

The Instrumental Body: Castrati

For most of the people in this book, bodily alteration was not a choice. Those who underwent amputations, mastectomies, and facial surgeries generally did so as a last resort. By contrast, this chapter deals with a group of people for whom surgery was a calculated decision, made by somebody close to them. The castrato – a man gelded in childhood to preserve his youthful singing voice – provides a rare example of a body which was ‘created’ by surgery to fulfil a purpose.

In examining writings about castrati, I will show how close attention to the altered body sometimes precluded engagement with the person who *lived* that body as something more than a singer and sex object. Stories about the lives and loves of castrati were almost exclusively told from an outsider’s perspective. They are thus an apt reminder, at the beginning of this book, of the difficulties we face as readers when trying to imagine what it was like to live with, in, and through an anomalous body. Those who wrote about castrati described them in terms which emphasised their physical difference and their value as ‘instruments’, but obscured or denied their subjectivity as human beings. Even when castrati made themselves rich, famous, and adored, they were denigrated by those who resented such assertions of agency and sought to represent them purely as objects, moveable goods to be pored over and acted upon rather than engaged with. Literary-historical study can make visible this whitewashing, but can only partly reveal an alternative story. The embodied experience of castrati is fragmentarily glimpsed through their art, and through the rare incursions of castrati into that most heteronormative of institutions, marriage.

Manufactured Men

At the most basic level, the manufacture of castrati – that is, the removal of testes and scrotum from pre-pubescent boys – was a money-making exercise. In this respect, it was unusual; as this book will show, most kinds

of bodily alteration had economic consequences, but the path from bodily difference to social and economic difference was seldom so clearly mapped. The majority of castrati came from Italy, often from humble families, and the gelding of young boys flourished during times of economic hardship.¹ Gelded boys could be sent to live with a singing master, freeing their family of a financial burden, and it was hoped that in later life they might repay both master and parents by becoming famous and commanding vast fees for their singing. Whether the child had any say in the matter was in most cases unclear – it is difficult to imagine how a small child could possibly give consent to such a procedure, but castrati generally remained tight-lipped about their experiences. This was in large part because all castrati were illegal creations; gelding for other than medical reasons had been banned on pain of excommunication by Pope Sixtus V in 1587.² Many castrati questioned about their state would claim to have lost their testicles in an accident or to have had them removed in a hernia operation.³

The gelding operation held dangers, as did any invasive surgery in this period. In the absence of effective anaesthesia, it must also have been excruciatingly painful. By the standards of the time, however, this was a fairly minor procedure. Numerous medical texts of the period give instructions for the removal of testicles from adult males on medical grounds (usually hernias or tumours), and they typically report a speedy recovery.⁴ However, gelding was only the beginning of the castrato's bodily alteration. As they matured, castrati developed distinctive physical features marking them out from other men and rendering them easy targets for all kinds of satire. The archetypal castrato had no beard and little body hair, but might possess a particularly full head of hair. His skin was softer than that of other men, and he tended towards plumpness, particularly around the hips. As gelding interrupted the hormones responsible for the closure of the growth plates, castrati tended to be unusually tall, with long limbs. Moreover, the intensive training to which the castrato was

¹ John Rosselli, 'The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550–1850', *Acta Musicologica* 60:2 (n.d.): 143–79.

² Helen Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 13.

³ Rosselli, 'The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550–1850'.

⁴ Daniel Turner, *The Art of Surgery: In Which Is Laid down Such a General Idea of the Same, as Is . . . Confirmed by Practice*, 6th edition, vol. II (of 2) (London: printed for C. Rivington and J. Clarke, 1741), pp. 274–5; Hugh Ryder, *New Practical Observations in Surgery* (London: printed for James Partridge, 1685), p. 55–8; Ambroise Paré, *The Workes of That Famous Chirurgion Ambrose Parey . . .* ed. Th. Johnson (London: printed by Th. Cotes and R. Young, 1634), p. 877.

subject – often up to ten hours a day – changed his body further.⁵ Through a combination of vocal exercises and hormonal factors, castrati possessed a large chest cavity that provided their voices with more power than those of female sopranos.⁶

The craze for castrati in England started relatively late. From the sixteenth century, castrati had entertained the Italian and, to a lesser extent, the German court, first in church singing and later in opera.⁷ It was not until the mid-seventeenth century, however, that castrati began to visit and work in Britain, and they remained a rarity, accessible only to the privileged.⁸ Thomas King reports how:

In 1667 and 1668 ... Samuel Pepys recorded hearing castrati at the Catholic Queen's Chapel at St James's Palace and in a rare, much anticipated appearance at the King's Playhouse. Twenty years later, on 19 April 1687, Pepys could invite his friend, the virtuoso John Evelyn, to a private performance, in Pepys's own lodgings, by Giovanni Francesco Grossi.⁹

Castrati typically occupied the mezzo-soprano range, but the quality of their voice was famously unlike any other. John Bulwer praised the 'smallness and sweetness' of their tone, while the Frenchman Charles Ancillon enthused that 'It is impossible to give any tolerable idea of ... the Beauty of their several voices: in short, they are above description, an[d] no one can possibly entertain any notion of them but those who have had the pleasure to hear them.'¹⁰

Being both rare and talented, castrati inevitably became valuable. Exactly *how* the castrato was to be valued, however, was a complicated matter. As Pepys' efforts to secure a private castrato performance

⁵ I am indebted here to CN Lester for their explanation of classical vocal training and insight into the range of music performed by castrati. Of particular note, CN pointed out that their own ribcage had expanded by several inches after beginning operatic vocal training as an adult.

