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The sexuality and social performance of androgen-deprived (castrated) men throughout history: Implications for modern day cancer patients

Michael William Aucoin, Richard Joel Wassersug*

Dalhousie University Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

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Abstract

Androgen-deprivation therapy (ADT) via either surgical or chemical castration is the standard treatment for advanced prostate cancer (PCa). In North America, it is estimated that more than 40,000 men start ADT each year. The side effects of this treatment are extensive and include gynecomastia, erectile dysfunction, and reduced libido. These changes strongly challenge patients' self-identity and sexuality.

The historical term for a man who has been castrated is 'eunuch', now a pejorative term implying overall social and sexual impotence. In this paper, we review key historical features of eunuch social performance and sexuality from a variety of cultures in order to assess the validity of contemporary stereotypes of the androgen-deprived male. Data were taken from secondary sources on the history of Byzantium, Roman Antiquity, Early Islamic societies, the Ottoman Empire, Chinese Dynasties, and the Italian Castrati period. This cross-cultural survey shows that castrated men consistently held powerful social positions that yielded great political influence. Many eunuchs were recognized for their loyalty, managerial style, wisdom, and pedagogical skills. Furthermore, rather than being consistently asexual and celibate, they were often sexually active. In certain cultures, they were objects of sexual desire for males, or females, or both.

Collectively, the historical accounts suggest that, given the right cultural setting and individual motivation, androgen deprivation may actually enhance rather than hinder both social and sexual performance. We conclude that eunuch history contradicts the presumption that androgen deprivation necessarily leads to social and sexual impotence. The capabilities and accomplishments of eunuchs in the past gives patients on ADT grounds for viewing themselves in a positive light, where they are neither socially impotent nor sexually chaste.

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Introduction

Androgen-deprivation therapy (ADT), a standard treatment for advanced prostate cancer (PCa), involves depleting the body of testosterone in order to prevent the growth and metastasis of prostatic tumors (see Higano, 2003; Kumar, Barqawi, & Crawford, 2005, for recent reviews). In North

*Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 902 494 2244;
fax: +1 902 494 1212.

E-mail addresses: michaelaucoin@dal.ca (M.W. Aucoin),
tadpole@dal.ca (R.J. Wassersug).

America, it is estimated that more than 40,000 men start long-term ADT each year (Wassersug, Zelenietz, & Squire, 2004). These patients are either chemically or surgically castrated. Because of the prostate specific antigen blood test, more men are being diagnosed with advanced PCa at a younger age. They are both starting ADT at a younger age and living longer than in the past.

ADT is accompanied by side effects that result in substantial physical and mental changes, including: loss of body hair, gynecomastia, genital hypotrophy, impotence, reduced libido, hot flashes, weight gain, and the development of a more female pattern of body fat distribution (Higano, 2003; Strum, 1999). Many patients on ADT perceive themselves as unmanly (e.g., Gray, Fitch, Phillips, Labrecque, & Fergus, 2002; Navon & Morag, 2003; Oliffe, 2005, 2006) and are prone to depression (Fowler, Collins, Corkery, Elliott, & Barry, 2002; Pirl, Siegel, Goode, & Smith, 2002). Patients often utilize defensive strategies, such as denial and avoidance, to cope with their 'liminal' no-longer-a-man (Fergus, Gray, & Fitch, 2002; Gray, 2004; Navon & Morag, 2004) gender state. Such coping strategies, however, may be detrimental to the patients in the long run. Roesch et al. (2005) reported that "men with prostate cancer who used avoidance coping experienced heightened negative psychological adjustment and physical health...".

Collectively, the effects of ADT strongly challenge patients' self-identity (Oliffe, 2005, 2006; Wall & Kristjanson, 2005) and sexuality, leaving them struggling to cope with, and accept, their altered bodies and functionality (Bennett & Badger, 2005; Gray et al., 2005; Navon & Morag, 2003). This can harm their interactions with their partners (Soloway, Soloway, Kim, & Kava, 2005) and overall quality of life (Gray et al., 2002; Navon & Morag, 2003).

