



Review of Kathryn M. Ringrose, *The Perfect Servant: Eunuchs and the Social Construction of Gender in Byzantium* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003), xiv + 295 pp.

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A gender that is neither male nor female? The role of eunuchs in late antiquity and their place in the emerging churches in the West (Roman Catholicism) and in the East (Byzantium) have both fascinated and repelled writers in the past and present. The anatomically mutilated male body has been seen as a biological and social anomaly, but with regard to the effects of this anomaly on the possibilities for enacting a differently gendered life, the views varied greatly—from severely restraining the eunuch’s life choices (servants; prostitution) to endowing him with royal authority and sacred qualities (court eunuchs; military generals; angels).

Kathryn Ringrose’s book is a rich and detailed historical study on eunuchs in Byzantine culture, covering a period of almost 1000 years, from “the founding of Constantinople in 324 to its capture by the Turks in 1453” (p. 3). Ringrose does not proceed chronologically but thematically, and thus offers a lively introduction to the world of eunuchs from late antiquity to the end of Byzantium. Paying particular attention to the reliability of sources that address “eunuchism” (p. 3), she guides the reader through medical definitions, the legal code, the eunuchs’ roles in Byzantine society, and their place in the royal system, the church, as well as in the religious imagination. Along the way, Ringrose addresses theoretical issues on gender construction in the Byzantine world and on the various discursive functions of eunuchs in medical lore, hagiographies and ecclesiastical texts. She argues that eunuchism was never a stable category: just as castrated individuals defied gender boundaries, the social function and reputation of eunuchs as a group kept changing over time. “Within that long history [of a millennium],” she writes, “eunuchs were particularly prominent both at court and in the church from about 600 to 1100 . . . and individuals flourished despite the fact that Roman and Byzantine law prohibited the making of eunuchs within the empire and that ecclesiastical traditions frowned on bodily mutilation” (p. 3).

Ringrose does well to address early on the range of anatomical changes that would place men into the category of eunuchs. Voluntary self-castration would be one way of becoming a eunuch (one feared and opposed by most church fathers), but certainly not the only one. Castration, to begin with, was not the removal of the penis (as erroneously assumed by modern readers in a post-Freudian age; on this issue, see Gary Taylor’s intriguing study, *Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood* [2000]), but refers to the removal of testicles. At stake was not (phallic) appearance, but procreation, and the term eunuch “could refer to any nonreproductive man” independent of the “specifics of genital mutilation” (p. 14f). Some men were born eunuchs (with deformed genitalia or lacking sexual desire),

others were “cut” as boys (without a choice on their part), yet others had their testicles surgically removed as adult men. The Greek language testifies to the range of these procedures, from *tomias* referring to “cut men” (surgical removal of testicles from scrotum) to *spado* (natural eunuchs), from *thlibias* (intentionally crushed testicles) to the fewer cases of *curzinasus*, the doubly castrated men, whose testicles and penis had been removed.

In the church, finally, the term “eunuch” could refer to celibate monks who had taken a vow to remain nonreproductive. The metaphorical usage of eunuchism here referred not to anatomical but spiritual castration: a monk in its social and biological function was the equivalent of a eunuch. By adopting this analogy the church could make sense of the famous passage in the Gospel of Matthew without encouraging Christian celibate men (ascetics and monks) to literally cut themselves. Jesus says in response to a question about marriage: “There are eunuchs born that way from their mother’s womb, there are eunuchs made so by men and there are eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can” (Matt. 19.12). With Origen being one of the possible exceptions, church fathers almost unanimously heaped scorn on physically castrated men (they are castrated “for the sake of the kingdom of women,” Athanasius wrote), while praising bodily whole men who practice celibacy as the true eunuchs: those men, according to Epiphanius, metaphorically “castrate themselves for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven” (p. 115). These sentiments are repeated by church fathers such as St. John Chrysostom, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea, and later translated into some monastic rules, which prohibited (anatomical) eunuchs to join the secluded communities of celibate men.

The strict separation of anatomical and spiritual eunuchs, by which church fathers tried to differentiate between legitimate forms of male celibacy and artificially produced, unnatural forms of celibacy (after all, how would it be a feat for a eunuch to conquer sexual desire?), softened, however, over time in the Byzantine culture. “The Byzantine hagiographical corpus,” writes Ringrose, “includes remarkably few examples of negative rhetoric about eunuchs” (p. 117). By the eighth century, the general cultural acceptance of eunuchs in high positions of imperial authority allowed eunuchs to cross over into “prominent religious positions” (p. 118). Ringrose presents evidence both from legendary narratives and historical sources. One of the early prominent “ecclesiastical eunuchs,” for example, was the “patriarch Germanos (715-730)” who had been “castrated when he was already an adult, as a political act” (p. 118). Prominent court eunuchs could enter the monasteries—often like a retirement option—if they vowed to become a monk for the remainder of their lives.

The Perfect Servant is formally arranged in two parts. Whereas the four chapters that make up the first part address larger conceptual and theoretical issues relating to questions of gender, definition, language and sources (while always staying close to the material itself), the second part delves into more detail of the textual and historical sources relating to specific realms within which eunuchs arose to prominence in Byzantine society. Chapter 5 looks at prominent eunuchs crossing over into the ecclesiastical world; chapter 6 looks at powerful eunuchs in the imperial (secular) realm; chapter 7 investigates the parallelism that is constructed in religious texts and icons between the appearances of (court) eunuchs and angels;

and the last chapter details the various offices that eunuchs held in the imperial palace—most of which were designed as positions of “perfect” servanthood.

Throughout these chapters, Ringrose also gets across two important points: for one, that eunuchs within Byzantium “constituted a third gender” (p. 4) and, second, that there is an inherent difficulty in reconstructing the lives of eunuchs since almost all texts about them were not written by them but by “bodily whole” men. Each text, then, cannot be taken at face value but must be carefully examined as to the specific views and polemics of its author and must be compared to a wide range of sources before a more comprehensive and accurate picture of eunuchs can emerge.

In many ways, *The Perfect Servant* can be read as the companion volume to Matthew Kuefler’s earlier study of eunuchs in late antiquity in the Western tradition, *The Manly Eunuch: Masculinity, Gender Ambiguity, and Christian Ideology in Late Antiquity* (2001). Together, these two books not only provide an impeccable introduction to eunuchism in the Christian West and East but also broaden our understanding of Christian men and their concomitant ideals of masculinity both in the emerging Christian churches and in the (sometimes counter-cultural) religious imagination.

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