⁶ For a detailed medical explanation of the castrato's vocal ability and physical distinctiveness, see Enid Rhodes Peschel and Richard E. Peschel, 'Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera', *American Scientist* 75:6 (1987): 578–83.

⁷ Rosselli, 'The Castrati as a Professional Group and a Social Phenomenon, 1550–1850', 146–7.

⁸ Rosselli estimates that there were around 120 castrati living in Rome in 1650 (*ibid.*, 157).

⁹ Thomas A. King, 'The Castrato's Castration', *SEL Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 46:3 (2006): 563.

¹⁰ John Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis: = Man Transform'd: Or, the Artificiall Changeling* (London: printed by William Hunt, 1653), p. 355; Charles Ancillon, *Italian Love: Or, Eunuchism Displayed. Describing All the Different Kinds of Eunuchs; Shewing the Esteem They Have Met with in the World, and How They Came to Be Made so, Wherein Principally Is Examined, Whether They Are Capable of Marriage, and if They Ought to Be Suffered to Enter into That Holy State ... Occasioned by a Young Lady's Falling in Love with One, Who Sung in the Opera at the Hay-Market, and to Whom She Had like to Have Been Married. Written by a Person of Honour*, 2nd edition (London: printed for E. Curll, 1740), p. 30.

demonstrate, to hear these singers was a matter of social prestige as well as personal aesthetics. Being seen at castrato performances – better still, hosting castrato performances – was a marker of one's wealth and good taste, tied up with the vogue for all things continental. In the early days of castrati, argues Helen Berry,

To be able to hear a castrati sing was an elite privilege, a private pleasure reserved for powerful men whose bodily senses were attended to with all forms of luxury. What pepper and spices did for the tongue, and furs did for the touch, the castrato did for the ear, and sometimes the eye as well.¹¹

As an extension of this logic, particularly fine castrato singers were often patronised by wealthy members of the nobility. Occasionally, they were sent from one court to another in a sort of gift exchange, and in this respect they acquired a status analogous to that of unmarried women – that is, a tool for making bonds between powerful men.¹² Unlike most such women, however, castrati were capable of building fortunes to rival many of those whom they entertained, and in so doing, they demonstrated a degree of intersubjective agency which made it more difficult to treat them as objects or even as servants. Contemporary accounts make clear that while the majority of castrati never achieved fame, a very select few became superstars. In England, arguably the most feted were Carlo Maria Michelangelo Nicola Broschi (1705–82), or 'Farinelli', Francesco Benardi (1686–1758), or 'Senesino', and Nicola Francesco Leonardo Grimaldi (1673–1732), also known as 'Nicolini'. All these men were capable of commanding astronomical sums for their appearances, and all more or less managed their own careers. In 1734, for instance, it was reported that 'The famous Singer, Farinelli, who is just arriv'd here from Italy, has contracted with the Nobleman Subscribers, to sing at the Opera House in the Hay-Market 50 Nights, for 1,500 Guineas and a Benefit.'¹³ This sum represented around £170,000 in modern terms, or the equivalent of 15,000 days of skilled labour for an early modern tradesman.¹⁴ Later that year, the *London Evening Post* described how the royal family had come to see the superstar sing, and the following year, the *General Evening Post* reported his performance at one of innumerable society parties.¹⁵

¹¹ Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife*, p. 16. ¹² Ibid.

¹³ 'Farinelli Sings at the Haymarket', *London Evening Post*, 12 October 1734.

¹⁴ Conversion calculated using www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/currency-converter.

¹⁵ *London Evening Post*, 29 October 1734; *General Evening Post*, 16 January 1735. On castrati's salaries, see Cheryll Duncan, 'Castrati and Impresarios in London: Two Mid-Eighteenth-Century Lawsuits', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 24:1 (2012): 43–65.

The wealth accrued by famous castrati troubled many of those who wrote about these men in periodicals, satires, and newspapers. As Martha Feldman has shown, making money allowed castrati to participate in society, and potentially to leave a legacy in spite of their infertility:

Politically castrati compensated for being infertile through a number of strategies . . . adoption, often of nephews; extended international friendship networks with patrons, royals, writers, singers, artists, and others . . . careful acquisition of goods and money; and careful management of their estates, heirs, and bequests . . . They were apt to align themselves with male power, including rulership, if they could sing at court or in important churches or opera houses. In all this we can see them engaging in concrete forms of male social reproduction.¹⁶

Not all of the options Feldman describes would have been available to castrati in England, but nonetheless many commentators were deeply troubled by the extent to which English society appeared to have embraced castrati. In 1734, for instance, a letter-writer to *The Prompter* was led to opine that: 'I have heard sensible People express – their Astonishment at the Countenance – and Reception Eunuchs meet with in *England*. I am told Lords and Dukes are to be seen at their Levees.' This reception, he argued, was out of keeping with the treatment of such men elsewhere – notably, even in hedonistic Italy:

Bless the *Prince of Modena*, who shewed us the other Day how *our Nobility* ought to use them. I heard, in a Company of Persons, illustrious for Sense and good Breeding, that *S-en-s-no* [Senesino], having got permission to wait on that Prince, (when he entered the Room) fell *prostrate* and *licked the Dust*; and tho' he did so three times, the *noble-minded* Prince used him as *Nobles* do in other Countries; he did not descend so *low* as to *speak to him*, did not *look at him*, did not *seem to know* that the *propudious Creature* was in the Room. Surely 'tis enough that they are paid so *abundantly*; why make *Companions* and *Equals* of them? No *Man* converses with an *Eunuch* any where but in *England*, unless he has a Mind to *Marry it*, as Nero did *Sporus*.¹⁷

The hyperbole of this letter was typical; the popularity of castrati was blamed for all manner of moral and economic ills. One common tactic among critics of castrati was to claim that their rise was directly indexed to the decline of the 'honest poor', complaining, for instance, that 'A Lady can't find Half a

¹⁶ Martha Feldman, *The Castrato: Reflections on Natures and Kinds* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), p. xvii.