The historical term for a man who has been castrated is 'eunuch'; however, few PCa patients would be comfortable with this label. As it is used in contemporary society, 'eunuch' has a pejorative meaning that implies overall weakness. It is often assumed that an androgen-deprived male must be sexually impotent and socially powerless (see Yamamoto, Phillips, & Wassersug, Submitted). When men with advanced PCa are victimized by misconceptions about the functionality of castrated men, the burden of their cancer is intensified by the stigma surrounding their medical treatment (Gray et al., 2005; Navon & Morag, 2003, 2004; Oliffe,

2005, 2006; Yamamoto et al., Submitted). Since PCa treatment has resulted in there once again being a large number of androgen-deprived men in society, it seems appropriate to review the social and sexual performance of eunuchs in history. If a review of various societies reveals that eunuchs in the past could be sexually active and socially accomplished, then the current pejorative stereotype of the castrated man will be challenged.

For more than 3000 years, numerous cultures across Asia and elsewhere castrated men to produce eunuchs, who served royalty, aristocracy, and religious institutions (Scholz, 2001; Taylor, 2002; Tougher, 1997). In these cultures, castrated men were not necessarily viewed through the derogatory lens implied by contemporary usage of the term 'eunuch'. In fact, eunuchs consistently held positions of power that yielded great influence within the societies they inhabited (e.g., Lieberman, 2005; Penzer, 1993; Ringrose, 2003; Segal, 2001). For instance, most of the long-running empires in Asia over the last 4000 years had eunuchs in their senior management (Wassersug, 2004) where they were chamberlains, admirals, diplomats, and generals (e.g., Mitamura, 1970; Scholz, 2001; Tsai, 1996). Because androgen deprivation lowers libido, many eunuchs in history were asexual, but not all. Beyond their social prowess, eunuchs were admired for their sexual capabilities and served as objects of desire for both men and women in several cultures (e.g., Ayalon, 1999; Cheikh-Moussa, 1982; Hester, 2005; Kuefler, 2001; Ringrose, 2003; Wassersug, 2004). They could function as passive partners, and in certain settings, depending on age at castration and extent of genital destruction, as active partners as well.

Researching cultural and familial history may contribute positively to self-image and identity. Pride, confidence, and self-respect are generated when knowledge of one's own origins reveals ancestors who have accomplished laudable feats and left recognizable legacies. Actions of predecessors can permeate the ages and bring empowerment to a particular group. To this end, eunuch social and sexual history is reviewed to build a bridge between modern day PCa patients and their eunuch predecessors. Through such an examination, PCa patients may be more informed about physiological and social potential of the androgen-deprived male. Through this review, we suggest that the assets and accomplishments of many eunuchs in history can empower androgen-deprived patients and play a

role in deconstructing the stigma attached to castration. In particular, we hope to show that the reported social roles and diverse sexuality of eunuchs contradicts the presumption that androgen deprivation must be equated with social and sexual impotence.

This review is not meant to provide a comprehensive history of castration, which would include varied cultural contexts and purposes, as well as different degrees of consent, coercion, and brutality. Rather, we discuss the history of societal roles and sexuality of eunuchs in selected times and places to show that many androgen-deprived individuals were—contrary to the current stereotype of the ineffectual eunuch—successful in their life and not necessarily asexual. We hope to reaffirm the potential of individuals who have been castrated to become successful by drawing on some of the benefits of androgen deprivation, despite the cruel circumstances of their castration.

Social roles

Eunuchs repeatedly held specific professional roles in church, court, and military life across different cultures throughout history. In the first section of this review, social roles are explored in an attempt to reveal psychosocial elements common to the eunuch condition. If it can be established that eunuchs consistently held the same positions across a number of societies separated by time and space, a similar capability for the modern androgen-deprived male will be supported.

The commonality of eunuchs excelling in certain social roles was previously addressed by Hopkins (1978):

Eunuchs cannot be explained exclusively in terms of their individual actions...The continuing power position of eunuchs must be considered rather as a socio-political institution in itself, a patterned regularity, a phenomenon to be explained not only by its individual manifestations but with reference to other broad social factors.

Those ‘broad social factors’, such as polygamous societies where powerful males needed an interceding and reliable social class that would protect them and their women from the populace at large, is explored extensively by Ringrose (1996, 2003).

More recently, Taylor (2002) explored the bridge between eunuch functionality and social settings that contributed to their success in history:

Eunuchs are in an obvious and literal sense...the corporeal materializing of a dominant discourse that is written onto and in the body. Moreover... [they]... perform a variety of social identities, which do indeed vary from culture to culture: operatic castrati, priests of Cybele, Chinese palace eunuchs, Hijras of India, guardians of Islamic harems, Byzantine and Ottoman imperial officers.

Taylor goes on to suggest that social factors, within the environments that eunuchs thrived, are as important as biological factors in determining the effects of castration.

