The Eroticism of Emasculation: Confronting the Baroque Body of the Castrato

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Anyone who has taught a survey of baroque music knows the special challenge of explaining the castrato singer. A presentation on the finer points of Monteverdi’s or Handel’s art can rapidly narrow to an explanation of the castrato tradition, a justification for substituting women or countertenors, and a general plea for the dramatic viability of baroque opera. As much as one tries to rationalize the historical practice, a treble Nero or Julius Caesar can still derail appreciation of the music drama. And given the usual time constraints in such courses, one may well be tempted to ask students just to ignore the “castrato problem.”

Such an approach certainly has a history of scholarly sanction. Paul Henry Lang, for example, advocated concealing the “problem” entirely through the downward transposition of high male roles: “This music can only be salvaged . . . if we substitute for the impersonal instrument [i.e. the castrato] a human character. The contrast between men and women is vital, there can be no drama without it—not to us.”¹ Lang, of course, was writing almost 40 years ago, but still today, it seems, many forward-thinking scholars remain troubled by the dramaturgical impli-


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cations of the castrato singer. Instead of directly addressing the seeming paradox at the heart of the issue—that heroes and lovers were regularly portrayed by castrated men—most writers have either avoided the subject entirely or interpreted it in ways that minimize its incongruity.

Probably the most frequent approach to this “castrato problem” is simply to discount its significance. Dorothy Keyser expresses the principle clearly in her comments on the related phenomenon of transvestite characters: “The practice of cross-sexual casting as seen in the Italian baroque opera assumes that the audience will not be disturbed by contradictions between the sexual identity of the character being portrayed and either the actual gender of the performer or the voice register of the musical part.” Keyser suggests, in other words, that contemporaries found little significance in the sexual status or vocal range of the performers, and so neither need we. Isabelle Moindrot seconds this view:

The idea according to which there exists a natural scale of voices, related to age and sex, and even to character and psychology, is completely foreign to the universe of opera seria. In a genre that not only tolerated castrati, but valued them to the highest degree, this is not at all surprising. The total dissociation of natural and aesthetic criteria, which two centuries later seems to us an element of confusion and artifice, was then a dramatic custom devoid of specific connotations.

Other scholars adopt this outlook implicitly: Winton Dean, for example, concedes the convention of heroic male parts being the “inalienable prerogative” of sopranos and altos but does not account for the practice; and Joseph Kerman discusses the “dark ages” of baroque opera without ever considering the significance of voice type for characterization. Even the newest edition of A History of Western Music entirely

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overlooks the gender and characterization issues that stimulate such immediate interest in the classroom.  

When these issues are addressed, authors frequently deflect attention away from the castrato’s physicality and towards more abstract concepts. Many writers, for example, locate the heroism of the castrato in his legendary vocal technique. John Rosselli, who has otherwise given the most enlightened account of these singers, suggests typically that “the castrato voice with its special brilliance appears to have struck contemporaries as the right medium to convey nobility and heroism.”

This view has again been adopted into textbooks, as in David Schulenberg’s recent *Music of the Baroque*: “The heroic character of kings, princes, and warriors and other leading male figures was expressed in opera primarily by the virtuosity of soprano and, less frequently, alto voices.”

A different rationalizing strategy ties the hierarchy of the characters on stage—an obvious reproduction of the social order—to a hierarchy of pitch. According to this thinking, high vocal pitch naturally personified high social station (soprano = souvano), and so castrati played noble roles because of their treble ranges.

Of course, one could easily point out flaws in these approaches. The “higher-is-better” theory does not explain, for example, why sopranos should not have sung roles that frequently (in Handel’s oeuvre, anyway) went to altos, nor how a bass could play a loftier figure than a tenor. And the focus on vocal brilliance fails to account for such singers as Faustina Bordoni (female soprano) and Antonio Montagnana (bass), who were as renowned as any castrato for their virtuosity, without, of course, ever playing the *primo uomo*.

Further, not every castrato who regularly took leading roles possessed “Farinellian” pyrotechnics: As Tosi reminds his readers, castrati were starring in operas long before Farinelli’s instrumental style of vocalization became fashionable (a sub-

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9 In her dissertation on Faustina, Margarete Högg provides a list of all Faustina’s known roles, which includes no male characters: *Die Gesangkunst der Faustina Hasse und das Sängerinnenwesen ihrer Zeit in Deutschland* (Königsbrück: A. Pabst, [1931]), 92–95. Montagnana’s bass voice was of course incompatible with *primo uomo* status.
My aim here is not so much to refute these theories, which surely are valid in certain respects, but to suggest that by themselves they fall short of accounting for the casting phenomenon at issue.

In fact, these sorts of approaches, which highlight the voice of the castrato while disregarding his body, have developed furthest and perhaps with greatest influence outside the realm of musicology. Much of this work draws theoretical support from the ideas of the neo-Freudian Jacques Lacan. Most relevant is Lacan’s conception of the “phallus” as the ultimate—and ultimately unattainable—symbol of desire fulfilled. His conception is subtle: Just as gender is often distinguished from sex, Lacan carefully differentiates the social/psychological construction of the phallus from the actual physical penis. But fascination with the historical practice of castration has led some writers to blur this distinction. While recognizing that European castration normally involved only the removal of the testicles, some have written about castrati as if they had also lost all their phallic significance. In such studies, castrati are often described as “blank” or “hollow,” defined by their lack. For example, Beth Kowaleski-Wallace, who is primarily interested in questions of female sexuality, suggests that “the existence of the castrato forces the issue of the significance of the non-phallus, of the possibility of sexuality in the absence of a penis.”

Similarly, Joseph Roach describes the castrato Nicolino on stage as “substituting for the hero’s character a bodily instrument that continuously deflects the desire it compels, replacing the sexual object with a sexual symbol, a hollow signifier.”

But easily the most frequently cited authority for viewing the castrato as “void” is Roland Barthes, specifically his book S/Z, which interprets Balzac’s novella Sarrasine. The pertinent element of Balzac’s story is the erotic attraction of the male protagonist Sarrasine toward the castrato Zambinella. Contemplating that attraction, Barthes offers perhaps the most radical statement of voice over body:

10 Pietro Francesco Tosi, Observations on the Florid Song, or Sentiments on the Ancient and Modern Singers, trans. [Johann Ernst] Galliard, 2nd ed. (1743; repr., with a preface by Paul Henry Lang, New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 99–117; originally published as Opinioni de’ cantori antichi e moderni (Bologna, 1723). Tosi champions the more cantabile style of the mid to late 17th century alongside the “modern” taste for continual brilliance. Tellingly, his paragon of the brilliant style is not a castrato, but Bordoni (see previous note; Observations, 170–71).


An erotic substance, the Italian [castrato] voice was produced a contrario (according to a strictly symbolic inversion) by singers without sex: this inversion is logical, as though, by selective hypertrophy, sexual density were obliged to abandon the rest of the body and lodge in the throat, thereby draining the organism of all that connects it . . . The voice is a diffusion, an insinuation, it passes over the entire surface of the body, the skin; and being a passage, an abolition of limitations, classes, names, it possesses a special hallucinatory power. Music . . . can effect orgasm.

Zambinella’s body is “without sex,” neuter and drained, but his voice is potent and overpowering—an incarnation of the phallus.

Barthes’s idiosyncratic approach to the character Zambinella has been appropriated by a range of scholars more narrowly interested in opera criticism. In an article on the castrato, for example, the musicologist Joke Dame suggests that “the castrato’s virility, the phallus, has been displaced into his voice.”

Michel Poizat, by training a Lacanian psychoanalyst, in fact bases an entire book on the trope of the phallic voice. Using Lacan’s sexually charged term jouissance to describe the effect of some operatic passages, Poizat highlights the emotional, even erotic, potency of song. Again for Poizat, the castrato provides a key, since that singer’s art betokened “a search for jouissance in the pure vocal object . . . bringing vocal ecstasy to a point of paroxysm that has not since seen its equal.” In this interpretation, the purity of the “vocal object,” its power to generate ecstasy, depends on “the autonomy of the voice . . . detached from its usual functions of signification, communication, and the marking of gender difference.” That is, the castrato created the greatest jouissance because his singing transmitted the least information, in terms of both language and sex.

15 In Lacan’s conception, as explicated by Madan Sarup (Jacques Lacan, Modern Cultural Theorists [Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1992], 99), jouissance “signifies the ecstatic or orgasmic enjoyment—and exquisite pain—of something or someone. . . . Jouissance is unconscious, it is unconscious pleasure which becomes pain. An example: while listening to music the other day I burst out crying without knowing why.”
17 Ibid., 116.
Margaret Reynolds too adopts the image of the disembodied voice in her article about homoeroticism in opera. For her, the supposed foreignness of the castrato sound precluded any connection to a recognizable body:

More than for its power and brilliance, more than for its range and pitch, the castrato voice was valued because it was strange and rare, because it was fabulous and other. The use of the castrato pointed away from the ordinary meanings of the voice, which lie in the message, and directed the listening ear to the particularities of the voice itself. . . . Because this sound was a strange voice in the wrong body (insofar as it belonged to any natural body), it became impersonal, more a musical instrument than a voice at all.  

Reynolds, in fact, embraces virtually all of the strategies discussed here for discounting the castrato body, variously suggesting, in addition to the statement above, that voice types carried no character significance and (seemingly conversely) that the high pitch of castrato voices linked them to lofty characters.

I cite these examples at some length to highlight the prominent themes of recent writing on the castrato. It has become common to interpret the voices of these creatures as bodiless, that is, of giving no indication of the sort of body from which they emanate. Thus, the voice can enchant even when the body would repel. While such perspectives have surely enriched the discourse on the castrato, they strikingly resemble more traditional attitudes in their reluctance to address the aforementioned casting paradox. What all these approaches share is the assignment of the potentially disturbing castrato body to comforting irrelevance.

And yet much of the historical evidence indicates that contemporaries experienced these singers in a more integrated way. Reports of operatic performances often suggest that the castrati came across as complete human beings, individuals with their own character and personality; indeed, these traits were often said to rival any representation of the characters in the plot. Benedetto Marcello sarcastically remarks that, regardless of the part portrayed, the singer must wear a bejeweled costume, plumed helmet, and sword, and that until his aria begins, he


19 Ibid., 138 and 136.
should withdraw from the action, take tobacco, and talk to friends from the stage: An audience was rarely allowed to forget it was watching a famous celebrity.\(^2^0\) Further, the castrato would hardly have struck contemporary audiences—in Italy at least—as the strange creature so often portrayed in recent analyses. Castrati had been present in church choirs all over Italy (and not only there) since the 16th century, and, as Rosselli has so convincingly argued, they were familiar figures in both musical and nonmusical court life.\(^2^1\) For Italian baroque audiences there was nothing particularly exotic about their presence, or their sound: The castrato was no enigma.

But what, then, did he represent? Why, in fact, did he so often portray the roles that today seem the least appropriate? In this essay, I will argue that the casting of castrati in 17th- and early 18th-century Italian opera can best be understood by taking into account contemporary perceptions of his body, along with his voice. These perceptions in turn depended on an understanding of sexuality that differs radically from that of today. Indeed, I will suggest not only that the castrato fit easily into this sexual framework, but also that his special station within it carried a potent erotic charge. In other words, I contend that the castrato represented not a neutral vessel for an exotic sound, but rather an alluring figure whose talent only augmented an innate desirability. Castrati thus played amorous leading roles not in spite of their physical distinctiveness, but because of it. Or, to put it another way, as much as the taste for castrato singing may have produced emasculated protagonists, so also did the taste for emasculated protagonists bolster the tradition of castrato singing.


The Landscape of Sexuality

A key to comprehending such an alien sensibility may be found in the conception of sexuality that characterized the early modern period. For this background I am indebted primarily to the work of Thomas Laqueur, whose groundbreaking research has traced the discontinuities in sexual attitudes between the early modern and post-Enlightenment periods.\(^2\) He suggests that the most fundamental and radically unfamiliar element of the earlier viewpoint is its premise of a one-sex system. That is to say, instead of explaining male and female bodies as the two distinct forms of the human species, the early modern tradition considered man to be the more perfect manifestation of the single body that both men and women shared.\(^3\) The differences between the sexes lay not in the flesh itself, but in the higher phenomenon of vital heat. This insensible but fundamental energy of life not only determined the development of sexual organs in the womb, but also influenced the balance of humors throughout life, and thus all aspects of a person’s health, character, and intelligence.\(^4\)

With respect to the castrato, the greatest significance of the one-sex model lies in its implication of a vertical, hierarchical continuum ranging from man down to woman. According to Laqueur, in the 17th century and before, woman was regarded as “a lesser version of man along a vertical axis of infinite gradations,” while after the 18th century, she was considered “an altogether different creature along a horizontal axis whose middle ground was largely empty.”\(^5\) Indeed, we continue to speak of the sexes as “opposite.” But in the earlier period, difference in sex


\(^{3}\) Laqueur examines this view in detail throughout the first four chapters of his book (ibid., 1–148), but the idea receives a clear statement at 124. Laqueur’s emphasis on the “one-sex system” has been criticized as an oversimplification, a privileging of the Galenic/Hippocratic model of sex over a competing Aristotelian account: See, for example, Lorraine Datson and Katharine Park, “The Hermaphrodite and the Orders of Nature: Sexual Ambiguity in Early Modern France,” in *Premodern Sexualities*, ed. Louise Fradenburg and Carla Freccero (New York: Routledge, 1995), 118–19. But even these authors suggest that the Galenic/Hippocratic view seems to have predominated from the second half of the 16th through at least the 17th centuries (121–22).