¹⁷ 'Letter to the Editor', *Prompter*, 19 December 1735.

Guinea on a *Saturday* morning, for a poor Shoemaker . . . that at Night will untye her purse-strings, and with *Greediness* bestow it at the Opera.¹⁸ Outraged pamphlet- and letter-writers complained that castrati's devotees reneged on debts, sold property, and even stole in order to afford tickets to their performances.¹⁹ One eighteenth-century pamphlet attested that:

A Woman of the first Quality in England, fearing lest *the Senor* should be affronted at receiving a Bank Note of 50l for one Ticket, if presented without Disguise, thought of a lucky Expedient, to prevent his Anger; which was, to purchase a Gold Snuff-box of Thirty Guineas Value, in which having inclosed the Note, she ventured, with Fear and Trembling, to make her Offering at the EUNUCH'S Shrine.

. . . a Widow Lady of a very moderate Fortune, with two or three Children to take care of, said, with great Concern, SHE HAD STOLE A TICKET FOR FIVE GUINEAS. If she had said, *She had Robbed her Children of Five Guineas*, she had spoke the Truth.²⁰

The notion that money given to castrati was siphoned directly from more deserving causes was widespread.²¹ Moreover, the fact that the gift-givers in all these encounters were women was no coincidence. Women's supposed fascination with castrati was linked to a perceived lack of manly authority and noble feeling among aristocratic young men, particularly in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century (see Chapter 3). Thus in 1735, the author of the pamphlet *A Trip through the Town* decried the inability of young men to keep women properly in check and away from castrati: 'Is there no Spirit left in the young Fellows of the Age? No Remains of Manhood? Will they suffer *the Eyes, Ears, Hearts, and Souls* of their Mistresses, to follow *an Echo of Virility*?'²² The culpability of the fop or rake in the rise of castrati is implied once again in the second plate of Hogarth's 1735 *A Rake's Progress* (see Figure 1.1). In a chaotic room full of lavishly dressed men, a long piece of paper hangs over the back of a chair; it is titled 'A list of the rich Presents Signor Farinelli the Italian Singer condescended to Accept of the English Nobility & Gentry'.

Suspicion and resentment of the popularity and wealth of castrati were clearly widespread. Week after week, angry letters and columns appeared in publications such as the *London Evening Post*, *The Prompter*, *The Daily Post*, and others, all complaining of the money and attention 'squander'd'

¹⁸ *A Trip through the Town. Containing Observations on the Customs and Manners of the Age*, 4th edition (London: printed for J. Roberts, 1735), p. 63.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 61–62. ²⁰ *Ibid.* ²¹ *Daily Post*, 16 February, 9 May 1738.

²² *A Trip through the Town*, pp. 61–2.



Figure 1.1 William Hogarth, *A Rake's Progress*, Plate 2: *Surrounded by Artists and Professors*, Engraving, 1735.

on Farinelli and his ilk.²³ Moreover, such complaints were not based on the unnaturalness or barbarism of castrating young boys. Indeed, very few critics of castrati objected to their creation per se. Rather, what vexed these writers so much was the socio-economic liminality of the castrato. The castrato was a commodity; his body was created specifically for the entertainment of the rich. Unlike other commodities, however (and unlike the ultimate human commodity, the slave), castrati resisted their objectification by acting in ways which made apparent their status as agential subjects – specifically, making money and gaining influence. The castrato thus occupied a curious position: he was not chattel, but neither could he be admitted as a subject within a heteronormative, patrilineal society. For commentators to admit the phenomenological experience of the castrato would therefore have required them to admit the discord that existed between fixed, idealised social structures and varied, anomalous lived bodies.

²³ 'Letter to the Editor', *Daily Post*, 16 February 1738.

Sex Objects

Given how entwined the castrato's socio-economic status was with his gender identity, it is unsurprising that complaints about castrati's place in society bled into complaints about their sexual activity, and vice versa. What is perhaps surprising is the range of sexual vices attributed to castrati. Abuse directed at castrati figured them as sexually deviant in every direction. They were variously accused of being incapable of sex and sex mad, homosexual and (excessively) heterosexual, passive and predatory. Predictably, many of the insults levelled at castrati were homophobic; Valeria Finucci describes how 'Castrati provoked homophobic reactions and were subject to taunts, verbal abuse, coercion, physical retaliation, and psychological intimidation.'²⁴ It was certainly the case that some castrati engaged in homosexual relationships with their patrons or other men. In such pairings, the distinctive body of the castrato once again became a commodity, this time as a novel sexual object.²⁵ Roger Freitas has argued that the castrato's sexual appeal stemmed in part from his mixture of juvenile and adult sexual characteristics: 'Sexually speaking – and this is an essential point – the castrato would have been viewed as equivalent to the boy.'²⁶ To a greater extent, however, it seems to have been the castrato's combination of stereotypically masculine and feminine physical features which shaped his representation as a sex object. This notion is evident in the letter to *The Prompter*, above, which refers to Nero marrying Sporus: Nero famously castrated Sporus, a slave, in order to have Sporus act as his 'wife', a phrase which here implied both submission within the romantic relationship and being sexually penetrated.²⁷ Similarly, Casanova – himself an icon of sexual excess – famously mistook for a woman a castrato who then promised that 'he will serve me as a boy or a girl, whichever I choose'.²⁸

²⁴ Valeria Finucci, *The Manly Masquerade: Masculinity, Paternity, and Castration in the Italian Renaissance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), p. 239.