The eunuchoid traits valued over several cultures and across thousands of years support the idea that there is a consistency rooted in their physiology and psychological disposition. These traits may be omnipresent in eunuchs and can be assumed to exist in, although not necessarily be utilized by, the modern PCa patient.

Loyalty and trustworthiness

A common theme that arises in the discussion of eunuchs and their societal positions relates to their reputation as being loyal and trustworthy. Ayalon (1999) suggests that trustworthiness is “...a very basic characteristic common to eunuchs everywhere...”. This concept spans empires and pervades the various posts they held, be they in the church, court, or military.

In Medina, eunuchs were the sole guardians of the tomb of the prophet Mohammed where they “...controlled access to the messenger of God” (Marmon, 1995)—a task they were entrusted with during the 12th century C. E., and continued to perform over the course of 800 years. Marmon (1995) cites the Saudi magazine, *al-Yamama*, which reported in 1990 that 17 eunuchs continued to loyally guard the tomb of the Prophet. Ayalon (1999) describes how they played a major role in the management and guardianship of money—further evidence of their trustworthy nature. He goes on to explain that “...most of the specific tasks and jobs allotted to the eunuchs necessitated a very high degree of trustworthiness...”.

Similarly, in China, “...emperors seemed to have considered them [eunuchs] particularly trustworthy” (Mitamura, 1970). This trust undoubtedly contributed to the political power that eunuchs experienced over the course of 23 Chinese Dynasties.

By the end of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), it is estimated that the total number of eunuchs in China reached 100,000, and that at one time they owned 60% of the property in the capital city (Tsai, 1996). Notably, the great military eunuch Tong Guan rose to power during the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234), and was entrusted with the command of 800,000 troops from the Chinese army.

Because of the great trust that emperors and nobility placed in them, eunuchs had access to the innermost sanctums of court life and proved essential for the stability of kingdoms across generations (e.g., Ayalon, 1999; Ringrose, 1996). Eunuchs were commonly appointed as tutors and caregivers to the children of monarchs; these roles allowed them to gain admiration and affection from noble youth who were destined to become rulers. Eunuchs were gradually woven into the fabric of the young nobles' psyches, securing long-term influence and status within the court. Segal (2001) speaks to this familiar occurrence:

One black eunuch of probable Nubian origin, Abu'l-Misk Kafur, eventually rose to rule Egypt during the tenth century. The Ikshidid ruler, Muhammad b. Tughi (sic)... invested him with increasingly important political and military responsibilities, including the position of tutor to his two sons. With the death of Muhammad b. Tughi (sic) in 946, Kafur became regent to each of his sons in turn until, with the death of the second in 966, he declared himself ruler and remained such for the two years until his own death.

Eunuchs rising to power by way of their association with the children of nobility was common in Islam, as Ayalon (1999) wrote: "...the fact that the eunuchs were the upbringers of the offspring of so many rulers and highly placed people on the one hand, and of the Mamluk novices [warriors in training] on the other, made them immensely powerful and influential".

Ringrose (2003) makes the argument that eunuchs, at certain points in the Byzantine Empire, constituted a distinct socially constructed third gender—neither man nor woman, but eunuch (see below). To quote Ringrose, "...an important part of their gender construct was centered on their perceived loyalty, [and] trustworthiness...".

It is apparent that trustworthiness was the cornerstone of eunuch social success and contributed to the political power they continually gar-

nered. This eunuch trait was viewed as a valuable attribute in diverse Asian societies for thousands of years from Peking to Istanbul/Constantinople (Ayalon, 1999; Mitamura, 1970; Segal, 2001; Tsai, 2002). In many instances, trustworthiness served as a vehicle for social mobility by allowing eunuch slaves promotion to the highest echelons of society.

Educated and in command: eunuchs as intelligent and organized

Cheikh-Moussa's (1982) interpretation of ninth century Islamic text describes an awakening of 'knowledge' and 'communication' that the castrated man experiences, from which, "... his mind becomes refined, his intelligence quickened, his nature polished, and his soul stimulated". The image of eunuchs as intellectuals is reaffirmed by their previously mentioned roles as tutors and educators of young nobles. They have also been commended for their literacy (Marmon, 1995; Taylor, 2002; Tsai, 2002) and command of languages (Marmon, 1995). Several important ecclesiastic scholars and philosophers, including Origen of Alexandria (185–254 AD), St. Ignatius (800–877 AD) and Peter Abelard (1079–1142 AD), were eunuchs, castrated as adults.