\(^{5}\) Laqueur, *Making Sex*, 148. Datson and Park, “The Hermaphrodite,” 122, use this continuum to explain the increased eroticization of the hermaphrodite from the middle of the 16th century.
was more a quantitative than qualitative matter, and a well-populated middle ground between the usual sexes was broadly acknowledged: Tales abounded, many treated by physicians as factual case studies, of weak men who began to lactate and strong women who suddenly grew a penis.  

Significantly, the most familiar inhabitant of this middle ground was the prepubescent child. Although in the womb differences in vital heat between male and female were considered great enough to determine genital formation, a man’s full heat was not thought to develop until adolescence, when the bodies of boys and girls began to differentiate themselves. Castrating a boy before puberty, then, did not throw his sex, in the modern sense, into question. It merely froze him within the middle ground of the hierarchy of sex: He never experienced the final burst of vital heat that would have taken him to full masculinity. Sexually speaking—and this is an essential point—the castrato would have been viewed as equivalent to the boy. In fact, he was an arrested boy: Although his body would increase in size, his surgery ensured that his vital heat, and thus his physical characteristics, would remain at the less markedly masculine level of youth.

Lacking this heat, both castrati and young boys were described as effeminate, an important concept in this discussion. Although the denotation of the term seems to have changed little since the 17th century, its connotations are significantly different today: Whereas nowadays describing a man as “effeminate” might imply homosexual leanings, a womanish demeanor in the 17th century was considered rather a sign of too great a taste for women. The 1612 dictionary of the Accademia della Crusca defines femminacciolo, for example, as “[a man who is] pretty in a feminine way, and who is happy to remain among [women], effeminato.” Indeed, scholars such as Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass have concluded—surprisingly to the modern sensibility—

27 Greenblatt, Shakespearean Negotiations, 91; Laqueur, Making Sex, 101.
29 On the similarity of the denotation, the Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca (Venice, 1612), s.v. “effeminato” offers: “di costumi, modi, e animo femminile, dilicato [sic], morbido.”
30 Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca, s.v. “femminacciolo”: “vago di femmine, e che stà volentier tra esse, effeminato.” See also Laqueur, Making Sex, 123–24.
that in this period “it is ‘heterosexuality’ itself which is effeminating for men.”31

To comprehend such an attitude, one must recognize that before the Enlightenment an unbroken continuity was considered to exist between a person’s physical and behavioral disposition: The vital heat and humors of one’s body determined not only outward appearance (including genital sex and muscle tone) but also personality. Conversely, this vital heat could itself be affected, either by physical intervention—in the form of bleeding, medication, or indeed childhood castration—or by conduct, consorting with or behaving like people whose vital heat differed from one’s own. This instability provoked real anxiety: A man who succumbed too much to the pleasures of the flesh, whose existence revolved too much around women, was considered in danger of losing his masculine nature and even physical strength.32 By the same principle, a man who presented a rather feminine demeanor—like the boy or castrato—was considered predisposed to becoming ensnared in the womanish pursuits of love.

Of course, any move toward feminine qualities carried broad social implications. In patriarchal Seicento society, many of the binary oppositions of life were joined to the vertical sexual axis, with the attributes deemed positive always gendered masculine.33 Laqueur reports that contemporary scholars, confirming the link between the physical and psychological, produced “an enormous literature that relate[d] the cold, wet humors said to dominate women’s bodies to their social qualities—deceptiveness, changeability, instability—while the hot, dry humors in

31 Jones and Stallybrass, “Fetishizing Gender,” 97.
32 In *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1988), 11, quoted in Jones and Stallybrass, “Fetishizing Gender,” 86. Peter Brown writes: “each man trembled forever on the brink of becoming ‘womanish.’ His flickering heat was an uncertain force. If it was to remain effective, its momentum had to be consciously maintained. It was never enough to be male: a man had to strive to remain ‘virile.’ He had to learn to exclude from his character and from the poise and temper of his body all telltale traces of ‘softness’ that might betray, in him, the half-formed state of a woman.” And from the *Vocabolario degli Accademici della Crusca*, s.v. “femminacciolo,” one of the attestations offers confirmation of the connection between feminine behavior and an effeminate body: “Sapeva ben lo ngegnoso huomo, che l male dilettamento fa gli huomini femminaccioli, e assottiglia il corpo soggetto a carnalità.” Of course, much work on this issue has been done in the field of English Renaissance theater; see, for example, Laura Levine, *Men in Women’s Clothing: Anti-Theatricality and Effeminization, 1579–1642*, Cambridge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture, no. 5 (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), passim, but neatly summarized at pp. 3–8.
33 As part of her argument about the gendering of the Monteverdi-Artusi debate, Suzanne G. Cusick produces a useful table that lays out some of these binary oppositions, demonstrating the links between femininity and a host of negative traits. “Gendering Modern Music: Thoughts on the Monteverdi-Artusi Controversy,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46 (1993): 4.
men supposedly account[ed] for their honor, bravery, muscle tone, and
general hardiness of body and spirit.” 34 Women were especially con-
demned for having sexual appetites so voracious as to imperil the virtue
of men; in Linda Austern’s words, they “were associated by nature with
sin, with the dark uncontrollable side of sensuality and with the loss of
paradise.” 35 Clusters of ideas such as masculinity-heat-virtue-perfection
and, on the other hand, femininity-cold-depravity-imperfection were so
firmly linked that femininity and degeneracy could function as synonyms.
Thus, the sexually overactive man who compromised his masculin-
ity through too much sociability with women was at the same time, by
diminishing his vital heat, compromising his virtue; likewise, the male
whose very appearance belied his more feminine humors—that is, the
prepubescent boy and castrato—was regarded as a highly sensual crea-
ture, wanting in the “masculine” virtues of restraint and abstinence. In
Wendy Heller’s useful formulation, effeminate men were simply those
who had “exchange[d] Mars for Venus.” 36

The Eroticism of the Boy

This sketch of the early modern sexual order finds support and
enrichment in a range of contemporary evidence. In particular, the
literature, art, and records of everyday life repeatedly characterize the
prepubescent boy as an object of sexual desire. By briefly exploring this
evidence, one can perhaps shed light on the erotic associations of other
“middle ground” creatures, including the castrato.

Winfried Schleiner observes that, in general, authors of Renais-
sance romances “had a predilection for very young heroes.” 37 The cen-
tral character of the paradigmatic Amadis de Gaule, for example, is de-
scribed by his companion as “so young that you don’t yet have any facial
hair and have an appearance that will let you be taken for a beautiful
girl.” 38 Later in this romance other male characters make the same ob-

34 Laqueur, Making Sex, 108.
35 Linda Phyllis Austern, “‘Alluring the Auditorie to Effiminacie’: Music and the
the author summarizes the ideas of such writers as John Knox and Joseph Swetnam.
Austern’s conclusions are supported by one of the attestations in the Vocabolario degli Acca-
demici della Crusca, s.v. “femmina”: “Che altro è femmina, se non inchinuole amistà,
fuggevole pena, necessario male, naturale tentazione, domestico pericolo, dilettevol
dannaggio, natura di male dipinta di color di bene.” See also Wendy Heller, “Chastity,
Heroism, and Allure: Women in the Opera of Seventeenth-Century Venice” (Ph.D. diss.,
37 Winfried Schleiner, “Male Cross-Dressing and Transvestism in Renaissance Ro-
38 Le huitiesme livre d’Amadis de Gaule (Lyon, 1575), 525, quoted and translated in
Schleiner, “Male Cross-Dressing,” 608. The first known version of Amadis de Gaula is by
Garci Ordóñez de Montalvo in 1508, but evidence suggests the material was in circulation
servation about each other: “We are both of us still without hair on our chin.” Yet the very youth of these characters seems the source of their desirability. In one instance the valiant young knight Oronce removes his armor before a duchess. The duchess had expected someone “robust and strong, because of the high degree of valor; when she saw such a delicate, rosy, and beautiful face, she was overcome not only by much wonder but also by a wonderful pleasure: and as she felt the pleasure, she fell in love as if she had never seen or hoped to see such a handsome and graceful knight.”

Similarly, in the first canto of Giambattista Marino’s influential L’Adone (1623), the hero is described in a passage worth quoting at some length:

Era Adon ne l’età che la facella
Sente d’Amor più vigorosa e viva,
Ed avea dispostezza a la novella
Acerbità di gli anni intempestiva.
Nè su le rose de la guancia bella
Alcun germoglio ancor d’oro fioriva;
O, se pur vi spuntava ombra di pelo,
Era qual fiore in prato o stella in cielo.

In bionde anella di fin or lucente
Tutto si torce e si rincrespa il crine;
De l’ampia fronte in maestà ridente
Sotto gli sorge il candido confine.
Un dolce minio, un dolce foco ardente
Sparso tra vivo latte e vive brine
Gli tinge il viso in quel rossor, che suole
Prender la rosa infra l’aurora e ‘l sole.

Adonis was then at the age which feels
the spark of love most vigorous and keen,
and he was disposed to face
the new bitterness, ill-timed to his years.
Nor on the roses of his lovely cheeks
had yet blossomed any bud of gold;
or if any shadow of hair had begun to show,
it seemed like a flower in the field or star in heaven.
In blond ringlets of pure shining gold
his hair withered and curled,
under which there flowed the white line
of his ample forehead in smiling majesty.
A sweet vermilion, a sweet burning flame,
mingled with living milk and living frosts,
tinged his face with such a blush as roses take on between dawn and day-time.

from the late 13th or early 14th century. This romance became particularly popular in the 16th century, especially in France, where it served as a model for deportment and writing style and was expanded and continued by other writers.


40 Le vingtimié livre d’Amadis de Gaule, fol. 192r, quoted and translated (without publication information) in Winfried Schleiner, “Cross-Dressing, Gender Errors, and Sexual Taboos in Renaissance Literature,” in Gender Reversals and Gender Cultures: Anthropological and Historical Perspectives, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (London: Routledge, 1996), 99. Oronce is elsewhere described as “si jeune et sans poil de barbe.”
Ma chi ritrar de l’uno e l’altro ciglio
Può le due stelle lucide serene?
Chi de le dolci labra il bel vermiglio
Che di vivi tesor son ricche e piene?
O qual candor d’avorio, o qual di giglio
La gola pareggiar ch’erge e sostiene,
Quasi colonna adamantina, accolto
Un ciel di meraviglie in quel bel volto?

But who can paint the two stars, clear and bright, of his twin brows?
Who can portray the lovely scarlet of his sweet lips, rich and full of fiery treasure?
What whiteness of ivory or lily can equal his throat, which raises and sustains, like a column of adamant, a heaven of marvels assembled in that lovely countenance? 41

Far from the virile specimen the name Adonis might invoke today, Marino’s paragon of male beauty is still waiting for puberty, with just the first hints of fuzz on his face. The description of his long golden hair, white skin, blushing cheeks, ruby lips, clear eyes, and ivory neck could just as easily have applied to a woman; but here, such traits portray a boy at the age “when the spark of love feels most vigorous and ardent.” In England, Shakespeare represents his own Adonis—here through Venus’s words—as similarly youthful and feminine:

“Thrice fairer than myself,” she thus began,
“The field’s chief flower, sweet above compare;
Stain to all nymphs, more lovely than a man,
More white and red than doves or roses are:
Nature that made thee with herself at strife,
Saith that the world hath ending with thy life.” 42

Of course, representations of Adonis and his youthful brethren populate not only the field of literature but also the visual arts. Annibale Carracci’s Venus and Adonis (1588–89) shows a young hunter who almost seems the incarnation of Marino’s hero, with his long golden hair, white body, and beardless, feminine face (see Fig. 1). Guercino’s representation of this figure (1646), though at the point of death, is likewise boyish in appearance. Similarly, the Christian knight of Domenichino’s Rinaldo and Armida (ca. 1620–21) could almost be mistaken for the enchantress’s handmaiden instead of her lover (see Fig. 2). Luca Giordano’s Diana and Endimion of the late 1670s and Giovanni Battista Tiepolo’s Rinaldo Leaving Armida of ca. 1756–57 confirm the persistence of this boyishly effeminate ideal.

The connection of youth with love-making is promulgated most explicitly in a ceiling fresco in the Palazzo Pitti by Pietro da Cortona (see Fig. 3). Crowning the Sala di Venere, Cortona’s work (1641–42) depicts Minerva carrying off a youth from the sumptuous couch of a dismayed Venus and Cupid and transporting him to the waiting arms of Hercules and Anteros (the other winged boy, holding the wreath). Venus and Cupid, of course, represent the world of sensuality and love, while Hercules stands for masculine strength, and Anteros, Cupid’s virtuous counterpart, for moral or divine love. Bearing the inscription “Pallas tears the adolescent away from Venus,” the message of the image is clear: When a boy reaches adolescence—that is, when he becomes fully male—he should leave behind the pleasures of the flesh and strive after heroic deeds and manly virtues. In fact, as Malcolm Campbell points out, the painting serves as the key to the remaining frescos in the

room, which—for the benefit of maturing Medici princes—all depict ancient (adult) heroes resisting the temptations of love. By implication, however, the ceiling fresco also suggests that preadolescents may appropriately give themselves over to Venusian pleasures. One is not surprised, then, to discover that the youth here closely resembles the Adonises and Rinaldos of other works: He is only just past the age of love.