²⁵ Katherine Crawford, 'Desiring Castrates, or How to Create Disabled Social Subjects', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 16:2 (2016): 59–90.

²⁶ Roger Freitas, *Portrait of a Castrato: Politics, Patronage, and Music in the Life of Atto Melani* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), especially pp. 101–48; Theo van der Meer, 'Sodomy and the Pursuit of a Third Sex in the Early Modern Period', in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), pp. 137–212.

²⁷ David Woods, 'Nero and Sporus', *Latomus* 68:1 (2009): 73–82.

²⁸ Quoted in Freitas, *Portrait of a Castrato*, 29. Associations between castrati and homosexuality were always coloured by the association between castrati and Italy, and between Italians, pederasty, and sodomy. A vituperative 1747 text in favour of gelding Catholic priests argued that this method of

The presumed homosexual activities of castrati were evidently of concern to commentators, but they were seldom openly named in the period's newspapers and periodicals, which shied away from discussing the possibility of sex between men. The insinuation of such activities, however, was part of a continuum in which castrati were imagined to pose a wider threat to sexual morality. Thus, a large volume of literature, ranging from the satirical to the polemic, was dedicated to detailing the alleged affairs of castrati with aristocratic women. In some such works, castrati were figured more as emotional partners than in explicitly sexual terms. For instance, in a satirical poem about Nicolini, published in 1711, the singer is imagined as a replacement for a lapdog:

Ye blooming *Nymphs* who warily begin
 To dread the *Censure*, but to love the *Sin*,
 Who with *false Fears* from your *Pursuers* run,
 And *filthy Nudities* in *Picture* shun,
 From *Scandal* free, this *pretty PLAY-THING* meet,
 . . .
 Who gently leaning on the *Fair Ones* Breast,
 May sooth *her Griefs*, and lull her into Rest.
 And should *He*, should *He* like *her* Squirrel creep
 To *her* soft Bosome when *she's* fall'n asleep;
 Ev'n then *she's* safe. Nor need *she* fear *Him* more
 Than those *kind Aids* which eas'd *her* Heart before.²⁹

There is a hint here that in replacing 'kind Aids', Nicolini may be providing sexual gratification. In the main, however, the castrato is represented here as, in Helen Berry's terms, '[a] life-size doll, safe for women to dress up, buy presents for, and play with'.³⁰ To correspond with, express devotion to, or meet with a castrato was, as Berry points out, far less scandalous than to similarly engage with an 'intact' man.

In many other cases, however, relationships between castrati and women were represented as far less innocent. It was obvious that the greatest part of the castrato's appeal was that he could not impregnate

tackling the Popish threat would be particularly appropriate, since 'it is a common practice in *Italy* and other popish countries with the meaner sort of people, to *geld* their own sons to make the better market of them for singing-boys, and musicians, or to be catamites to cardinals, and other dignitaries of the *Romish* church' (*The priest gelded: or popery at the last gasp. Shewing . . . the absolute necessity of passing a law for the castration of Popish ecclesiastics* (London: A. M'Culloh, 1747), pp. 12–13).

²⁹ *The Signior in Fashion: Or the Fair Maid's Conveniency. A Poem on Nicolini's Musick-Meeting* (Dublin, 1711).

³⁰ Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife*, p. 81.

his partners. Women might, it was feared, engage in sexual activity with a castrato without producing any evidence of their wrongdoing. Under this guise, 'Constanzia' [Constance] Mullman, a woman whom Berry describes as 'a notorious prostitute', was rumoured to have engaged in an affair with the talented and immensely famous Farinelli, a topic which provided ample fodder for satirists.³¹ In mock epistles between the lovers, 'Constanzia' explains that the eunuch appeals to women because he offers extra-marital sex without consequences:

Eunuchs can give uninterrupted Joys,
 Without the shameful curse of Girls and Boys:
 The violated Prude her Shape retains,
 A Vestal in the publick Eye remains;
 Shudders at the remotest shew of Vice,
 And Bashfulness out-blushes, she's so nice:
 With eager Fondness yet can yield her Charms,
 When raptur'd in her darling Eunuch's Arms.