Military accomplishments by eunuchs have been correlated with superior managerial skills rather than simple ferocity. For instance, the sixth century historians Prokopios and Agathias (cited in Ringrose, 1996) documented with admiration the talents of the Byzantine eunuch general, Narses, during the reign of Justinian I. Both historical accounts report that the general was exceptionally adept in military tactics, strategy, and the execution of large-scale military operations (Fauber, 1991).

Narses' talents are what one would expect from any great commander. However, Prokopios and Agathias do not credit Narses with being a courageous and 'manly' warrior. Rather, his success is credited to his cleverness, which they claim was common to eunuchs of their time. Narses' lack of traditional masculinity, one can argue, provided him with a strategic edge by granting him an element of control over spontaneous aggression and endowing him with contemplative foresight. Ringrose (2003) makes comments on how lower ranking military eunuchs also possessed highly valued organizational abilities, and were consistently entrusted to organize supplies and manage military logistics.

An association between androgen levels and military rank has been examined in a modern day context. Among military personnel, generals have been found to have the lowest levels of testosterone and foot soldiers the highest (McBride Dabbs & Goodwin Dabbs, 2000). It should be noted that historical eunuchs would have had relatively lower levels of testosterone than those of modern day, gonadally intact, generals. Nonetheless, the parallel is intriguing and provides an example of how performance in certain major social roles, both historically and presently, may have been facilitated rather than hindered by lower levels of testosterone.

Liminal and celestial: eunuchs find their 'in'

In Byzantium, the social roles of eunuchs were diverse, but there was a clear stereotype for what it meant to be a eunuch. Ringrose (2003) describes an acculturation process that worked to shape eunuchs and define their gender category. For instance, they adopted a certain physical appearance marked by a particular style of dress and body language. She also explains how a process of acculturation "...normalized eunuchs as the appropriate agents for carrying out a variety of roles in society, particularly mediating between distinctive groups, defining the sacred space around the emperor, and connecting that space to the regular world".

The ambiguous gender category of eunuchs granted them liminal qualities that created opportunities to travel freely between the worlds of men and women. They could associate with women in the most intimate of settings without being seen as a threat. Yet they also held great authority in the world of men (Kuefler, 2001; Ringrose, 2003). Kuefler (2001) suggests that eunuchs were tolerated and active in both gender domains because they were not seen as members of either.

Eunuchs were ideal intermediaries between rulers and their subjects. In Byzantium, China, and various pre-Christian era Middle and Near East kingdoms "[e]unuchs met a distinct need, the need of a divine emperor for human information and contact" (Hopkins, 1978, in reference to Roman Antiquity). The emperors' innate divinity, or presumption thereof, could only be safely maintained by separating them from the masses. "[N]either God nor monarch was to reveal what he actually was to the people—the secret door between the two worlds was always shut...[and] he could not allow a commoner to enter his private quarters"

(Mitamura, 1970). Eunuchs were well suited to bridge the societal gap (Kuefler, 2001; Ringrose, 2003). They could provide the deified with information about the world at large, while forming a social barrier (and also a physical one when necessary) between the palace and the populace.

The eunuch's ability to transcend social boundaries was also used to carry information from one group to another. "There are endless references to eunuchs carrying messages, an area where their liminal function is always on display. They facilitate interactions between men and women, old and young, rich and poor, emperor and peasant" (Ringrose, 2003).

The view of eunuchs as liminal beings was not restricted to the earthly world, as they were also seen as emissaries of God (Ringrose, 2003; Wassersug, 2004). Ringrose (2003) argues convincingly that the modern image of angels was molded from eunuchs in the pre-Christian world. Religious art dating from the Byzantine era depicts the Lord in heaven being flanked by beardless (but not female) beings, who bear striking resemblance to eunuchs. Here, we find eunuchs as angels fulfilling an intermediate role for which their gender construct—neither man, woman, nor even mortal—allowed them to be trusted guardians, celestial protectors, and advisors to the Lord.

In the Byzantine world, the court represented a sanctum of heaven on earth and the emperor served as Christ's messenger. Considering eunuchs' angelic nature, "[t]he accompaniment that angels provide to Christ can be paralleled to that which they [eunuchs] provide to the emperor and empress ... By likening themselves to divinity, nobility can solidify their [divinity] on earth" (Ringrose, 2003). As such, eunuchs became symbols of divinity and were empowered by this association.