Of course, research has established that the boyish male lover idealized in literature and art was also the object of much real-life desire, by both men and women; that is, the boy was eroticized both in art and life. One locus of that eroticization was pederasty. Most researchers agree that pederasty was practiced more or less widely throughout the early modern period and that among men whose tastes included homosexual sodomy, boys were the generally preferred partners. Michael Rocke’s comprehensive study of homosexual practices in late 15th-

44 The preceding discussion of the fresco is based on Campbell, Pietro da Cortona, 92–93, 99.
45 Criminal records of the period abound with reports of such transgressions, still a capital offense. See Luciano Marcello, “Società maschile e sodomia: dal declino della ‘polis’ al principato,” Archivio storico italiano 150 (1992): 115–38; and Gabriele Martini, Il “vitio nefando” nella Venezia del Seicento: Aspetti sociali e repressione di giustizia, Collana della
century Florence, based on the records of the Office of the Night, confirms the norm of the pederastic model: “The ‘active’ partner was usually an adult over the age of eighteen, while his companion was normally an adolescent.”

Luciano Marcello further suggests that “the pederastic type of relationship was widespread and almost rooted in social custom. . . . It represented a phase of life entirely within [normal] customs and the masculine sexual life.” Indeed, Marcello notes that

Facoltà di Lettere e Filosofia dell’Università di Venezia in San Sebastiano, sezione di studi storici 2, Materiali e Ricerche, n.s. 4 (Rome: Jouvence, 1988).


when adolescents themselves reached adulthood, they normally changed roles: In Florence, gangs of maturing boys would seek out younger ones to sodomize as a kind of rite of passage, marking arrival at full masculinity.\(^{48}\)

Something of the mentality behind these habits emerges in the writings of Antonio Rocco, a lecturer in philosophy at San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice and member of the Accademia degli Incogniti.\(^{49}\) His *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola* (published no later than 1651) is a dialogue between a Greek tutor, Filotimo, and his young student, Alcibiade; throughout the work Filotimo warns of the contaminating nature of sex with women and argues the naturalness and indeed superiority of pederasty. He characterizes sex with women as “most bitter because of the fiery and poisonous excretions of her menses,” the reason that “whore-mongers are always unwell and detestable”; to this he contrasts the axiom of a “famous doctor” that “the [sexual] use and embrace of the boy, when well moderated, is a healthful medicine.”\(^{50}\) In Heller’s assessment of Rocco’s central point,

Alcibiade’s perfection consists in his possession of female beauty in a male body. Boys are thus the ideal object for male love because they are superior to women both spiritually and physically. And the particular pleasure of boys is that they offer the possibility of enjoying feminine beauty without the necessity of congress with a woman.\(^{51}\)

A boy partook of enough of the feminine to be attractive to a man, but not so much as to contaminate him: The boy was socially and physically subordinate, but he also was male, and so less threatening to another

\(^{48}\) Ibid., 122–24. Pederastic practices seem to have been a constant right through to the end of the early modern period. At the conclusion of his study, Rocke observes that notwithstanding harsher sodomy laws instituted in 1542, the extent of pederasty seems to have remained little changed well into the 17th century; indeed, the 1542 laws were rarely enforced after their first decade (Forbidden Friendships, 234–35). Harold Acton’s more casual history of the Medici family supports this idea: He tells, for example, that Grand Duke Ferdinando II (reg. 1621–70), himself known to enjoy the affections of a young page, refused to persecute subjects who shared his predilection (*The Last Medici* [London: Faber and Faber, 1932], 25–26). And Gabriele Martini writes that in 17th-century Venice, economic crises and changes in priorities led to a general disregard for extensive homosexual activity: “Dal 1647 e per almeno tutta la seconda metà del ’600, la sodomia non fu più considerata un reato di pubblico interesse” (II “vitio nefando,” 90).

\(^{49}\) On Rocco’s position, and the publication date of the treatise, see Laura Coci, introduction to *L’Alcibiade fanciullo a scola*, by Antonio Rocco, ed. Laura Coci, Omikron, no. 27 (Rome: Salerno, 1988), 95–96 and 32.

\(^{50}\) Ibid., 72: “Ma il dolce stesso che si prende da esse è amarissimo, per gli’escrementi focosi e venenosì del mestruo . . . percio’ li puttanieri son sempre infermi e infami.” Ibid., 75: “Uno de’ nostri famosi medici lasciò scritto che usus et amplexus pueri bene temperatus è salutaris medicina.”

\(^{51}\) Heller, “Chastity, Heroism, and Allure,” 125.
man’s masculinity. While Rocco’s talk of feminine “contamination” may also stem from fears of venereal disease (from which young boys probably represented a safer refuge), his arguments clearly participate in the widespread and enduring identification of the boy as an erotic target for men.

For different reasons, presumably, the boy also seems to have been attractive to women. Unfortunately, discerning a true female perspective in the 17th and early 18th centuries is extremely difficult: The artistic, literary, and historical testimony originates almost exclusively with men. And so in the familiar depictions of women with boys—a number of which are cited above—one may question whose perspective is actually emerging. Do these works represent the true desires of contemporary women, or do they reveal more about male attitudes? Men might have found these examples of women’s amorous susceptibility to be amusing; alternatively, the depiction of women with boys might have been a safer way to represent pederastic desire.

The only real evidence I can offer comes from somewhat after the period at issue here, at a time when true female voices were beginning to emerge more regularly. In such cases, one sometimes still finds traces of a more “effeminate” ideal of male beauty. Lady Anna Riggs Miller’s *Letters from Italy* of 1776, for example, describes the author’s reactions to various artworks encountered during her travels. Faced with the famously brawny Farnese Hercules, she writes, “it may be very beautiful, and the most perfect model of a man in the world; but I am insensible enough to its charms to own, that if all mankind were so proportioned, I should think them very disagreeable and odious. The muscles of this Hercules . . . are like craggy rocks compared with the Belvideran Apollo.” In fact, the Apollo Belvedere—smooth-limbed and with “angelic sweetness”—clearly represented Miller’s masculine ideal. From this case and others, literary historian Chloe Chard generalizes: “Grace and beauty are . . . qualities that are regularly identified in the 18th century as attributes of the female or effeminate body. They are also, however, defined as qualities to which women are particularly attracted.”

52 Anna Riggs Miller, *Letters from Italy, describing the manners, customs, antiquities, paintings, &c. of that country, in the years MDCCLXX and MDCCLXXI, to a friend residing in France* (Dublin: W. Watson, et al., 1776), 3:64. I was directed to Miller’s book by Chloe Chard, “Effeminacy, Pleasure and the Classical Body,” in *Femininity and Masculinity in Eighteenth-Century Art and Culture*, ed. Gill Perry and Michael Rossington (Manchester: Manchester Univ. Press, 1994), 142–61. Chard offers a fascinating consideration of the discourse surrounding the Farnese Hercules and several other famous classical sculptures during the latter 18th century.


Perhaps discerning a true female perspective on male beauty in the baroque period is not possible: Such a distinct perspective may not have even existed, overwhelmed by the predominant masculine conception. Indeed, what few indications of female taste survive do tend to agree with that conception. But whether or not one can ever know what women actually found erotic, there can be little doubt that in the literature, art, and everyday life of the elite classes, the figure of the boy was associated with sensual charm and sexual desire.

*The Castrato as Boy*

My central argument in this study is that, on the Italian baroque stage, the castrato represented a theatrical imitation of this erotically charged boy. Just as stage sets might exaggerate an architectural vista or costumes aggrandize Roman armor, so too did the castrato magnify the familiar youth. He inhabited the same intermediate sexual zone as the boy, sharing the erotic mixture of masculine and feminine qualities. Support for this assertion comes from many quarters. Physically, of course, a castrato simply retained many of his boyish features well into the years of adulthood: Although he might grow in height (sometimes to unusual proportions), he retained his high voice, lack of beard, and soft body. The few known portraits of castrati also suggest that they retained their boyishly round faces and full cheeks, probably a consequence of the eunuchoid fat patterning discussed below (see Figs. 4 and 6).\(^{55}\) That this boyish appearance tended to affect the contemporary conception of these individuals is suggested by the frequent use, well into adulthood, of diminutive nicknames for them, such as Nicolino, Senesino, Giuseppino, Marianino, and Pauluccio.\(^{56}\) Further, I have found evidence in the correspondence of one castrato, Atto Melani, that he, at least, also sometimes thought of himself in boyish terms: At age 35, for example, he lamented to one of his patrons that he was “le

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\(^{56}\) Nicolino is Nicolò Grimaldi (1673–1732); the best known Senesino is Francesco Bernardi (d. 1759), but at least two others were known by that nickname, Andrea Martini (1761–1819) and Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci (1735–90); Giuseppino is the castrato mentioned below in connection with Anna Maria Sardelli (identity unknown); Marianino is Mariano Nicolini (fl. 1731–58); Pauluccio is mentioned in [Charles Ancillon], *Eunuchism Display’d* (London: E. Curll, 1718), 30—originally published as (and slightly altered from) *Traité des eunuques* (Paris: n.p., 1707)—but I have been unable to discover anything further about his identity. Other diminutive nicknames for castrati include Annibaliano (Domenico Annibali, ca. 1704–ca. 1779), Appianino (Giuseppe Appiani, 1712–ca. 1742), Cusanino (Giovanni Carestini, ca. 1704–60), Gizziello (Gioacchino Conti, 1714–61), and Matteuccio (Matteo Sassani, ca. 1667–1737).
plus miserable garçon du monde.” For Melani, a diplomat to the papal court, to refer to himself as a “boy” in a letter to the French foreign minister surely constitutes striking (if not conclusive) evidence of a peculiar contemporary attitude.

A further indication of this attitude is the similar sexual role adult men apparently expected of castrati and boys: In an age when pederasty was the homosexual norm, the (adult) castrato took the role of the boy. Considering how much participants would have wanted to hide their activities, the number of documented liaisons between noblemen and castrati is surprising. Marc’Antonio Pasqualini’s intimacy with Cardinal Antonio Barberini in the early 1640s is well known: Contemporary testimony leaves little doubt that the “veritable passion” the cardinal

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57 Melani to Hugues de Lionne, Rome, 31 October 1661 (Paris, Archives de la Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Correspondence politique, Rome, 142, fol. 227r).
felt extended to more than Pasqualini’s beautiful voice. In an even clearer case, Grand Prince Ferdinando de’ Medici (1663–1713), grandson of Ferdinando II, carried on a rather open affair with the castrato Francesco (Cecchino) de Castris, who himself replaced Ferdinando’s previous castrato favorite, Petrillo. De Castris too rose to a position of great influence before envy and intrigue led to his banishment. Atto Melani was probably hoping for a similar rise to power during an affair with Duke Carlo II of Mantua. Although Melani’s letters never confirm this affair directly, the circumstantial evidence is convincing, including Melani’s indication that both men had sex with the same (unidentified) page at the court of Innsbruck.

In fact, satirists treated such relationships as the norm. Atto himself suffered a particularly blistering attack in an anonymous work entitled “On Atto Melani, Musician, Castrato of Pistoia, Son of a Bell-Ringer” (I have tried to render some of the pervasive double entendre with parentheses):

So che fate mille mode
Nelle forme più eccellenti,
E pur dicono le genti,
Che attendete a cose sode:
Et ogn’un che vi rimira
Per le strade andar tirato
Sa ch’in camera serrato
V’inchinate, e sete humile
Deh pensate [al campanile].

Se cantate una Canzona
Ad’alcun che voi preghate

... ... ... ... ...

I know that you do [it] a thousand ways (fashions)
in the most excellent forms,
and yet the people say
that you expect solid (firm) things:
and everyone who stares at you
walking attired in the streets
knows that in the locked chamber
you bow (bend over) and are humble.
[refrain] Oh think of the bell-tower.

If you sing a Canzona
to someone [from] whom you are begging,

58 The phrase comes from Henry Prunières, L’opéra italien en France avant Lulli, Bibliothèque de l’Institut Français de Florence (Université de Grenoble), ser. 1, Collection d’histoire et de linguistique française et italiene comparées, no. 3 (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1913), 89. See also Georges Dethan, The Young Mazarin, trans. Stanley Baron (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 63–64; originally published as Mazarin et ses amis (Paris: Berger-Levrault, 1968). Cardinal Alessandro Bichi, among others, complained bitterly about Pasqualini’s influence over Antonio: “[Antonio’s] blindness is unbelievable, and the boy’s insolence has become unbearable” (letter from Cardinal Bichi [no further information given], quoted and translated in ibid., 64). Dethan points out in a note (178) that Bichi refers to Pasqualini with the word “ragazzo” even though the castrato was 27, another case like that in the previous paragraph.


60 For the evidence on this relationship, see Freitas, “Un Atto d’ingegno,” 148–51.
Che regalo n’aspettate
Se l’istesso ve la suona?
E per che ciascun vi dona
Della vita il primo sangue
E non l’oro che al fin langue
Il Regalo non è vile
Deh pensate [al campanile].

what present do you expect for it
if the same man plays it [back] to you
(screws you)?
And because each one gives you
the first blood of life [i.e., semen]
and not gold, which fades in the end,
the gift is not worthless.
Oh think of the bell-tower . . .

In his satire on music, the painter and man of letters Salvator Rosa (1615–73) again suggested that this behavior characterized castrati generally: “Miracles are so customary in palaces / that a beardless musicò, with his charms, / [by being] ridden, unhorses (ousts) even the most wise.” And still at the end of the 18th century, sexually overindulgent men were assumed to be attracted to castrati: Writing in 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft complains that, for the “lustful prowler,” “something more soft than women is sought for; till, in Italy and Portugal, men attend the levees of equivocal beings, to sigh for more than female languor.” Although this passage points to a broad change in the conception of gender by this time—the castrato no longer falls between man and woman but stands beyond these categories—Wollstonecraft still views the singer as a sexual target for men.