These love the Deed, but seem to hate the Name,
 Indulge Love's Pleasure, but avoid the shame:
 Well knowing Eunuchs can their Wants supply,
 And more than Bragging Boasters satisfy;
 Whose Pow'r to please the Fair expires too fast,
 While *F—lli* stands it to the last.³²

The castrated man was here viewed as facilitating female sexual agency, in the form both of extra-marital sex and of unsanctioned kinds of sexual activity.³³ There were persistent rumours that some castrati were unaltered men in disguise, exploiting their talents to gain access to adoring women. Elsewhere, it was said that castrati were in fact women, seeking to cover up their licentious behaviour towards both sexes.³⁴ Crawford notes that it was even suggested at one point that Farinelli was pregnant, a narrative made possible in part by the effeminising effect of the above poem: where Constantia Philips (allegedly) affected masculine agency, Farinelli assumed

³¹ For her part, Mrs Mullman claimed that rumours of the affair, and the 'correspondence' between the pair, had been cooked up by her estranged husband, and that she had never so much as seen Farinelli, having been ill with a 'pleuritic fever' the entire time he was in England (Teresia Constantia Mullman, *An Apology for the Conduct of Mrs Teresia Constantia Phillips*, vol. II (of 2) (London: printed for the booksellers of London and Westminster, 1748), pp. 91–2.)

³² Teresia Constantia Mullman, *The Happy Courtesan: Or, the Prude Demolish'd. An Epistle from the Celebrated Mrs C- P-, to the Angelick Signior Far-n-Li* (London: printed for J. Roberts, 1735).

³³ George Sebastian Rousseau and Roy Porter, *Sexual Underworlds of the Enlightenment* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp. 57–8.

³⁴ Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife*, p. 84.

the feminine role.³⁵ Even if one accepted that castrati were who they claimed to be, it was often said that castrati could maintain erections despite their infertility. Marten's 1737 *Gonosologium Novum*, for instance, argued that

experience has shewn that such men as have been deprived of their testicles, have, notwithstanding, been able to shew their prowess by diverting themselves with women, and defiling the nuptial beds of others . . . It cannot be express'd to what point [eunuchs] will push their irregular desires, when their fancy is once inflam'd, and a kind of aqueous seed in the prostate or seminal bladders irritates their privities.

'Constanzia's' epistle buys into this idea, and implies that her castrato lover not only can engage in penetrative sex, but is more virile than other lovers, 'stand[ing] it to the last'. Though it was not explicitly stated, the much-vaunted fondness of women for castrati also hints at non-penetrative practices such as masturbation and oral sex; Freitas cites Casanova as having mentioned that castrati employed the 'secret des Lesbiennes'.³⁶

Allegations of castrati's heterosexual affairs may at first seem to contradict suspicions about their homosexual activities. However, both these narratives relied on one thing – the objectification of the castrato's body. Just as was the case in his professional life, the perceived value of the castrato in his personal relationships was based on his bodily alterity. Whether because of his novel aesthetic attributes or his infertility, the castrato as lover had an instrumental value which informed both sympathetic and hostile accounts of his activities. By contrast, the emotional and physical experience of the castrato was entirely absent from written accounts of either homosexual or heterosexual encounters. His subjectivity was once again erased, while his value as a commodity was continually reinscribed. As we shall see elsewhere in this book, the visual spectacle of the anomalous body was a source of fascination. Bodily alteration was horrifying, but it was also exciting and potentially erotic. The castrato was unique, however, in the extent to which his spectacular body was interpolated as a money-making device.

In part, this interpolation was facilitated by contemporary market forces, and specifically by changes to the economics of printing in the

³⁵ Crawford, 'Desiring Castrates, or How to Create Disabled Social Subjects', 74.

³⁶ Freitas, *Portrait of a Castrato*, p. 141. This 'secret' was apparently observed by Casanova during an orgy in Rome at which abbés (Roman Catholic clergymen) were also present, reflecting both the anti-Catholic nature of these rumours and the erotic potential of racial, religious, and bodily otherness.

years in which castrati were most popular. The rise of castrati took place broadly concurrently with the expansion of the market in newspapers and periodicals.³⁷ Moreover, the height of castrato fever was attained after the lapse of the Licensing Act in 1695, and therefore in tandem with the sharp rise in the numbers of newspapers and periodicals printed from that date.³⁸ This rise arguably fostered intense scrutiny of all kinds of bodies. As Mark Dawson points out, the need to concisely and vividly describe physical features in newspaper reports led to the employment of a physiognomic and humoral shorthand in which attributes such as complexion or height were made to stand in for moral and social status.³⁹ Increased print advertising also encouraged focus on the body by homing in on physical shortcomings in order to sell medicines, cosmetics, and assistive technologies such as canes. Castrati were part of this marketisation; breathless accounts of their lavish lifestyles and scandalous affairs helped to shift newspapers. However, the positioning of castrati as items for ocular as well as auditory consumption reached its apex in a far odder form – namely, a series of advertisements for the ‘Anodyne Necklace Shop’ which appeared in 1745.

The anodyne necklace was, as Chapter 3 discusses, a piece of ‘sympathetic’ medicine, aiming to cure everything from teething pains to fevers using the atoms which allegedly flowed from the amulet.⁴⁰ The aim of this piece appears to be to get customers through the door of the premises on Drury Lane, London. Rather than promising the most effective or cheapest goods, however, the proprietor of the Anodyne Necklace Shop offers a different incentive: the chance to look at and in some measure interact with the castrato Farinelli:

³⁷ On advertising and the newspaper trade, see Michael Harris, ‘Timely Notices: The Uses of Advertising and Its Relationship to News during the Late Seventeenth Century’, in *News, Newspapers and Society in Early Modern Britain*, ed. Joad Raymond (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), pp. 141–56. On the role of newspapers and the circulation of the *London Gazette*, which peaked in the late 1690s, see Natasha Glaisyer, ‘The Most Universal Intelligencers’, *Media History* 23:2 (2017): 256–80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13688804.2017.1309971>. For a general overview of newspaper and periodical culture in this period, see Gerhild Scholz Williams and William Layher, *Consuming News: Newspapers and Print Culture in Early Modern Europe (1500–1800)* (Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi, 2008); James Raven, *Publishing Business in Eighteenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell and Brewer, 2014), pp. 118–32; James Sutherland, *The Restoration Newspaper and Its Development* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁸ Raymond Astbury, ‘The Renewal of the Licensing Act in 1693 and its Lapse in 1695’, *The Library* 5th series, 33:4 (1978): 296–322, <https://doi.org/10.1093/library/s5-XXXIII.4.296>.

