

*Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages*, edited by Larissa Tracy.  
Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2013. Pp. xiv+351. ISBN: 9781843843511.

The curious yet uneasy glances I received from fellow patrons while reading this book in the comfort of my local Starbuck's reminds me that castration is a subject generally approached with discomfiture. Yet the frequency of castration in the pre-modern world (if not in practice, then in thought) makes this a necessary subject of study. To date, very little has been written on castration in medieval Europe.<sup>2</sup> What studies do exist, as Karin Sellberg and Lena Wänggren astutely remind us in the final chapter of this volume, labor in the imposing shadow of Freud, who conceived of castration primarily as loss. This interpretation is not as perceptive for a period in which castration sometimes functioned as a vehicle to power. Accordingly, Tracy's *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages* endeavors to fill a gaping hole in the scholarship, though this uneven collection does not quite achieve its goal. Chronologically, the book is only partly medieval (ten of the fourteen chapters). Essays by Tougher and Collins on antiquity at the very least provide a constructive foundation for the evolution of medieval attitudes; the final essay by Sellberg and Wänggren on castration in Shakespearian drama, however, strains the limits of the period. Geographic coverage spans Byzantium, England, Frisia, Ireland, Rome, Scandinavia, and Wales, yet the Christian-centric focus means omitting cultures that regularly practiced castration. For example, the Muslim world is mentioned only briefly; so, too, is China.

There are a number of true gems in this volume. Drawing heavily on ancient Jewish law and theology, Collins's piece on the development of early Christian thought as it relates to castrates does an excellent job of tracing the foundations of Christian anxieties about sex, the body, and clerical masculinity. Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr.'s survey of castration in Frisian law is chock-full of remarkable insights. Looking to injury tariffs, he explains that compensation for genital mutilation was intended to supplement the loss of future children and the labor, income, and security that come with them. Connecting the law with contemporary medical knowledge, he also explains why injury to the right testicle carried

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2. Byzantine eunuchs have received the lion's share of attention in works by (among others) Shaun Tougher, K.M. Ringrose, Maria Parani. For Western Europe, between 1999 and 2006, Jacqueline Murray wrote a series of articles, all in volumes of collected works, on the subject that have become touchstones for scholars of gender and the body. Klaus van Eickels has also written two articles on the subject as it relates to Norman law.

a more severe penalty than that to the left—medieval medicine held the right testicle responsible for the birth of a boy. Charlene M. Eska's essay on castration in early Welsh and Irish sources provides an example of cultural adaptation. While the Norman Conquest introduced castration as a penal practice, the Irish and Welsh came to prize castration as a useful tool to disqualify political enemies for kingship without fear of reprisal from future generations. Finally, Robert L. A. Clark tackles the vital question of how to categorize a eunuch in his analysis of *De vetula* and its French translation. Where many scholars lump eunuchs with women, these satirical texts conclude that an eunuch is neither male nor female; neither plant nor animal; thus, "[i]t can be nothing but a monster" (288).

Collins, Bremmer, Eska, and Clark represent the upper end of the spectrum. The rest of the essays can be grouped into three subsets. The first grouping (Reusch, Tougher, Tracy, and Valante) bears a striking resemblance to a teetering house of cards: with little to no evidence shoring up their arguments, they crumble. Kathryn Reusch's cogent rationalization of the benefits of studying medieval castration through archaeology, while eloquent and interesting, contains no medieval evidence. She asserts that the skeletal remains of eunuchs are easily identifiable: when castrated at a young age, the lack of testosterone has an impact on bone growth. Eunuchs tend to be tall with extremely long limbs, but with small, child-like faces. Knowing this helps us to recognize castrate remains, and thus detect attitudes towards eunuchs through analysis of their burials. Yet, Reusch's findings derive from a study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century remains. If archaeologists have not unearthed the skeletal remains of any medieval eunuchs, do we know that these specific physical features were not influenced by the pervasive malnutrition of medieval life? Larissa Tracy founds her chapter on English attitudes to castration on an absence of evidence. She contends that the South English Legendary plays deliberately exclude scenes involving the castration of Christian martyrs as a rejection of the criminal associations of castration as a punishment. Further, in eschewing castration the English were rejecting a Norman import, thus bolstering English nationalism. Without evidence, such bold claims remain speculative. Shaun Tougher challenges traditional perceptions of ancient Roman distaste for eunuchs by focusing on descriptions of the youthful beauty of two of Rome's famous eunuchs, one of whom Nero eventually espoused. Tougher's findings are thought-provoking; nevertheless, his case studies are too unrepresentative to draw firm conclusions. Mary A. Valante puts forward an original argument in positing the growing need in Greek and Arab societies for educated castrates as the true motivation for Viking attacks on monasteries. Valante is forthright in her admission that

she has no evidence to indicate that any of the slaves sold were actually castrated, although her supply-and-demand analysis is highly logical. These four chapters all make for an interesting read, yet the reader remains unconvinced.

Another subset (Leech, Chandler, Sellberg and Wånggren) involves studies of literature in which castration features at best in a figurative sense. Mary E. Leech writes about *La dame escolliee*, a disturbingly violent old French fabliau in which a shrew is metaphorically castrated by her son-in-law. Jed Chandler examines both spiritual castration and a grouping of thigh wounds that may or may not represent examples of castration in Grail literature. And Karin Sellberg and Lena Wånggren highlight early modern anxieties about castration through characters that have little or nothing to do with castration: Viola/Cesario (a woman masquerading as a man), Antony (symbolically unmanned by his love for Cleopatra), and Shylock (who threatened to castrate Antonio). None of these examples represents actual instances of castration in literature and thus can offer only so much insight into the social space accorded to medieval eunuchs.

The final subset (Adams, Gates, Friedrich) includes essays whose introductions need refining in order to present an orderly, coherent argument. Anthony Adams's discussion of the blinding and castration of Órækja Snorrason in the *Sturlunga saga* has much to say about the "slippery field of Norse masculinity" (205). Jay Paul Gates eventually clarifies that he is interested in changing valuations of the body in Anglo-Saxon law. Ellen Lorraine Friedrich purports to comment on Guillaume's version of the *Roman de la Rose*, but ends up offering a truly intriguing analysis of medieval ideas about beavers and their uses in medicine.

*Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages* breaks ground on a subject in serious need of research. The collection works hard to expand our knowledge of castration beyond Origen and Peter Abelard, the two most well-known eunuchs of the Christian world who usually dominate the discussion. While still more can be said on the subject, it provides a good foundation for further scholarly research.

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