A well known letter of Saint-Évremond from ca. 1685 emphasizes the connection between castrati and boys in a different way. The letter is addressed to a Monsieur Dery, a young page serving the duchess Mazarin and known for his singing. Saint-Évremond’s purpose is to convince the boy to submit to castration.

I would say to you, in an entirely discreet way, that you must sweeten [adoucir] yourself by means of a mild operation that will assure the delicacy of your complexion for a long time and the beauty of your voice for your whole life. The money, the red coats, the little horses that you receive are not given to the son of Monsieur Dery because of his nobility; your face and your voice win them. In three or four years, alas!, you will lose the quality of both if you do not have the wisdom to provide for this eventuality, and the source of all these nice things will

61 “Sopra Atto Melani Musicò Castrato di Pistoia figliolo d’un Campanaio,” in Poesie diverse che ancora non sono alla stampa di diversi eccellentissimi Autori (MS), Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Cl. VII. 359, pp. 758–68. For further information on this poem and its manuscript source, see Freitas, “Un Atto d’ingegno,” 466–71.


have dried up. . . . But you fear, you say, to be less loved by the ladies. Be rid of your apprehension: we are no longer living in the age of idiots. The merit that follows the operation is well recognized today, and for every mistress that Monsieur Dery would have in his natural state, the sweetened Monsieur Dery will have a hundred.64

Not only does this letter suggest that the operation will make the boy more—rather than less—attractive to women, but it also highlights the sense of preservation that surrounds the operation: The castrato is indeed viewed as a temporarily extended boy. The effect—indeed, the purpose—of castration is to preserve the boy’s charms, his beautiful face and voice.

Interestingly, a number of artworks appear to corroborate the link between the physical appearance of the castrato and that of the boy. Art historian Franca Trinchieri Camiz has studied several paintings of castrati.65 She describes Caravaggio’s Singer with Lute (1595–96), apparently modeled after the castrato Pietro Montoya, as displaying the “androgynous and effeminate aspect characteristic of the representation of castrati” and sees in the painting “an idealization that well explains what power of seduction and fascination could have been exercised by these individuals.”66 Caravaggio’s singer, however, exhibits all the same delicate qualities elsewhere used to depict the various youthful heroes of legend (discussed above); to me, the singer’s face particularly resembles that of Guido Reni’s slightly later Hippomenes (1618–19), clearly not intended to represent a castrato. Whether boys and cas-

64 Saint-Évremond to Monsieur Dery, 1685?. Lettres, ed. René Ternois, Société des Textes Français Modernes (Paris: Librairie Marcel Didier, 1968), 2:49–50: “Je vous dirai avec tous termes d’insinuation, qu’il faut vous faire adoucir par une operation legere, qui assurera la delicatesse de vôtre teint pour long-temps, et la beauté de vôtre voix pour toute la vie. Ces guinées, ces habits rouges, ces petits chevaux qui vous viennent, ne sont pas donnes au fils de Monsieur Dery pour sa noblesse; vÔtre visage et vÔtre voix les attirent. Dans trois ou quatre ans, helas! vous perdrez le mérite de l’un et de l’autre, si vous n’avez la sagesse d’y pourvoir; et la source de tous ces agremens sera tarie. . . . Mais vous craignez, dites-vous, d’étre moins aimé des Dames. Perdez vÔtre appréhension; nous ne sommes plus au tems des imbeciles; le mérite qui suit l’operation est aujourd’hui assez reconnu, et pour une Maîtresse qu’auroit Monsieur Dery dans son naturel, Monsieur Dery adouci en aura cent.” Clearly, Saint-Évremond refers here to two different people with the title “Monsieur Dery”: First, he means the boy’s father, and later, the boy himself.


66 Camiz, “Putti,” 14: “Aspect androgyne et efféminé caractéristique de la représentation des castrats”; “une idéalisation qui fait bien comprendre quels pouvaient être le pouvoir de séduction et la fascination exercés par ces personnages.”
trati actually looked so similar, the likeness of their artistic representations—at least in this case—suggests how similarly they could be viewed.

That resemblance seems to reach an extreme in some works of Giambattista Tiepolo. A striking physical distinction of castrati—besides the absence of beard—was a lack of proportion that often affected various elements of their bodies. Removal of the male sex glands had a secondary effect on the entire growth process; specifically, the larger bones of the body—primarily in the arms and legs—did not receive the chemical signal to stop growing at the appropriate time and so sometimes continued to abnormal lengths (more on this below). Indeed, 18th-century caricaturists frequently exaggerated this feature (see Fig. 5). Such cartoons also regularly emphasized the disproportion between the torso and head: Again, the chest cavity seems to have expanded exceptionally while the head remained boyishly small. Even some serious portraits, such as that of Farinelli by Bartolomeo Nazzari, register this latter incongruity (see Fig. 6).

Remarkable, then, is the appearance of that same incongruity in a number of Tiepolo’s representations of legendary heroes. In his Family of Darius before Alexander (1743–44), for example, both Alexander and Hephaestion, at right, have heads markedly too small for their bodies (see Fig. 7); the same is true of the hero in the artist’s Rinaldo Leaving Armida. While these small heads may be one more indicator of the youthfulness (and resultant effeminacy) of these characters, the images so resemble the typical deformations of the castrati that I believe more may be inferred. The sense of operatic spectacle may have so permeated the conceptions of this painter, working in the home city of the dramma per musica, that even the appearance of his heroes was sometimes affected by stage conventions. Whether or not Tiepolo consciously modeled his characters on their contemporary theatrical incarnations, it seems that in this artist’s work, at least, the form of the youthful male ideal became imprinted with the castrato’s peculiar features.

Of course, as much as the appearance of the castrato may have been deemed attractive, his voice was the undisputed nexus of his charms. And this characteristic too—if it seems not too obvious to say so—linked the castrato to the prepubescent youth. Naturally, the high vocal register was significant. But the castrato’s very association with

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67 Indeed, a leading scholar of Tiepolo’s work, Michael Levey, comes close to this observation—without necessarily recognizing the characteristic castrato deformity—in his criticism of the Family of Darius: “Alexander . . . with his rigid bearing and distinctly unimpressive physiique, might be the castrato of this opera seria: assertive, even arrogant but slightly ludicrous amid the firmly characterized, robust, bearded baritones and the impressive range of sopranos who yet all depend on him.” Michael Levey, Giambattista Tiepolo: His Life and Art (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1986), 124.
FIGURE 5. Antonio Maria Zanetti, Caricature of Farinelli in *Catone in Utica* (1729). Courtesy of Fondazione Cini, Venice
Figure 6. Bartolomeo Nazzari, portrait of Carlo Broschi (Farinelli) (1734). Courtesy of Royal College of Music, London
singing also associated him with that realm of effeminate sensuality so much the province of the boy. Schleiner, for example, cites a recurrent episode in romances in which the singing of a cross-dressed boy is found alluring, by both women and men. That this singing never gives away the character’s real sex only confirms the tender age of the heroes in these works. Similarily, in Rocco’s *L’Alcibiade*, the tutor Filotimo

68 Schleiner, “Male Cross-Dressing,” 616–18, in which the author relates such a case from *L’Onzième livre d’Amadis de Gaule*, fol. 181.
admits that it is his young student’s voice, even in speech, that most effectively enchants him: “The inestimable joy of this treasure was his angelic speech: he promptly expressed the characters of the words with a voice so gentle . . . that like a siren he enchanted souls with sweetness, not to deprive them of life, but to torment them, while living, with love.”

It seems the boy’s voice itself could carry erotic associations: For a castrato so regularly to flaunt this boyish attribute in public only heightened the titillation.

Admittedly, none of the individual points presented here represents irrefutable evidence that castrati and boys were viewed similarly in the baroque period, a perspective that may well have been impossible to formulate at that time; but I have tried to suggest how contemporary perceptions tended in that direction. In fact, many of the alluring qualities of youth—the round face, soft body, high voice—were amplified and prolonged in the castrato, encouraging a link with the boy in art, in the bedroom, and perhaps even in the castrato’s own mind. Like the boy, the castrato seemed a disciple of Venus, by nature inclined toward sensuality and love. As such, he was not only the passive object of desire by men; even more famously, he was supposed to be the active subject of affairs with women. This latter role has been much debated and indeed requires some consideration.

The Question of Potency

The numerous tales of sexual escapades involving castrati, particularly as related by Angus Heriot, are by now familiar fare. In what was clearly intended as a popular sort of book, Heriot tells a number of spicy stories: of one castrato’s romance, which became so serious that his mistress’s family had him murdered; of another’s openly sexual exploits with a Russian grand duchess; and of others’ attempts to have their relationships with women sanctified by marriage.

Unfortunately, the

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69 Rocco, _L’Alcibiade_, 41: “La gioia inestimabile di questo tesoro era l’angelico della favella: egli con voce tanto soave esprimeva prontamente i caratteri delle parole . . . che a guisa di sirena incantava gl’animi di dolcezza, non per privarli di vita, ma per tormentarli, vivendo, d’amore.”

70 Of course, the castrato’s very profession as musician consigned him to a feminine, and therefore libidinous, domain. The early modern view that music—and especially vocal music—was dangerously “womanish” has been much investigated: See for example Austern, “ ‘Alluring the Auditorie,’ ” and Cusick, “Gendering Modern Music.” In addition, one may consider the lines of Rosa from his satire of music: “Non è virtù d’un Animo o decoro / Trattar chitarre, cimbali, e leuti, / Ò diletto è da Re musico coro; // Ma ben d’ Animi moli, e dissoluti / Da persone lascive, e da impudichi, / Da spiriti di piacer solo imbeuti.” (Rosa, “La musica,” 1:177, lines 415–20).

71 Angus Heriot, _The Castrati_, 193–34, 193, and 185–88, respectively. The castrati involved were Siface (Giovanni Francesco Grossi, 1653–97); Velluti (Giovanni Battista Velluti, 1780–1861); and Tenducci (the aforementioned Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci), among others.
reliability of Heriot’s accounts—and even of his more general information on castrati—is often impossible to judge, as he cites few sources. Nevertheless, contemporaries clearly seem to have perceived the sexual activity of castrati as real, and thus threatening.

Indeed, almost from their first known appearance in the West, these singers elicited sexual anxiety. In 1587, for example, Pope Sixtus V wrote a letter to the bishop of Novara, papal nuncio to Spain, specifically prohibiting castrati from marriage. In his view, castrati unleashed the (natural) lasciviousness of women: “Women who marry [eunuchs] live not chastely but are instead joined carnally, with depraved and licentious intention, under the pretext and in the form of matrimony, aspiring to these shameful unions, which offer an occasion for sins and scandals and make for the damnation of souls.”

Similarly, in Paris already in 1619, pamphlets were circulated decrying relationships between women and castrati, relationships the authors apparently viewed as a genuine sexual threat (see below).

The best known expression of this sort of anxiety, however, comes in the 1707 Traité des eunuques of lawyer and historian Charles Ancillon. Like earlier writings, this treatise makes the traditional argument that marriage is forbidden to eunuchs, by both civil and canon law, because such men cannot father children; indeed, the ostensible stimulus of the work was the desire of a certain woman to marry the castrato Niccolini (Nicolò Grimaldi). But, as Beth Kowaleski-Wallace points out, Ancillon’s language often suggests a motivation based not so much on piety or lawfulness as on an underlying fear of the castrato’s sexuality. Ancillon, for example, quotes St. Basil’s description of eunuchs as men “who are past the Sense of Honour, who are neither Men nor Women, whom the Love of the Sex has rendered mad and furious.” And, to the contention that some castrati should be allowed to marry because they can

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72 Pope Sixtus V to the bishop of Novara, 22 June 1587, Bullarium diplomatum et privilegiorum sanctorum romanorum pontificum taurentinum editio, vol. 8 (Naples: Henrico Caporaso, 1889), 870: “Quam mulieres, quae eis nubunt, non ut caste vivant, sed ut carnali invicem coniugantur, prava et libidinosa intentione, sub praetextu et in figura matrimonii, turpes huiusmodi commixtiones affectare, quae cum peccati et scandali occasionem praebent, et in animarum damnationem tendant.”

73 Further evidence of this anxiety emerges in an incident involving Atto Melani in 1661. The husband of Hortense Mancini (niece of Cardinal Mazarin) convinced Louis XIV to exile Atto from France, apparently out of fear of the singer’s affections for his wife. For details, see Freitas, “Un Atto d’ingegno,” 152–55.

74 See n56 for the citation.

sexually satisfy women, Ancillon responds that these singers are in fact too capable in that regard:

It is certain that an Eunuch can only satisfy the Desires of the Flesh, Sensuality, Impurity, and Debauchery; and as they are not capable of Procreation, they are more proper for such criminal Commerce than perfect Man, and more esteem’d for that Reason by lewd Women, because they can give them all the satisfaction without running any Risk or Danger.76

As Kowaleski-Wallace puts it, by having sex without the threat of pregnancy, women and castrati “constitute an implicit threat to the construction of masculinity.”77 The castrato embodies a renegade sensuality unbound by the rules of religion and society.

But was it true? Was the castrato in fact a sexually potent creature? That is, did his physiology allow him to take more than a passive, receptive role? Was his reputation as an accomplished lover—in stage roles, as in life—based at all on reality, or, to put the question the other way around, could the reality of his activities have influenced that reputation? The issue of castrato sexual function might seem a detour from my chief argument here (and even from the history of music generally), but that issue—often unstated—underlies many modern discussions of these singers. Indeed, it would seem impossible to comprehend the historical castrato, and his sexual aura, without considering this integral aspect of his being.