³⁹ Mark S. Dawson, ‘First Impressions: Newspaper Advertisements and Early Modern English Body Imaging, 1651–1750’, *Journal of British Studies* 50:2 (2011): 277–306.

⁴⁰ Francis Cecil Doherty, *A Study in Eighteenth-Century Advertising Methods: The Anodyne Necklace* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1992).

The Interpretation of Women's Dreams

With the Prints of these DREAMS, Finely Engraved, And, the Application of them to Men.

Of Which, If a Maid Dreams the 34th Dream, She may as Well Wed FARINELLI, *At One* ----- With *A Curious Print* of FARINELLI, Finely Engraved, Plainly and Visibly Shewing, (to Plain, Open, and Clear View) the Apparently *Visible* MARKS of His CASTRATION.

With a LOTTERY,

For HUSBANDS for Young MAIDS,

With the Prints of these *Husbands*, finely Engrav'd.

Not One Blank, but ALL Prizes, the *Lowest* of Which, Is a Very HANDSOME and RICH *Young* Gentleman, that Keeps his COACH.

And, If She Draws of the 6th Class of Tickets, She is Then, SURE to be, MY LADY.

Any *Maiden*, that will Put off TWO *Tickets*, shall have ONE, for *Her Self*, To Put Her in Fortuna's Way. To be Drawn, as Soon, as Full.

'Tis GIVEN GRATIS ----- At the ANODYNE NECKLACE Shop, in LONG-ACRE.⁴¹

The author of this advertisement was clearly targeting young women. Enter the necklace shop, and one could experience both the thrill of viewing Farinelli's nakedness and the dubious benefit of being entered in a sort of fortune-telling raffle. Farinelli's body functions in this text as an object of ocular desire, a man whose physicality provokes equal lust and repugnance in those who examine his image. In this respect he is not dissimilar to the anatomies which Jonathan Sawday identifies as having had erotic potential for seventeenth-century audiences, joining 'morbid fears' with 'barely suppressed desires'.⁴²

In such advertisements, the objectification of castrato bodies reached its zenith. Ironically, given the way in which he made his living, the castrato was entirely voiceless in the texts which traded on his image. Elsewhere in this book, we will see how bodily alteration was often shown to provoke a renegotiation of the relation between mind and body, such that the terms in which one 'lived one's body' were brought into question. Popular representations of castrati largely sidestepped such negotiations by simply declining to acknowledge that the castrato *had* a mind, and instead focussing obsessively on the potential of his unusual body. Fleeting affairs

⁴¹ 'The Interpretation of Women's Dreams (Anodyne Necklace)', *Penny London Post or The Morning Advertiser*, 8 April 1745.

⁴² Jonathan Sawday, *The Body Emblazoned: Dissection and the Human Body in Renaissance Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 49.

with castrati were viewed as physical rather than emotional exchanges, and thus the issues raised by those affairs were ones of the castrato's socio-economic liminality rather than deeper crises of gender; the matter at stake was how to conceive of the castrato's status as a commodity, rather than how to conceive of him as male or female. Ultimately, however, this objectification was not sustainable. Castrati made their voices heard, and in the process provoked discussion of their gender status. They did so by seeking to become 'real men' – that is, by seeking to marry.

Beyond Instrumentality

If castrati's illicit affairs were disconcerting to commentators, their encroachment on licit areas of sexuality – namely, the institution of marriage – was viewed as potentially catastrophic. It is telling that although such unions occurred only a handful of times during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, they attracted as much interest as any of the castrato's professional activities. Two cases of castrato marriage stand out as having garnered particular attention. The first occurred in Dresden in 1667, between Bartolomeo Sorlisi (1632–72) and Dorothea Lichter. The second took place between Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci (1736–90) and an Irishwoman, Dorothea Maunsell, in 1766. Both cases have been explored in detailed studies, and I will not rehearse their specifics here.⁴³ It is worth noting, however, that both instances provoked hostility from religious and secular authorities. In Sorlisi's case, initial misgivings from Dorothea Lichter's family were overcome, but it took years to persuade the Lutheran Church to marry the pair. The case of Tenducci and Maunsell was more complex. Maunsell, aged fifteen, eloped with Tenducci as a means to avoid betrothal to another suitor favoured by her family, though she also claimed to be passionately in love with the singer. Her relatives reacted with fury, accusing Tenducci of abducting their daughter, and they pursued his imprisonment and the dissolution of the marriage until 1767, when they finally capitulated. By 1771, however, Dorothea had borne at least one child which was widely accepted to have been fathered by William Kingsman. She married Kingsman in 1772, and a trial followed in which she successfully contended that her marriage to Tenducci had

⁴³ For a detailed study of Tenducci, see Berry, *The Castrato and His Wife*; on Sorlisi, see Mary E. Frandsen, "Eunuchi Conjugium": The Marriage of a Castrato in Early Modern Germany', *Early Music History* 24 (2005): 53–124.

never been valid, and that she was not therefore guilty of bigamy.⁴⁴ As I explore below, this decision by the courts reflected a longstanding belief in some quarters that castrato marriages were illegitimate because of the liminal status of the castrate body.

