development of hostile accounts of gender non-normative persons.

Notes

1 Jacques Lacan’s revision of the castration complex as the symbolic lack of an imaginary object in which castration is not about the penis as an actual organ, but rather about the imaginary phallus, moves away from the physicality of castration as articulated in Freud. The multiple phases of the Oedipus Complex are understood as negotiations over the phallus, which are resolved in renunciation and a loss of jouissance. The process does not hinge on physicality, but on language and the development of the psyche in linguistic terms. See especially Lacan (1991, 208–227; 1977, 324).

2 Attempts to recuperate female spectatorship include Hollinger (1987); De Lauretis (1984).

3 For castrates as servants in China, see Mitamura (1970). Although not interested in gender, Mitamura suggests how non-reproductive castrates at the Chinese court provided forms of mediation. Some Chinese castrates married either before or after castration per Jay (1993).

4 As in China, some castrates in Islamic contexts had families before castration. See Ayalon (1999).

5 Elsewhere, Tougher has argued against Wittfogel. See Tougher (2002, 47).

6 See also Davis (1995), which traces the emergence of deafness as a disability in eighteenth-century Europe in support of his argument that disability is always a historically constructed discourse. See (1995, 2, 50–72). On eugenics and disability, see Haller (1984).

7 Even Alexander Graham Bell supported the idea, focusing his interest in eugenics on preventing the emergence of a deaf population created by deaf couples having deaf children. See Bell (1884).

8 Reilly (1991, 28–29) located one case of state-sanctioned castration in 1864 in Texas. Castration as punishment does have its advocates, notably Cheney (2003), who argues for vasectomy to curb crime, violence, and a variety of physical maladies. Cheney advocates vasectomy in a medical environment, but he is clear that he considers castration the cure for a variety of what he considers to be social ills.

9 “Impairment is the functional limitation within the individual caused by physical, mental, or sensory impairment. Disability is the loss or limitation of opportunities to take part in the normal life of the community on an equal level with others due to physical or social barriers” (Barnes 1991, 2). Generally, “disability” is used as the more capacious term, covering both the physical, anatomical, or mental issue, as well as the social and cultural environment attached to it. Metzler (2013, 3–10) has emphasized that a distinction between “impairment” (usually physical) and “disability” as the social construct attached to that impairment ought to be separated in historical analysis.

10 Long (1996, 108) maintains that castrates were recognizable by appearance in antiquity.

11 The question of passing, which is not available to many disabled people, is taken up from a variety of perspectives in Disability and Passing. Disability passing refers
“to the way people conceal social markers of impairment to avoid the stigma of disability and pass as ‘normal’” (1). See also Siebers (2004).


Peschel and Peschel (1987, 582) call the castrate’s penis “infantile.”

Modern studies have confirmed that if a boy is castrated in this manner between the ages of nine and twelve, erectile function and ejaculation remain possible. See Melicow (1983, 749–753).

Most studies are on rats, mice, hamsters, and occasionally horses. The variability within animal populations is significant. See Ellis and Turek (1980).

For an analysis of the transformation of the historical treatment of disability, see Kudlick (2003); Stiker (1999).

See also Trent (2017).

The classic statement of transsexuality is by Benjamin (1966), who categorizes transsexuality on a scale linking desire to change sex to sexual orientation. The language of being trapped in the wrong body was the nineteenth-century re-writing of the notion of a “female soul in a male body.” Karl Ulrichs adapted it in reference to gender “inversion” in his defense of homosexuality. See Hekma (1996).

Guilds, for instance, expected required men to be married if they were to become masters (Roper 1989, 136). Membership in municipalities sometimes depended on marriage (Watt 1993, 82), and participation in local offices often did as well (Rocke 1996, 132).
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