In fact, there is a radical difference of opinion on the issue. Heriot’s view, repeated by many succeeding writers, is that castrati were indeed capable of an active sexual role. Ardently opposed are Enid and Richard Peschel, who have published two medically oriented articles on the physical consequences of castration. From their perspective, “the notion that various castrati had natural sex lives with women is . . . a hoax.”78 The Peschels’ medical posture has lent their arguments an air of authority, and their work is regularly cited.79 In the following paragraphs, I will attempt to reevaluate and shed light on the controversy, to the extent that evidence permits. That evidence is, of course, meager: One cannot expect straightforward historical testimony on so intimate a subject. And yet some relevant information is available, in the form of

79 See, for example, Rosselli, “Castrato.”
modern scientific research into endocrinology and historical reports on
the castrati themselves.

Any basic medical dictionary tells something about the physical
results of the castrato’s operation.80 The destruction of the testes before
puberty creates the condition of eunuchoidism, in which the male sec-
ondary sexual characteristics are not expressed: The penis remains
small; beard growth does not occur; axillary and pubic hair follow a fe-
male rather than male pattern, as does the distribution of body fat; and
of course the larynx does not grow. In addition, as mentioned above,
the proportions of the body are sometimes upset by the lack of the hor-
mone that arrests bone growth.81 Many of these observations are con-
firmed in a 1937 study of the radical Russian Orthodox sect known
as the Skopecs, who still into the 20th century ritually castrated them-
selves, sometimes prepubertally, in the pursuit of spiritual purity.82

The castrato’s operation certainly produced infertility: On this
point every source agrees. Nor could their sexual activity have been
“normal,” at least in comparison to intact males. The question here,
however, centers around the issue of potency, that is, “the ability to re-
spond appropriately and orgastically to sexual stimulation.”83 Unfortu-
nately, the Peschels do not seriously address this question, dismissing
the reports of castrato affairs as “fanciful tales” and “disput[ing] the
claim that castration had no damaging effect on the subject’s . . . sexual
impulses.”84 For their opinions, the Peschels rely heavily on a study of
sexual endocrinology from 1924.85 Even more problematically, they
conflate the ability to have sex with the ability to procreate: As evidence
of Velluti’s “maimed sexual condition” and inability to “consummate
heterosexual love affairs,” they cite a letter (reported in Heriot) in

80 As Rosselli notes, the procedure used in the operation is not entirely certain. Vir-
tually the only information comes from the treatise by Ancillon, who was hardly a medical
expert. Ancillon tells of several possible methods: The testicles could either be removed
through an incision, or simply caused to wither through pressure or the severing of the
ductus deferens. As a rule, the penis was not removed. All the procedures were consid-
ered relatively safe by 17th-century standards, requiring only about two weeks of recupera-

81 The above is based on the International Dictionary of Medicine and Biology (New
York: John Wiley and Sons, 1986), s.v. “eunuchoidism.” Peschel and Peschel, “Medical In-
sights,” 582, also provides a useful summary.

82 Ionel Florian Rapaport, La castration rituelle: L’état mental des Skopizy (Paris: Lipschütz,
1937), 41–42. Information about the Skopecs, along with some disturbing pho-
tographs documenting these physical characteristics, can be found in Fritz, Kastratenge-
sang, 24–36.

83 The definition comes from the International Dictionary of Medicine and Biology, s.v.
“potency—sexual potency.”

84 Peschel and Peschel, “Medical Insights,” 583, 582.

85 Alexander Lipschütz, The Internal Secretions of the Sex Glands: The Problem of the
“Puberty Gland” (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons, 1924).
which the castrato admits he cannot conceive a child.\textsuperscript{86} And by “sexual impulses,” the Peschels seem to mean only fertility and potency, since they never investigate the issue of sexual desire. In the end, they only succeed in confirming what is already known, that castrati were infertile and sexually abnormal; their judgment that castrati lived entirely asexually is undermined by their use of outdated evidence and their limited conception of sexuality.

To explore questions of sexual urge and function among the castrati, uropathologist Meyer Melicow conducted a survey of urologic surgeons on the subject in 1983. Although the answers he received varied considerably, some areas of consensus emerged. Bilateral orchiectomy (the removal of both testes) performed between the ages of five to seven should cause permanent sterility and impotence; however, if the procedure were done later, from ages nine to twelve, the subject would not necessarily be rendered impotent, “because the interstitial cells that manufacture testosterone had probably functioned and induced erections and, once begun, erectability may have continued because of testosterone-producing cells along the [spermatic] cords and in the retro-peritoneum.”\textsuperscript{87} Of course, historical reports indicate that boys were more likely castrated at the later ages, when the quality of their voices was more apparent.\textsuperscript{88} Other castration procedures would have produced different results: Prepubertal vasectomy (the excision of segments of the spermatic ducts) should have caused sterility and impotence, as should vasotomy, simply cutting through the ducts.\textsuperscript{89} In sum, the survey suggested that, while certainly infertile, some castrati might have been potent.

This conclusion is seconded by the very medical text that the Peschels cite in their own arguments. The author, Alexander Lipschütz, recounts some research into the physiology of the aforementioned Russian Skopecs. In at least one case, the researchers “observed erection in a prepubertally castrated Skopec during the examination.”\textsuperscript{90} The report is important because it offers perhaps the most direct evidence obtainable of castrato erectability.

\textsuperscript{86} Peschel and Peschel, “Medicine and Music,” 31–32. See also their “Medical Insights,” 583.
\textsuperscript{88} Ancillon, \textit{Eunuchism Display'd}, 39.
\textsuperscript{89} Melicow, “Castrati Singers,” 754.
With such limited information about the effects of castration in humans, studies of other mammals, particularly primates, offer useful indications. For example, one study of rhesus monkeys, in which an entire family group was prepubertally gonadectomized (and isolated from other monkeys), showed that such surgery did not in fact seem to discourage sexual impulses: The castrated males of the study actually showed higher rates of sexual behavior than normal, even though most of this behavior took place with other males.91 Another study observed prepubertally castrated male rhesus monkeys in more normal monkey society, complete with sexually mature males and females. In this setting, the castrated males in fact developed full sexual behavior, including mounting, thrusting, and the motor response associated with ejaculation (although with no release of semen).92 From both these studies, the researchers arrived at their primary conclusions: Monkeys seem to learn sexual behavior in society and that behavior is not entirely dependent upon the hormones produced by the testes during puberty.93

Similar results have in fact been found for other mammals: Studies of marmosets, horses, bulls, and dogs, for example, parallel the monkey studies above.94 There is of course some variance between species as well as among individuals within the same species. But the animal research all seems to point in the same direction, namely, that prepubertally castrated mammals tend to retain sexual impulses and—particularly when exposed to their normal society—substantial sexual function. Of course, conclusions concerning animals cannot recklessly be transferred to humans, but it is also true that monkeys, at least, are often used in hor-

91 The researchers interpreted this male mounting activity as an arrested form of juvenile social behavior in which most of the males’ interactions, including frequent mountings, occurred with their own sex. The above discussion is drawn from James Loy et al., *The Behavior of Gonadectomized Rhesus Monkeys*, Contributions to Primatology, no. 20 (Basel: Karger, 1984), 51–72. In fact, the researchers conclude that “the ‘sexless’ society we hoped to produce actually contained a high degree of isosexual eroticism” (69).


93 Loy et al., *The Behavior*, 70, 72.

monal research precisely because of their physiological similarities. The information gained from their study should be able to suggest possibilities, and even likelihoods.

Particularly striking, then, is the prevailing agreement of these modern studies with the historical evidence, spotty and indirect as it often is. One source of such evidence is the satirical poetry of the period, which often addresses sexuality. In one of these poems, Anna Maria Sardelli (fl. 1649–59), singer and lover to a number of prominent Italian gentlemen, is depicted as lamenting her castrato lover’s forced departure to Venice. A recurring theme in the poem is Sardelli’s foolish contentment with her impaired lover, whose sexual (dis)abilities are suggested in obvious double entendre. In the first excerpt, for example, the conceits of money, the empty purse, and capital clearly refer to sperm, the scrotum, and the penis:

Questi cervelli insani
San, ch’io son donna liberale, e quieta,
Perciò quella moneta,
Mi compiacqui pigliar scarsa due grani.
Ma non venghino all’esca
Del buon mercato i goccioloni avari,
Ch’hanno le loro a traboccar danari.
Ah ch’avoida non sono,
De miei pregi io dono,
Mentre è cosa ben nota,
Che il mannerino amante

These crazy brains (penises)
know that I am a generous and restrained woman;
[and] so I was happy to take that coin even though it was two grains short.
But these big miserly idiots (drops [i.e. testicles]),
who have their money to overflowing, let these not be tempted by [my] good prices.
Oh, I am not so greedy;
I make a gift of my virtues:
for it is well known
that I always gathered into my lap

95 Loy et al., The Behavior, 1: “Due to their phylogenetic ties, all anthropoid primates show broad similarities in anatomy, physiology and behavior—a situation which has led to the widespread use of nonhuman primates as ‘models’ in research into a variety of human problems.”
96 The poem’s full title is “Per la partenza di un castrato amato dalla Sig. Anna Maria N. [backwards] Cortigiana, e cantatrice romana detta Campaspe per haver recitata quella parte con grande applauso in una commedia in musica nella città di Firenze.” It appears in Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale, Magl.VII.364, fols. 289r–95v. I am most grateful to James Leve for notifying me of this poem and transcribing it for me. For information on Sardelli, see Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, “Dalla Finta pazza alla Veremonda: Storie di Febiarmonici,” Rivista italiana di musicologia 10 (1975): 440–44. In an astonishing coincidence, the departure to which the poem refers is mentioned in a postscript to one of Atto Melani’s letters to his patron Mattias de’ Medici (Florence, 2 October 1654, Florence, Archivio di Stato, Mediceo del Principato, filza 5453, fol. 596r): “Già V.A. saprà come Giuseppino andò a Venetia e perché il fine fu di levarlo dagli Amori del’Anna Maria adesso che quella prelibata Dama è occupata in congiungimenti di Cavaliere sbarbato (bello) e richissimo.” Unfortunately, the lover’s identity remains uncertain.
Sempre raccolsi in grembo a borsa 
vota.
Non son di queste no, che fanno 
mescere;
Anzi fui seco tale,
Che sul suo capitale 
Messi le mani sol p[er] farlo crescere.

In another passage, the imagery is even clearer:

L'imbroglio de coglioni
Alle gioie d'amor serve d'impaccio;
..........................
Assioma gentile,
Che mi contenta a pieno;
In lui levato il più, s'accresce il meno.
Sia dunque il mio petto
Continuo ricetto
Di strali pungenti
Se del mio bel cupido
Non è pericol più, che l’arco allenti.

The author of this poem clearly believed that a castrato could achieve an erection: “I put my hands on his capital to make it grow.” But the danger of the “slackening bow” may suggest the fleeting nature of this condition. The poem may even hint that some sort of climax was possible: In the line, “I was happy to take that coin,” coin may well represent semen.

In fact, further evidence for a sort of impaired climax appears in the letter of Sixtus V from 1587 cited above. In it, the pope states that, as opposed to “true seed,” the castrati “pour out a certain liquid perhaps similar to semen, although by no means suitable to generation and the cause of matrimony.” The castrati themselves seem to have been claiming the ability to ejaculate as a justification for marriage; Sixtus rejected that reasoning and, as Ute Ranke-Heinemann observes, established the requirement of fertility for marriage.

97 “Per la partenza,” fols. 289r–95v.
98 Ibid.
99 Sixtus V to the bishop of Novara, 22 June 1587, Bullarum diplomatum, 870: “Et humorem forsan quemdam similem semini, licet ad generationem et ad matrimoniis causam minime aptum, effundunt.”
100 Uta Ranke-Heinemann, Eunuchs for the Kingdom of Heaven: Women, Sexuality and the Catholic Church, trans. Peter Heinegg (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 250; originally
Another glimpse of castrato sexuality emerges from the two French pamphlets published in 1619 mentioned above, likewise dedicated to denouncing relationships between eunuchs and women. One pamphlet echoes Sixtus’s arguments against eunuchs marrying and in the process touches on a number of relevant details:

If one cannot reach orgasm on account of the dysfunction or the excessive disproportion of the genital members, or if the man has none at all, he can in no way [be granted] marriage. It would seem, however, that, according to the presuppositions I have made, the opposite [would be] true for those who have lost only their testicles, since eunuchs and castrati to whom one has left the members would be able to orgasm with women [jouir des femmes], as they say. This is not so, however, for no matter how much such type of men can orgasm with women, they cannot return the favor [rendre la pareille]. They are mockers and insulters who have committed the crime of fraud for having represented false merchandise as genuine.102

Admittedly, the sense of the phrase “jouir des femmes,” which I have translated as “to orgasm with women,” is debatable. Le Grand Robert gives synonyms for “jouir de” as “apprécier, goûter, savourer, profiter”; literally, the phrase would mean something like, “to derive pleasure from women.” Earlier in the passage, however, the phrase “parvenir à la jouissance” less ambiguously invokes the other definition of “jouir”: to experience sexual pleasure, and, especially, to have an orgasm. In the context of this passage, then, in which the author contrasts the man who cannot achieve orgasm (and therefore cannot marry) with the type of man under discussion, the phrase “jouir des femmes” would seem to indicate that orgasm was indeed the specific “pleasure” that the castrato derived from women. According to this interpretation, the related published as Eunuchen für das Himmelreich: Katholische Kirche und Sexualität (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1988). In fact, Sixtus allowed marriage to men suffering from sterility for unknown reasons, but not when the cause was known (251).