Why were castrati forbidden – or at least, very strongly discouraged – from marrying? The answer to this question is less obvious than it appears. Officially, castrati had been forbidden to marry in the same 1587 Papal ‘cum Frequenter’ which had barred the castrating of boys to become singers. This, however, does not seem to have been the main issue which prevented acceptance of Sorlisi’s and Tenducci’s marriages. Neither, it appears, was the castrato’s inability to beget children. Though critics often argued that castrati were unfit for marriage because they were unable to procreate, Sorlisi and Tenducci both pointed out that this consideration did not prevent marriages between men and women past childbearing age. Likewise, it was not usual (though not unheard of) for marriages to be dissolved when one of the parties proved to be infertile. Rather, the objection to castrato marriages that was stressed in court accounts and popular reportage was once again linked to the liminality of the castrato. Those who argued against such marriages questioned whether castrati could rightly claim to be men.

For English readers, this question was treated in most detail in a text translated from French, Charles Ancillon’s *Italian Love: Or, Eunuchism Displayed* (1740; first published 1718). This text was framed as an advisory to a friend’s daughter who had become enamoured with a castrato, though there is no evidence that this was more than a conceit. Ancillon’s attitude to castrati was much coloured by his reading on eunuchs, who appeared in various ethnographic texts throughout the seventeenth century. Eunuchs were said to be created by the rulers of Middle Eastern or Oriental countries in order to serve as administrators or as guards for harems.⁴⁵ Following these texts, Ancillon asserted that eunuchs’ bodily difference conferred on them particular, mostly undesirable, character traits:

An Eunuch . . . is a person which has not the faculty or power of generation, either through weakness or coldness of nature, or who is any wise deprived

⁴⁴ ‘Maunsell [Married Name Kingsman], Dorothea (b. 1749x51), Figure of Scandal | Oxford Dictionary of National Biography’, accessed 4 December 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/104868>.

⁴⁵ See, for instance, *The New Atlas, or, Travels and Voyages in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America* (London: J. Cleave and A. Roper, 1698), pp. 20–1; Bulwer, *Anthropometamorphosis*, pp. 354–62; Ottaviano Bon, *A Description of the Grand Signour’s Seraglio or Turkish Emperours Court*, trans. John Greaves (London: Jo. Ridley, 1653), pp. 95–100.

of the parts proper for generation . . . Such who can by no means propagate and generate, who have a squealing languishing voice, a womanish complection, and soft down for a beard, who have no courage or bravery of soul, but ever timorous and fearful: In a few words, whose ways, manners, and customs, are entirely effeminate.⁴⁶

This list emphasised the character of the castrato in a way which was entirely absent from discussions about those singers' social lives and casual affairs. Once again, however, such a formulaic depiction of castrati assigned to them as a group courses of action based entirely on their bodily difference, and thus sought to exclude the possibility of their individual, subjective agency. Ancillon's desire to stereotype and stigmatise castrati was far from unique. In so doing, he echoes the tone of earlier texts which, in their most antagonistic forms, treated castrato singers as not only less than male, but less than human. *A Trip through the Town* described Farinelli as a mixture of exotic beast and apparition, one 'whose CRIES have a sort of MAGICK CHARM in them, that takes Possession, at once, of the MOVD Listener's Soul . . . The *Hyaena*, who is said, by its feigned Cry of Misery, to attract Traveller's Steps towards itself, has not so sure an Effect as that of this AMPHIBIOUS ANIMAL.'⁴⁷ Similarly, Nicolini was described in dehumanising terms as a '*Plump, Tender Thing*', member of '*A tuneful Race*'.⁴⁸

This discourse was soon brought to bear on discussions of the castrato's legal rights, which culminated in public wrangling over the castrato's right to marry. In *Italian Love*, Ancillon argues, predictably, that castrated men should not be allowed to marry because the purpose of marriage is procreation. In his elaboration on this argument, however, the author strays from that utilitarian view and into the question of the castrato's gender identity. Ancillon seems to assume that no woman would knowingly marry a eunuch, even though this is precisely the scenario around which he bases his 'epistles'. Reinforcing once again the potential commodity value of human bodies, he argues that marriage is a contract in which each party 'buys' the other's body. Castrati, he argues, misrepresent their bodies, and thus any marriages they contract ought to be considered fraudulent: 'The marriages then of eunuchs never were truly marriages, because there never was a true conjunction.'⁴⁹ His objections to castrati go even deeper, however, when he asserts that 'they put on the appearance of

⁴⁶ Ancillon, *Italian Love: Or, Eunuchism Displayed*, p. 8.

⁴⁷ *A Trip through the Town*.

⁴⁸ *The Signior in Fashion: Or the Fair Maid's Conveniency*.

⁴⁹ Ancillon, *Italian Love: Or, Eunuchism Displayed*, p. 158.

men, when they are not so in reality'.⁵⁰ From claiming that the castrato was not a procreative man, Ancillon moved to claiming that they were not men *at all*.

