



Eunuchs and Castrati: Disability and Normativity in Early Modern Europe.

Katherine Crawford.

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What can we say about a group of people, eunuchs and castrati, who are no longer being “made” through genital elision or, as it was often claimed in the past, through accident? Plenty, according to Katherine Crawford in her new book, *Eunuchs and Castrati: Disability and Normativity in Early Modern Europe*. Crawford’s aim is to link the past practice of manmade castration to current understandings of disability issues. This translates into an in-depth look at what was understood as “normal” sexuality in the past, starting as early as the Roman period, and what, if anything, is understood as normal today.

The book is divided into six chapters plus an introduction, a conclusion, and an exhaustive, well-researched list of references. Crawford uses the word *castrates* to refer to all men who had a problematic sexual apparatus, be it the Black eunuchs of the Ottoman harem, who underwent total ablation of their sexual organs; the white eunuchs of the Ottoman court, who may have only had a partial ablation; the spadones, who had an impaired sexual apparatus due to an accident; and the castrati, who underwent excision or torsion of their testicles before puberty in order to retain a high soprano voice. Her purpose is to see whether it is possible to understand castrates in terms of trans theory and trans politics and to appreciate whether culturally inflected notions of gender in the early modern period can support today’s “trans activism aimed at unpacking the pejorative lineages of transphobia” (10). She thus argues that as the eighteenth century progressed, normative masculinity—together with an understanding of what an able body means sexually—pushed the castrato, whose body clearly did not conform, to the margins of society by visualizing it as feminine, monstrous, and disabled.

Part 1, “Inceptions,” gives a survey of what medicine, from the Hippocratics to Aristotle and Galen, thought about castration; its therapeutical value in cases, for example, of hernia; and its link to sterility and to the physiological changes that surgery caused. It then examines castration through the centuries in terms of civil law and emphasizes how Roman law allowed spadones to marry, make wills, and adopt. Finally, she focuses on how castrates, no matter how rich, popular, and beloved in the early modern period, were pushed away socially when they were declared unable to marry because of their sterility. As Pope Sixtus V legislated with the bull *Cum frequenter*, for the Roman Catholic Church marriages were valid only if physiologically men possessed a full sexual apparatus that made them potentially able to generate. Being medically disabled, castrati were thus deemed insufficiently manly to be part of the economy of the patriliney.

Part 2, “Negotiations,” examines how castrates were perceived in society and how their supposedly feminine bodily characteristics (i.e., no beard, no loss of hair, female

distribution of fat in the body, soft facial features), coupled with their presumed feminine behavior (i.e., capriciousness, moodiness, unreliability) rendered their altered bodies repellent, freakish, undignified, and ridiculous. Anxieties about disrupted gender expectations produced upon the sight of the castrato were often played out not only in the musical theater, she argues, but also in playhouses, where parts were created for them in which they appeared as effeminized, capricious, and moody. Not surprisingly, it was the English stage, unlike the French and the Spanish, that often presented the castrato in hostile or preposterous plots, and Crawford offers plenty of gender performances of masculinity to sustain her narrative. It is the last chapter, on eunuchs in the Muslim world, that offers the most interesting examples in the book of how cultural differences vis-à-vis castration were understood by Westerners. In the sultan's court, the powerful Black eunuchs in charge of guarding the harem were described by travelers as being ugly and thoroughly feminized, while the white eunuchs in charge of the social structure of the palace were thought of as being better off, thus reflecting a racialized view of the issue.

Crawford also mentions that some men may have wanted to be castrated in the Ottoman court because of the social, political, and economic opportunities that they could then enjoy, but she unfortunately does not make much of this insight. Along the same lines, she does not expound, as in the recent studies by Martha Feldman and Patricia Howard, on the possibility that some castrati may have felt that the social, economic, and political position acquired through their success as adults on the operatic stage may have offered a compensatory psychological value for their pre-puberal "sacrifice."

Central to Crawford's reading of the castrato is indeed the notion of consent. Given that boys were castrated before they reached puberty and that eunuchs were often sexually mutilated at a much younger age, the notion of consent is by all means a moot one. Even assuming that castrati in the musical conservatories of Naples fully understood that they could be better fed and clothed than in their thoroughly impoverished households, it would be difficult to think that they knew how much the changes in their physical status would separate them from what came to be understood as normal masculinity or how much their castration would change their identity. And yet today, Crawford brilliantly argues, transgender people do consent; their choice is informed. This is in my view an area of queer and trans studies that she skillfully opens and that should lead to a more thorough historical investigation.

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