101 Arrest contre les chastrez (Paris: n.p., 1619); Les privileges et fidelitez des chastrez (Paris: n.p., 1619). Both pamphlets are anonymous. Exemplars of both are held by the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale Univ.

102 Arrest contre les chastrez, 4–5: “Si l’on ne peut parvenir à la jouissance par l’inhabilité ou la disproportion desmesurée des membres genitaux, ou si l’homme n’en a point du tout, il n’y peut point avoir de mariage, il sembleroit toutesfois que le contraire fust vrai pour ceux qui n’ont seulement perdu que les genitoires, par les presuppositions que j’ai faicte, les Eunuques & Chastrez ausquels l’on a laissé les membres, pouuant jouir des femmes comme l’on dit. Cela n’est pas pourtant ainsi: car combien que telles manières d’hommes, puissent jouir des femmes, ils ne leurs peuuent pas rendre la pareille, ce sont des mocqueurs & affronteurs, qui ont commis le crime, de stellionnat, pour avoir supposé de fauces marchandises pour veritable.”

103 Le Grand Robert, s.v. “Jouir”: “Éprouver le plaisir sexuel, et, spécialement, avoir un orgasme.”
A close reading of this passage largely agrees with previous indications: The castrato desires women and apparently can achieve at least a temporary erection, which, however, “faints at the door”; it is presumably the castrato’s small size that prevents the entry of more than his “head.” Interestingly, even in this tract, which is specifically aimed at discrediting the castrato’s sexual abilities, the author still admits a certain level of function.

While again no single piece of evidence presented here, either scientific or historical, can be said to prove the nature of the castrato’s sexual capacity, the general similarity of the testimony does make a suggestive argument. As opposed to the Peschels’ conclusion that the operation “probably produced asexual behavior in the castrati,” I would
maintain that a far greater degree of desire and function is indicated.\textsuperscript{106} The most capable could probably have had erections and something like an orgasm; others may have had lesser abilities. But even those left entirely impotent need not necessarily have lived “asexually”: Casanova’s memoirs tell of an orgy in Rome involving castrati who, along with the abbés present, employed the “secret des Lesbiennes.”\textsuperscript{107} One way or another, it seems clear that many of these singers were interested in and capable of sex. And surely this capacity, which seems to have been widely recognized, could have advanced their reputation as sensual, erotic creatures.

The Convention

In my view, then, the castrato regularly played the amorous male lead in Italian baroque operas at least in part because his special sexual status—his boyish suspension between the poles of masculinity and femininity—was found alluring and wholly appropriate to men in love. He was an extravagant embodiment of the seductive boy and presumed devotee of sensuality: That he was also considered (probably rightly) to be sexually active, only added to his appeal.

The final argument for this hypothesis must come from the operas themselves, that is, from how librettists and composers actually deployed these singers. At the opening of this essay, I cited the oft-heard proposition that the castrato played amorous heroic roles on account of his vocal virtuosity and in spite of his physical abnormality. Another statement of this viewpoint can be found in the writing of Patrick Barbier, a much published author on the castrato, who asserts that “it mattered little to the Italians that Scipio was a soprano and Pompey a contralto. . . . For the Italians the crucial word ‘enjoyment’ swept away all prejudices and discussions concerning castration, the dissolute morality of the singers and the pseudo-absurdity of these heroes of antiquity with their high voices”\textsuperscript{108} In other words, castrati were simply sources of dexterous vocalism whose other qualities were ignored. Yet a survey of

\textsuperscript{106} Peschel and Peschel, “Medicine and Music,” 30.


Italian baroque casting practices will suggest, I believe, something quite different, namely, that the castrato’s rise to operatic prominence depended at least as much on his general suitability for his assigned roles as on his exceptional vocalism.

Of course, the scarcity of basic data on early operatic casting presents a serious obstacle to such an inquiry: Casting documentation survives for only a fraction of the operas produced in the 17th and 18th centuries, and scant bibliographic control exists over even this limited material. It is outside the scope of the present project to solve this dilemma. Instead, I have relied on published casting information to conduct my admittedly finite survey: To cover the relevant period, I have considered around seventy works, including a range of early operas (by such composers as Monteverdi, Landi, Virgilio Mazzocchi, and Luigi Rossi) and all the readily accessible works of Cavalli, Alessandro Scarlatti, and Handel. Naturally, this overview will not uncover the full complexity of practice in different locations and years, but I believe the broad picture that emerges is clear enough for present purposes. My results are supplemented and supported by the work of Roger Covell, who has conducted perhaps the most extensive survey of this kind.

One particular problem created by the paucity of casting data deserves special comment. When a score survives without casting information—as is normally the case—one knows only the vocal ranges of the various male characters but not whether those characters were sung by castrati or women. Indeed, other evidence suggests that, depending on the situation, women might sometimes have portrayed treble male roles; such instances are known to have been common in the revivals of Handel’s operas, for example. Yet the nature of my argument in this essay in fact lessens the importance of this distinction. As I have suggested above, a woman in men’s clothing would have been considered only slightly more “feminine”—with all the implications of that notion—than the castrato himself: The masculinized woman and effeminized man stood remarkably close on the continuum of sex. And they seem to have carried much the same erotic charge. In the poem “On His Mistress,” to take one example, John Donne warns his lady that by dressing as a page, she increases her attractiveness: In both France and Italy, though in different ways, men would find the cross-dressing of women (an admixture of genders) dangerously alluring. Of course, the viragos of Ariosto’s and Tasso’s epics are also depicted as highly desirable. And so when no castrato was available, or when a particular female singer was

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110 The example is taken from Lisa Jardine, Still Harping on Daughters: Women and Drama in the Age of Shakespeare (Totowa, N.J.: Barnes & Noble, 1983), 27.
more likely to succeed (since a number of talented women specialized in male roles), it was entirely consistent for a cross-dressed woman to take the part of an amorous hero. By singing in the treble range, the performers of such male characters, whether themselves male or female, exploited an intermediate (and thus enticing) sexual status, a status that of course belonged intrinsically to the castrato. The following survey, then, need not be limited to works with known casts. If, as a result, one cannot yet fully chart the rise of the castrato in opera, one can at least chart the rise of the feminized operatic hero, a role the castrato regularly portrayed.

In fact, in the earliest operas, the appearance of treble male characters was quite restricted. Up to about the period of the first public theaters in Venice, concern over verisimilitude appears to have required the portrayal of male mortal characters by changed voices. Castrati did take part in these works but normally played gods or women. As is well known, the early Orpheus roles—composed by Peri, Caccini, Monteverdi, Belli, Landi—were all written for changed voices, while Monteverdi’s Eurydice was portrayed by a castrato. As always, exceptions to the norm did exist. In Michelangelo Rossi’s Erminia sul Giordano (1633), the shepherd Selvaggio, who is in love with Lydia, sings in the alto range; however, the more important figure of Tancred, though also in love, is characteristically sung by a tenor. Stefano Landi employs a soprano as the title character of his Sant’Alessio (for the Barberini family, 1632). But, as Nino Pirrotta reasoned, “besides being very young, he is a spiritual and ethereal figure, and so freed from considerations of scenic realism.” Perhaps saints, like pagan gods, were exempt from concerns of verisimilitude.

The interchangeability of women and castrati at certain places and times raises an interesting issue of vocal technique. Some contemporary observers indeed noted that they could not immediately distinguish between the two upon hearing them in the theater: See, for example, the report by Johann Wilhelm Archenholtz excerpted in Hubert Ortkemper, Engel wider Willen: Die Welt der Kastraten (Berlin: Henschel, 1993), 78–79. Eighteenth-century vocal treatises by such castrati as Pier Francesco Tosi and Giambattista Mancini, however, suggest that castrati sang in chest voice up to around c’ or d’, and so the lower half or two-thirds of the castrato’s range must have sounded quite different than a woman’s head voice in that range (Tosi, Observations, 23–24; and Giambattista Mancini, Practical Reflections on Figured Singing, trans. and ed. Edward Foreman, Masterworks on Singing, vol. 7 [Champaign, Ill.: Pro Musica, 1967], 20; originally published as Pensieri e riflessioni pratiche sopra il canto figurato [Vienna, 1774]). Even the generally execrable recordings by Alessandro Moreschi illustrate this change of quality when he flips, with noticeable awkwardness, from chest to head right around c’. Did women strive for a tone quality that imitated the castrato’s chest voice in this range, or did they even carry their own chest voice up so high? The topic could use further investigation.

Monteverdi’s *Arianna* (1608) offers a particularly interesting case from this early period. Pirrotta interprets the casting of a tenor Theseus in *Arianna* as a mark of Monteverdi’s commitment to dramatic realism (Pirrotta then cites that commitment when arguing that Nero in *Poppea* may originally have been written for tenor as well). Speaking of the Venetian revival of *Arianna* in 1640, Pirrotta doubts “that the tragic realism of *Arianna* could have countenanced what had not yet been heard in more unreal and fabulous scenarios, a soprano and castrato Theseus.”

Elsewhere, Pirrotta makes clear that his reservations relate specifically to the problem of the castrato as romantic hero. Yet the amorous male character of this opera is not Theseus, who promptly seeks to escape Ariadne (and return to the pursuit of “honor”), but rather Bacchus, who truly falls in love with her. Interestingly, what fragmentary evidence exists does not rule out Bacchus as a castrato role. Of course, being a god made Bacchus the usual province of such singers in this early period, but because the god is also a lover, such a casting choice would have prefigured later practices.

In any case, the late 1630s and 1640s seem to represent a period of transition, when the archetype of the amorous castrato slowly established a place alongside changed-voice lovers. On the one hand, tenors played many enamored central characters: Perseus in Manelli’s *Andromeda* (1637), Peleus in Cavalli’s *Le nozze di Teti e di Peleo* (1639), and both Orlando and Ruggiero in Luigi Rossi’s *Palazzo incantato* (1642). On the other hand, one finds similar characters written for high voice. The soprano Egisto in *Chi soffre spera* (by Virgilio Mazzocchi and Marco Marazzoli, 1637 and 1639) even destroys his family’s tower and serves up his own falcon for dinner in an effort to win his lady. In Cavalli’s *Didone* (1641), the role of Aeneas is composed for a tenor, but like Monteverdi’s Theseus, Aeneas’s ultimate aim—the founding of Rome—is political, and therefore supremely masculine. It is the alto King Iar...
bas who really loves the Carthaginian queen, goes mad when initially rejected, and finally wins her. By 1647, Luigi Rossi even cast his Orpheus as a castrato, as later would Antonio Sartorio (Orfeo, 1672) and Christoph Willibald Gluck (Orfeo ed Euridice, 1762). Although such a characterization contrasted sharply with earlier practice, the figure of Orpheus, who traverses the abyss for his love and (in Rossi’s version) twice laments her loss, is precisely the sort of female-besotted character who was becoming the special competence of the “unmanned” singer.

Among the most influential of the forces encouraging this casting practice must be counted the Accademia degli Incogniti of Venice, founded in 1630. As mentioned above, Heller has clearly shown how members of the Incogniti were leaders in the contemporary debate about gender—specifically, the nature and power of women—and how this interest spilled over into their paradigmatic opera librettos. Of particular fascination were the so-called “exceptional” women of history and legend. Powerful figures such as Semiramis, Cleopatra, Zenobia, and Lucretia, whose behavior so differed from accepted feminine norms, required special explanation and thus appeared often in the academicians’ discussions and operas. Not surprisingly, these women, who invaded the conceptually masculine provinces of politics and glory, were thought to occupy loftier positions in the sexual continuum than normal females; their more masculine humors indicated a more intense vital heat. As Heller puts it, “as long as virtue retained its association with gender, the exceptional woman—whose deeds were inappropriate to her sex—would necessarily be endowed with masculine characteristics.”

And this masculinity threatened the men around her. Again, Heller writes that in the cultural imagination, the “absorption [by these women] of the male characteristics almost invariably resulted in the loss of stature—and masculinity—for the men with whom they were juxtaposed.” Contemporary gender construction was almost a zero-sum game in which the extra heat attributed to an exceptional woman was necessarily drawn from the men around her.

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116 Luigi Rossi’s Orpheus was Atto Melani and Gluck’s was Gaetano Guadagni; the name of Sartorio’s Orfeo is not completely certain, but the role is clearly for treble male.
117 Heller, “Chastity, Heroism, and Allure,” 26; the above is generally based on ibid., 23–26.
118 Ibid., 26–27.
119 I borrow the idea of gender as a zero-sum game from an author in an interestingly related field: Jennifer Robertson, Takarazuka: Sexual Politics and Popular Culture in Modern Japan (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1998), 57. The wide diffusion of this configuration in Europe is attested by a range of cultural products from the period. See Raymond B. Waddington, “The Bisexual Portrait of Francis I: Fontainebleau, Castiglione, and the Tone of Courtly Mythology,” in Playing with Gender: A Renaissance Pursuit, ed. Jean R. Brink, Maryanne C. Horowitz, and Allison P. Coudert (Urbana, Ill.: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1991), 105–22 passim. Also, Sarah Colvin, The Rhetorical Feminine: Gender and Orient on the
Who more appropriately than the castrati, then, could have portrayed the men enthralled to the exceptional women of the Incogniti librettos? A seductress like Poppea saps the manhood from those she ensnares, and so Monteverdi’s Otho and Nero are high male roles. The even more powerful Medea has the same effect on Jason, who, in the conception of Cicognini and Cavalli, is a dissolute effeminate, again sung by a treble voice. Of course, Cavalli’s Giasone (1648) was one of the most frequently produced operas of the century, important in the diffusion of the Venetian genre.\textsuperscript{120} And just as this work, and others like it, transmitted conventions such as the sleep scene, the invocation, and the descending-tetrachord lament, so too, I would suggest, did it pass on the use of emasculated singers to represent men who had forsaken true virility in favor of love.