Discussions of castrato marriage thus show how castrati could be considered sexually as well as socially liminal. Nonetheless, while these debates still mostly took place about rather than with castrati, they show a greater engagement with castrati as agential subjects. Ancillon characterised castrati in terms of their bodily difference, but he at least acknowledged that castrati *had* characters, whereas elsewhere they were represented as practically devoid of an inner life. Paradoxically, sexual liminality provided the best platform for castrati to forge their own identities. In arguing for their status as marriageable, Sorlisi and Tenducci spoke up in a way few castrati managed. Furthermore, the castrato's aesthetic distinctiveness was founded on gender fluidity. For the most part, as scholars of opera have shown, the castrato voice was a heroic voice. Composers such as Handel wrote leading heroic male parts with the high, powerful voice of the castrato in mind:

a voice in the soprano range, singing floridly composed lines with lavish interpolated embellishments, came to represent the sound of the hero. This, perhaps, is one of the key points, that the hero *sounded* a particular way that was most associated with castrato and *travesti* voices.⁵¹

This allocation, however, was complicated. At times, castrati also played women on stage, a role in which Naomi André argues that 'some could sustain the illusion of belonging to either gender outside of the opera house, despite the men's or women's clothing they wore'.⁵² Equally, when a castrato could not be found, soprano female singers might fill the same roles, acting as *travesti* (female singers who dressed as men). Overall, the castrato's appearances on stage played to, and played with, his indeterminate status outside the theatre. André relates the castrato's position to that of the transvestite boy actor, and in particular, to Majorie Garber's contention that 'transvestism is a space of possibility structuring and confounding culture'.⁵³ Rather than perpetuating this sort of representational crisis, however, André sees the castrato's ability to play male or

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

⁵¹ Freya Jarman, 'Pitch Fever: The Castrato, the Tenor and the Question of Masculinity in Nineteenth-Century Opera', in *Masculinity in Opera*, ed. Philip Purvis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 52.

⁵² Naomi Adele André, *Voicing Gender: Castrati, Travesti, and the Second Woman in Early-Nineteenth-Century Italian Opera* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), p. 49.

⁵³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 49.

female on or off stage as ‘a performance practice that is part of a larger aesthetic’.⁵⁴ In that aesthetic, the use of soprano voices for male and female parts fostered a ‘one-sex’ view of anatomy which was antithetical to strict sexual dimorphism. Both castrati and, later, *travesti* possessed

a voice that was heard as being gendered masculine *and* feminine without different aural markers. The voices of these women, as well as the earlier operatic castrato, were heard as sometimes male and sometimes female, depending on the surrounding context. In looking back, it is also possible to imagine their voices as neither man nor woman in an exclusive sense, but regard that as a combination of something in between: a ‘third’ option for gendering the singing voice.⁵⁵

The same artistic distinction which led to the castrato’s prestige as a performer, and therefore to his commodification, opened up a space in which he could be imagined as *living* his body. While the castrato’s phenomenological experience might still be only dimly imagined, within the aesthetic of gender fluidity, an alternate mode of living was, at least, thinkable.

Conclusion

It is clear that for many onlookers, the castrato body was something very strange. Was it also strange to the castrato? When critics objectified castrati as commodities, and denied their subjectivity, they acted in a way consistent with what Drew Leder terms ‘social dys-appearance’. Leder explains:

As long as the Other treats me as a subject . . . mutual incorporation effects no sharp rift. But it is different when the primary stance of the Other is highly distanced, antagonistic, or objectifying. Internalizing this perspective, I can become conscious of my self as an alien thing. A radical split is introduced between the body I live out and my object-body, now defined and delimited by a foreign gaze.⁵⁶

‘Highly distanced’, ‘antagonistic’, and ‘objectifying’: these are all fitting terms to describe the attitudes of most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century writers towards castrati. We cannot know, however, whether such attitudes had the effect of alienating castrati from their own bodies, because those same attitudes excluded castrato voices. As so often in our study of people with bodily difference, the only perspective which remains

⁵⁴ Ibid. ⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 48.

⁵⁶ Drew Leder, *The Absent Body* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 96.

is that of the bodily and socially normative. Nonetheless, some evidence remains for castrati asserting their right to live fully rounded lives which incorporated their experience as gelded men. This includes the rare phenomenon of castrato marriage, in which the potential for meaningful relationships outside patrilineal structures is glimpsed. It also includes castrati's readiness to play a variety of on-stage roles in which male and female voices were interchangeable, and thus in which sexual dimorphism receded from view.

There is one further oddity about early modern accounts of castrati. Whilst 'facts' about eunuchs were sometimes used as bases to make claims about the bodies and characters of castrati, things which were supposedly known about castrati (for instance, their alleged sexual appetites) were not used to make claims about other gelded men. As I have described elsewhere, the gelding of adult men for medical or other reasons occurred within a cultural framework which included religious and folk references, but castrati were very rarely seen among those references.⁵⁷ There were no jokes about 'singing an octave higher' in ballads about castration or medical accounts of orchiectomy. Admittedly, castrati were not uppermost in the mind of most early modern people of the 'middling sort'. Nonetheless, this absence implies that the foreignness of castrati, their manifold physical differences, and their exoticised sexuality made them, for most people, entirely alien. Accounts in which castrati were dehumanised were not exceptions to the rule, but rather reflected a general view in which these singers were profoundly unlike 'normal' men.

⁵⁷ Alanna Skuse, "'One Stroak of His Razour': Tales of Self-Gelding in Early Modern England', *Social History of Medicine*, 33, no. 2 (2020), 377–93, <https://doi.org/10.1093/shm/hky100>.