Indeed, in the 1650s and 1660s in Venice, this use of the castrato voice became more standardized, as a survey of Cavalli’s works reveals. Changed-voice lovers, like the tenor Trasimede in Oristeo (1651) and bass Erimante in Erismena (1655), become increasingly rare.\textsuperscript{121} More typical are altos such as Endimion in Calisto (1651) and Xerxes and Arsamene in Xerse (1654), or sopranos like Scipio and Luceius in Scipione africano (1664) and Farnace and Servilio in Pompeo magno (1666): All these characters are in love with women, often in competition with one another. In Calisto, Endimion’s rival is of course Jupiter himself; interestingly enough, this god, initially a bass, changes himself into the soprano Diana as a ruse to gain his beloved. While this transformation is primarily a practical means of seducing Calisto (who is a devotee of that goddess), it also reinforces the idea that love undermines masculinity. More and more, wooing was deemed most appropriate to a high vocal range.

This outlook is perhaps expressed most directly in 1702 by the Italophile Frenchman François Raguenet in his famous Paralele des Ital-iens et des Français, en ce qui regarde la musique et les opera. In a passage that articulates the general principle outlined in this essay, he writes,

> these [castrato] voices, sweet as nightingales, are enchanting in the mouths of actors playing the part of a lover. Nothing is more touching than the expression of their pains uttered with that timbre of voice, so


\textsuperscript{121} According to the preface to the libretto, Erimante is in love with Aldimira before the opera starts, though he hardly treats her as a lover during the opera itself.
tender and impassioned. And the Italians have in this a great advantage over the lovers in our [French] theaters whose voices, heavy and virile, are consistently much less suitable to the sweet words that they address to their mistresses.  

Indeed, by the decades around the turn of the 18th century, the treble-voiced male lover had become the norm in Italian opera. In Alessandro Scarlatti’s early works, one occasionally still finds an amorous male role in the low range: In *Statira* (1690), for example, the tenors Oronte and Apelle both love and eventually win their ladies. But more often, tenor lovers are represented as unsuccessful or even outright fools: In *La principessa fedele* (1710), the sultan of Egypt, a tenor, falls in love with a boy, really the cross-dressed princess Cunegonda, disguised to rescue her betrothed. The scene not only affirms the ineffectuality of the tenor voice in amorous matters but also dramatizes the aforementioned attraction of some adult males (here safely Egyptian) to androgynous youths. Similarly, in the small cast of Scarlatti’s *Tigrane* (1715), the tenor Doraspe, the only changed-voice role, is also the only character left unmated at the end.

By the end of the 17th century, then, the Italian convention of casting castrati (or sometimes perhaps women) as male lovers was fully developed. Indeed, the proliferation of castrati in opera proceeded primarily through these sorts of roles, with which—as Raguenet attests—these singers were closely associated. They were also of course associated with markedly young characters, but given the close association of youth and amorousness, these two traits usually appeared in the same figures. That castrati were prized less at this time for extraordinary vocalism can be seen in the music written for them. From Cavalli’s King Iarba to Scarlatti’s Tigrane, the vocal requirements of treble male roles do not differ consistently from those of their female counterparts. Cavalli’s castrati seem to specialize in conjunct, lyrical songs of love and longing, such as Jason’s “Delizie contenti,” Endimion’s “Lucidissima face,” and Ormindo’s “Miracolo d’amore”: This “bel canto” style is of course a commonplace of mid-17th-century vocal music. Even later, in Scarlatti’s *Tigrane* for example, the hero’s betrothed Meroe (soprano) sings arias (e.g. “Dell’amante confido”) that are at least as demanding.

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122 [François Raguenet], *Paralele des Italiens et des François, en ce qui regarde la musique et les opéra* (Paris: Jean Moreau, 1702), 79–81: “Ces voix [de Castrati] douces & rossignolantes sont enchantées dans la bouche des Acteurs qui font le personnage d’amant; rien n’est plus touchant que l’expression de leurs peines formée avec ces sons de voix si tendres & si passionnez; & les Italiens ont, en cela, un grand avantage sur les Amans de nos Théâtres, dont la voix grosse & mâle est constamment bien moins propre aux douceurs qu’ils disent à leurs Maîtresses.”
(if not more so) than Tigrane’s own. Of course in any period the castrati would probably have been, generally speaking, the most skilled singers available, given their long years of rigorous training. But if composers did not obviously exploit their superior technique, then their elevation in opera must be owed at least in part to something else. I of course am arguing that that something else is the castrato’s special sexual status, a softened kind of masculinity that was found attractive in itself and appropriate to his portrayals.

Some have claimed that the operatic reforms of the early 18th century effected a sea-change in characterization, particularly with respect to male roles. Heller in particular speaks of a “reconstruction of operatic masculinity that was a driving force in the reform of Italian opera in the early 18th century,” a “complete reworking of . . . gender representation.” She bases this interpretation in part on the writings of several important opera critics, including Muratori, Gravina, Crescimbeni, and Maffei, who fault the genre for its effeminizing effects. She also evaluates the works themselves, with Metastasio’s Achille in Sciro as a case study. This opera tells the story of Achilles’s concealment as a woman at the court of King Lycomedes, Ulysses’s ruse to recruit the hero for the Trojan War, and Achilles’s anxiety over abandoning his lover Deidamia. Heller points out that, unlike earlier librettos on this subject, Metastasio’s text highlights the moment when Achilles rejects his feminine disguise and, specifically, the feminine practice of singing. As she puts it, “by rejecting his skirt for armour and throwing down his lyre in favour of a sword, he abandons the ambiguity of gender that was integral to the conventions of seicento opera (including his own operatic representations), and so becomes an eloquent proponent of the reform of Italian opera.”

Clearly Heller is right that Metastasian heroes are more recognizably masculine than their 17th-century counterparts and that the change owes much to contemporary discourse on gender in opera. But I would describe this change as less of a “complete reworking” than a shift of emphasis. While reform librettos may abandon the obviously weak male roles of the Seicento, the heroes are still particularly susceptible to love: Indeed, this susceptibility, which typically conflicts with the demands of duty, provokes the action of most reform operas. Although Metastasio’s Achilles forsweares all things feminine—including music—

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123 One of the classic reports on this training is found in Angelini Bontempi’s Historia musica (Perugia, 1695), as cited in Lorenzo Bianconi, Music in the Seventeenth Century, trans. David Bryant (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), 61; originally published as Il Seicento (Turin: Edizioni di Torino, 1982).
125 Ibid., 567.
in favor of war (Act 2, scene 8), he almost immediately launches into another aria (scene 9), in which he admits, “at the sight of her beautiful eyes alone does my heart melt.” Indeed, notwithstanding the hero’s decision in Act 2 to leave for the war, Achilles spends most of Act 3 torn between his love for Deidamia, who begs him to stay, and his duty to Ulysses, who urges departure. Early in the act, Ulysses’s confidant Arcade tellingly observes of the hero in an aside, “E la gloria e l’amore ecco a cimento”; and in the following scene, where Achilles refuses to abandon Deidamia, Arcade even comments, “Ha trionfato Amore.” At this point Achilles sings to his beloved a text that any of his Seicento forerunners could have uttered:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tornate sereni,</th>
<th>Becalm yourselves,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Begli astri d’amore:</td>
<td>beautiful stars of love:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La speme baleni</td>
<td>Hope flashes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fra il vostro dolore:</td>
<td>into your sorrow:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Se mesti girate,</td>
<td>If you turn sad,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mi fate morir.</td>
<td>it will kill me.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oh Dio! lo sapete,</td>
<td>Oh God! you know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voi soli al mio core,</td>
<td>you alone in my heart</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voi date e togliete</td>
<td>give and take away</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La forza e l’ardir.</td>
<td>strength and courage.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In discussing Giulio Strozzi’s 1641 opera on the same subject, La finta pazza, Heller comments on the character identified as Eunuco: “The importance of the eunuch in this translation of the Achilles myth cannot be underestimated, as he mediates the space between Achilles’ masculine and feminine identities, a constant reminder of the transience of gender categories, particularly on the opera stage.” I would make the same argument for Metastasio’s own Achilles: The fact that this character would most often have been portrayed by a eunuch (as Metastasio surely would have expected) ensures that Achilles’s feminine side, which in fact remains conspicuous to the end of the opera, receives full expression. Indeed, most Metastasian heroes, like Achilles,
remain highly susceptible to love, even if they recognize the competing claims of duty: Like their forebears, they inhabit a middle ground—they “mediate the space”—between amorous effeminacy and scrupulous masculinity. The extremist operatic reformers who attempted to eliminate the amorous/effeminate component of the operatic genre clearly did not succeed, nor can their tastes be taken as representative of contemporary audiences, for whom the soft hero must by that time have seemed normative and fitting. In addition to Ragueneau’s testimony above, Muratori’s own complaints confirm that treble voices continued to “inspire undue tenderness and languor in the souls of the audience.”

That is, these voices communicated precisely the “effeminate passion—love—without which,” Zeno lamented in 1730, “it appears that no plausible drama can be written.”

I would suggest, then, that the Metastasian reforms achieved just one step in the movement toward modern “masculinity” on the lyrical stage, a movement whose next obvious step (in serious opera) came only with the elimination of the treble hero in the early 19th century.

A quick survey of Handel’s operas, easily today the most studied and performed stage works from this period, provides an illustration of how the connection between love or youth and the treble voice continued into the 18th century. Except in Almira (1705), which follows a non-Italian casting tradition, the great majority of Handel’s high-voiced characters are either in love or otherwise so young as to have unchanged voices. The list of such figures is prodigious, as Table 1 illustrates. Of course, many of the high male roles in Handel’s operas do seem more masculine than their 17th-century predecessors: His Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and Siroe display more fiery temperaments and sing more heroically than Cavalli’s Jason, Endimion, and Scipio. Yet, for all the vigor, Julius Caesar still succumbs to Cleopatra’s overt, politically motivated seduction; Alexander (in Alessandro, 1726) abandons his military goals for a dalliance with two different ladies; and Siroe tries to commit suicide when his obligations as son and lover conflict.

Occasionally, the contrast between a pair of characters further highlights the convention. In Alessandro, for example, Alexander faces different kinds of opposition from two of his captains: Cleon, an alto, is himself enamored of Alexander’s beloved Roxana and so tries to redirect the hero’s passions; Clitus, a bass, reproaches his commander for


132 One might note that Handel’s casting practices seem consistent whether his libretto is based on a 17th-century source (e.g., Giulio Cesare, Admeto, Serse) or on the reform works of Zeno or Metastasio (e.g., Siroe, Poro, Faramondo).
### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opera</th>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Range</th>
<th>In love with . . .</th>
<th>Ends up with . . .</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rodrigo (1700)</td>
<td>Rodrigo*</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>Florinda (though married to Esilena)</td>
<td>Esilena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Evanco</td>
<td>soprano (f)</td>
<td>Florinda (no one, a general)</td>
<td>Florinda (no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fernando</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agrippina (1709)</td>
<td>Nero</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>Poppea</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Narcissus*</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Agrippina</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Otho</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Poppea</td>
<td>Poppea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rinaldo (1711)</td>
<td>Goffredo+</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rinaldo</td>
<td>mezzo</td>
<td>Almirena</td>
<td>Almirena</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Eustazio</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teseo (1713)</td>
<td>Theseus</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>Agilea</td>
<td>Agilea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Aegeus*+</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Agilea (betrothed to Medea)</td>
<td>(no one, Medea flees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arcanes</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Clizia</td>
<td>Clizia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silla (1713)</td>
<td>Sulla*</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Flavia and Celia (married to Metella)</td>
<td>Mettella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lepidus</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>Flavia (his wife)</td>
<td>Flavia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claudius</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Celia</td>
<td>Celia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amadigi di Giro (1715)</td>
<td>Amadigi</td>
<td>mezzo</td>
<td>Oriana</td>
<td>Oriana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Dardano*</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Oriana (no one, an enchanter)</td>
<td>(no one, killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orgando+</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>(f?)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radamisto (1720)</td>
<td>Radamisto</td>
<td>soprano (f)</td>
<td>Zenobia (his wife)</td>
<td>Zenobia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tigrane</td>
<td>soprano (f)</td>
<td>Polissena</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fraarte</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>Zenobia</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Floridante (1721)</td>
<td>Floridante</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Timante</td>
<td>soprano</td>
<td>Rossane</td>
<td>Rossane</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ottone (1723)</td>
<td>Otho</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Theophano</td>
<td>Theophano</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adalberto*</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Theophano (betrothed to Matilda)</td>
<td>Matilda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flavio (1723)</td>
<td>Flavio*</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Emilia and Teodata (already married)</td>
<td>(his original wife)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Guido</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Emilia</td>
<td>Emilia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vitge</td>
<td>soprano (f)</td>
<td>Teodata</td>
<td>Teodata</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Giulio Cesare (1724)</td>
<td>Julius Caesar</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Cleopatra (no one, young son)</td>
<td>Cleopatra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sextus</td>
<td>soprano (f)</td>
<td>Cornelia</td>
<td>(no one, killed)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ptolemy*</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Cleopatra (no one, eunuch)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Niermus</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamerlano (1724)</td>
<td>Tamerlane</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Asteria</td>
<td>Irene</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Andronicus</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Asteria</td>
<td>Asteria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodelinda (1725)</td>
<td>Bertarido+</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Rodelinda (wife) (no one, confidante)</td>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Unulfo</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Rodelinda</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera</td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>In love with . . .</td>
<td>Ends up with . . .</td>
</tr>
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<td>--------------------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Scipione</em> (1726)</td>
<td>Scipio</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Berenice</td>
<td>(no one, in show of magnanimity) Berenice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Luceius</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Berenice (his betrothed)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Alessandro</em> (1726)</td>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Roxana and Lisaura</td>
<td>Roxana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taxiles</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Lisaura</td>
<td>Lisaura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Cleon</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Roxana</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Admeto</em> (1727)</td>
<td>Admetus</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Alcestis (his wife) and Antigona</td>
<td>Alcestis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Orindo</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Antigona</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Thrasymedes</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Antigona</td>
<td>Antigona?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Riccardo Primo</em> (1727)</td>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Costanza</td>
<td>Costanza</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oronte</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Pulcheria and Costanza</td>
<td>Pulcheria</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Siroe</em> (1728)</td>
<td>Siroe</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Emira (Siroe also loved by Laodice)</td>
<td>Emira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medarse*</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>(no one, a general)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Tolomeo</em> (1728)</td>
<td>Ptolemy</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Seleuca (wife) (Ptolemy also loved by Elisa)</td>
<td>Seleuca</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Elisa</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
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<td><em>Lotario</em> (1729)</td>
<td>Lothair</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Idelberto</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Adelaide</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Partenope</em> (1730)</td>
<td>Arsace</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Partenope and Rosmira</td>
<td>Rosmira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Armindo</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Partenope</td>
<td>Partenope</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Poro</em> (1731)</td>
<td>Porus</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Cleophis</td>
<td>Cleophis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gandartes</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Eryxene</td>
<td>Eryxene</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Ezio</em> (1732)</td>
<td>Aetius</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Fulvia (Aetius also loved by Honoria)</td>
<td>Fulvia</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Valentinian</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td>Fulvia</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
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<td><em>Sosarme</em> (1732)</td>
<td>Sosarme</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Elmira (no one, Haliate's son)</td>
<td>Elmira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Argone</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>(no one, Altomaro's grandson)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melo</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Orlando</em> (1733)</td>
<td>Orlando</td>
<td>alto</td>
<td>Angelica (Medoro also loved by Dorinda)</td>
<td>Angelica</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Medoro</td>
<td>alto (f)</td>
<td></td>
<td>(no one)</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Arianna in Creta</em> (1734)</td>
<td>Theseus</td>
<td>mezzo</td>
<td>Ariadne (Theseus also loved by Carilda)</td>
<td>Ariadne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alcestes</td>
<td>mezzo</td>
<td>Carilda</td>
<td>Carilda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tauris*</td>
<td>mezzo (f)</td>
<td>Carilda</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera</td>
<td>Character</td>
<td>Range</td>
<td>In love with . . .</td>
<td>Ends up with . . .</td>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td><em>Oreste</em> (1734)</td>
<td>Orestes mezzo</td>
<td>Hermione (wife)</td>
<td>Hermione</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Philoctetes alto (f)</td>
<td>Iphigenia</td>
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<td><em>Ariodante</em> (1735)</td>
<td>Ariodante mezzo</td>
<td>Ginevra</td>
<td>Ginevra</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Polinesso* alto (f)</td>
<td>Ginevra (Polinesso also loved by Dalinda)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Alcina</em> (1735)</td>
<td>Ruggiero alto</td>
<td>Alcina, then Bradamante</td>
<td>Bradamante</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oberto boy treble</td>
<td>(no one, searching for his father)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Atalanta</em> (1736)</td>
<td>Meleager soprano</td>
<td>Atalanta</td>
<td>Atalanta</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Arminio</em> (1737)</td>
<td>Arminius alto</td>
<td>Thusnelda (wife)</td>
<td>Thusnelda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sigismund soprano</td>
<td>Ramisa</td>
<td>Ramisa</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tullio alto (f)</td>
<td>(no one, a general)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Giustino</em> (1737)</td>
<td>Justin alto</td>
<td>Leocasta</td>
<td>Leocasta</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Anastasius soprano</td>
<td>Ariadne</td>
<td>Ariadne</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Amantius* mezzo (f)</td>
<td>(no one, a general)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Berenice</em> (1737)</td>
<td>Alexander soprano</td>
<td>Berenice (Alexander betrothed to Selene)</td>
<td>Berenice</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Demetrius alto</td>
<td>Selene</td>
<td>Selene</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arsace alto (f)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Faramondo</em> (1738)</td>
<td>Pharamond mezzo</td>
<td>Rosamond</td>
<td>Rosamond</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Adolphus soprano (f)</td>
<td>Clotilda</td>
<td>Clotilda</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gernandus alto (f)</td>
<td>Rosamond (no one, young son)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td>Childéric boy treble</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Alessandro Severo</em> (1738)</td>
<td>Alexander mezzo</td>
<td>Sallustia (wife)</td>
<td>Sallustia</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claudius* soprano</td>
<td>Albina</td>
<td>Albina</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Serse</em> (1738)</td>
<td>Xerxes mezzo</td>
<td>Romilda (Xerxes also loved by Amastre)</td>
<td>Amastre</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Arsamene mezzo (f)</td>
<td>Romilda (Arsamene also loved by Atalanta)</td>
<td>Romilda</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Imeneo</em> (1740)</td>
<td>Tirinthus mezzo</td>
<td>Rosmene</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Deidamia</em> (1741)</td>
<td>Achilles soprano (f)</td>
<td>Deidamia</td>
<td>Deidamia</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ulysses mezzo</td>
<td>Deidamia</td>
<td>(no one)</td>
<td></td>
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</table>
claiming descent from Jupiter, thereby denying his true father. Here, appropriately, the officer with the high voice seeks love, while the changed-voice captain champions duty. Similarly, in Orlando (1733), Zoroaster, a bass, explicitly counsels Orlando, an alto, to relinquish the pursuits of Venus for those of Mars. Finally, in Imeneo (1740), the maiden Rosmene is forced to choose between the passion she feels for her betrothed, Tirinthus (mezzo), and the gratitude she owes to Hy-}

men (bass). After she finally chooses the latter, creating the unusual situation of a bass “getting the girl,” the concluding coro specifically hails this triumph of reason over emotion. In each of these cases, the contemporary antithesis between love and duty—traits inherently linked to femininity and masculinity, youth and maturity—is mapped out vocally on the high and low registers of male characters.

Of course, as mentioned above, the convention occasionally admits exceptions. Sometimes, for example, Handel cast castrati as villains. Rodrigo (soprano) in Rodrigo, Sulla (alto) in Silla, Ptolemy (alto) in Giulio Cesare, and Polinesio (alto) in Ariodante are all antagonists whose unchecked lusts motivate their respective plots (Table 1 indicates such characters with an asterisk). Just as often, however, Handel used changed voices to portray these sorts of figures: Tiridate (tenor) in Radamisto, Oronte (bass) in Floridante, Grimoaldo (tenor) in Rodelinda, and Timagenes (bass) in Poro, to name only a few. In fact, paintings from the period would seem to support better this latter practice, as they often represent the libidinous villain as completely adult, with full beard and tanned skin: The subject of the Rape of the Sabine Women provides repeated examples.133 Perhaps these characters are meant to illustrate the consequences of not leaving behind amorous pursuits in youth; surely the lecherous basses of opera buffa are the comic manifestation of this principle. When lustful roles do go to high voices, the significance must again, I believe, relate to effeminacy: Lacking the properly “masculine” control of his passions, the castrato villain may represent the dangerous sexual urges that were thought to characterize femininity generally. In this guise, the castrato villain is only a more menacing version of the castrato lover.

Less explicable is the occasional casting of high voices as father characters. Only a few of Handel’s roles fall into this category (indicated by the symbol + in Table 1): Godfrey in Rinaldo, Aegeus in Teseo, and Bertraido in Rodelinda (all altos).134 This casting practice cannot be

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133 The works by da Cortona (1627–29) and Poussin (1637–38) provide good examples. Rubens’ famous “Rape of the Daughters of Leucippus” (ca. 1618) is a variant of the theme.

134 Orgando (soprano) in Amadigi di Gaula is the uncle of the heroine Oriana, but he appears only at the end of the opera as an enchanter descending from heaven to bless
explained by the convention I have outlined here: An unchanged voice is simply incompatible with a character who has fathered a child. Still, some extenuating factors are present: Except for his fatherhood of Flavius (a mute figure), Bertraido is a typical lover, in this case struggling to be reunited with his wife; Aegeus is not only a father (of the hero Theseus) but also a lustful villain, desiring his ward Agilea and repudiating his betrothed Medea; Godfrey, although lacking any love interest, is at least not a central protagonist. Of course, the very infrequency of these exceptions only highlights the general consistency of the convention.

Conclusion

Indeed, throughout much of the baroque period, castrated men regularly portrayed the amorous heroes of legend and history on the Italian operatic stage. In this essay, I have tried to offer a new account of why that might have been. In my view, the practice owed much to a configuration of human sexuality that differs radically from current norms. The most significant distinctions are the equation of love with effeminacy and the link between psychology and physicality: To be not quite fully masculine—in body or manner—was to be especially susceptible to love. The literature, art, and historical accounts of the period confirm that, whereas now masculine eroticism is epitomized perhaps by firm muscles, a “healthy” tan, and maybe even an unshaven face, the earlier period prized a soft body, pale skin, and smooth cheeks. The ideal male was simply younger, and so more androgynous, than the current norm. An echo of this taste may occasionally emerge today in some of the androgynous stars of popular music and film, but even these

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Oriana’s union with Amadigi. In some ways, this characterization parallels that of the Christian Magician in Rinaldo (alto).

135 Worthy of note, perhaps, is that in Handel’s 1731 revision, Goffredo was rewritten for tenor.

136 Any consideration of operatic male heroes on the French and English stages lies outside the scope of this study. Still, there would seem to be some related traditions. The French court, of course, welcomed many castrati to the stage and chamber during the first half of the 17th century and continued to employ these singers in the royal chapel well into the 18th. When, with the death of the Italian Cardinal Mazarin, castrati were banished from court stage productions, amorous male characters were taken by the haute-contre, a light alto-ish tenor (or tenor-ish alto), the least “heavy and virile” (to use Raguenet’s terms) of the male voices available. England, of course, developed no strong operatic tradition of its own, but the idea that a “softened” male could inspire languorous reactions was certainly familiar from the theatrical tradition of cross-dressed boys. See Levine, Men in Women’s Clothing. Further, the well known devotion of many English women to Farinelli, for example, suggests that when Italian opera came to England, the castrati continued to appear, at least to some portion of society, as well suited to the amorous characters they portrayed.
figures, usually in their twenties, are more mature than their baroque predecessors. Indeed, what in the 17th century seemed a natural pattern of desire would now be condemned as pathological.

But when in the 17th century the youthful masculine ideal met the baroque penchant for exaggeration, the operatic castrato was born. Although these singers had served in churches for decades, only with the advance of the baroque aesthetic into opera did they rise to theatrical prominence. It can hardly be chance that just when the genre broke from the “naturalness” of spoken declamation and moved toward greater lyrical utterance—when issues of verisimilitude came to seem less acute—the castrato began to replace the tenor in leading roles. It was an age that valued artifice: The far-flung conceits of Marinistic poetry, the fantastic opulence of Jesuit church style, the extravagant rituals of court existence. Even in landscape design, as historian Franco Valsecchi writes, “it is artifice which dominates, the search for effect. . . . Nature is transformed, deformed; the vegetation is choked by art.”

So too was the natural boy transformed by his deforming surgery into something deemed more compelling than Nature’s own creations. When in the 18th century the taste for such exaggeration started to waver, the castrato tradition too began to be questioned. Within the protective conservatism of Italy and opera seria, the appreciation for artificially effeminate lovers survived the Age of Enlightenment; the political and cultural changes of the 19th century, however, finally compelled their demise.

For the castrato was a quintessentially baroque figure, in all the meanings of that word. In that culture of hyperbole—a culture that lingered longest on the Italian operatic stage—he represented not a blank, asexual source of vocal virtuosity, but rather the spectacular exaggeration of the “beardless boy,” the idealized lover.

Eastman School of Music

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138 That castrati continued to be employed in the hyper-conservative environment of the papal chapel only supports this point.
ABSTRACT

This study suggests that, against the background of early modern views of sexuality, the castrato appears not as the asexual creature sometimes implied today, but as a super-natural manifestation of a widely-held erotic ideal. Recent work in the history of sexuality has shown the prevalence in the early modern period of the “one-sex” model, in which the distinction between male and female is quantitative (with respect to “vital heat”) rather than qualitative. This model provides for a large middle ground, encompassing prepubescent children, castrati, and other unusual figures. And that middle ground, in fact, seems to have been a prime locus of sexual desire: the art, literature, and historical accounts of the period argue that boys especially were often viewed —perhaps by both sexes—as erotic objects. Further evidence suggests that this sexual charge also applied to castrati. The plausibility of such an erotic image is strengthened by investigation into the actual sexual function of these singers, which seems to have fallen somewhere between historical legend and modern skepticism. Finally, a survey of castrato roles in opera, from Monteverdi to Handel, shows how these singers were deployed and suggests that their popularity could not have depended entirely on vocal skills. Instead, I argue that castrati were prized at least in part for their unique physicality, their spectacularly exaggerated embodiment of the ideal lover.