Eunuchs were commonly privileged by their abilities to travel across areas isolated by social norms, and came to fill a special social niche well above the masses. As intermediaries and messengers, they were positioned to be praised and esteemed by the most powerful members of society, while engendering respect, if not fear, from the lower classes.

Their important position was well established in both Old and New Testament times. This is recognized in the "New International Version" of the Bible (1984), where its Dictionary-Concordance lists as the first definition of eunuch: "The most important official after the king or queen". In sum,

eunuchs were the antithesis of the powerless, quite the opposite of what most people today think it means to be emasculated.

It should be stated that not all castrated men in history were successful, nor did being castrated automatically guarantee elevated social status. For example, at times of famine in China, impoverished adult males would castrate themselves in order to be eligible for employment in the palace. Thousands of such eunuchs were turned away because there was no room for them there (Mitamura, 1970). Similarly, not all Castrati became opera stars (see below). Some languished because they simply did not sing well enough (Barbier, 1996). Notably, it was excessive competition among castrated men in both situations and not the fact that they were androgen-deprived that accounted for their tribulations.

Eunuch sexuality

The Women's Quarters

As previously mentioned, eunuchs served a vital role in pre-modern polygamous societies. In such settings, a patriarch housed tens to hundreds of concubines within the walls of his palace (e.g., Segal, 2001). With a population that size, it was impossible for one man to tend to the needs of his entire harem. Yet, in order to assure that a ruler's genetic lineage was maximally perpetuated, it was crucial that he be the sole reproductive male with intimate access to the women.

Eunuchs provided a much needed solution since they could be "...used as private attendants upon women, and were clearly intended to be their ineluctably safe guardians" (Hopkins, 1978). This seems fitting considering "...women apparently felt no embarrassment at including them in the most intimate of surroundings" (Kuefler, 2001). Kuefler, however, goes on to explain that the assignment of eunuchs to guard women presupposed that "...castrated men could not engage in sexual activity: an unreliable assumption and the basis for much anxiety..." especially since these women had "...very rare chances...of meeting their patron and because that patron... did not necessarily satisfy their desire when they did meet him" (Ayalon, 1999). [As an aside, Ayalon's quote does not consider lesbian relations, which have been reported to have taken place in the harem; cf. Penzer, 1993]. Sexual contact between eunuchs and

women in the harem setting has been described in Byzantium (Ringrose, 2003), Rome (Kuefler, 2001), China (Mitamura, 1970; Tsai, 2002), the Ottoman Empire (Penzer, 1993), and various Islamic societies (Ayalon, 1999; Segal, 2001). A vivid example of the sexual involvement of eunuchs in the harem can be seen in China where eunuchs were both the "...necessary cement that held the imperial institutions together and made China's polygamous society work" (Tsai, 2002), and sexually active in the women's quarters dating as far back as the Han dynasty (200 BC–200 AD) (Mitamura, 1970).

It has been suggested that the ruling elite were not necessarily naïve about the sexual activity of the eunuchs they employed. Rather, "[s]ome have argued that in harems at least, eunuchs were not castrated to prevent them from having sex with women, but rather to make certain the pregnancy of the harem woman resulted from the seed of the master..." (Tougher, 2002).

In some societies, this sort of activity was so well recognized that terms emerged to define the well-known conjugal relationships between court ladies and their eunuchs (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Mitamura, 1970). In others, laws were passed to prohibit women from engaging in sexual relations with eunuchs (Kuefler, 2001). In Islam, an effort was made to maintain concubines' fidelity to the sultan by allowing only men who had both penis and testicles removed ('fully castrated') to serve in the harem. "But even a fully castrated eunuch had ample opportunity to have sex [of a non-penile nature] within its walls" (Ayalon, 1999).

"In short, sex between women and eunuchs was always possible" (Kuefler, 2001). Regardless of whether their sexual escapades were known to the ruler, or if they were fully or partially castrated, the evidence suggests that eunuchs tended to the sexual needs of harem concubines for millennia.

Sexual capabilities and objects of desire

Kuefler (2001) cites Roman Christian writers Tertullian and John Cassian from the third and fourth centuries, respectively, on the topic of eunuchs and sex. Tertullian, Kuefler reports, "...doubted that there occurred any bridling of passion in castration" and Cassian remarked "...that castrated men might still have sexual feelings". Clearly though, residual sexual interest would have been greatest in males castrated after puberty. Notably, in Rome the castrations were not

always performed before puberty (Hester, 2005; Kuefler, 2001; Roller, 1999).

Much of the literature from China on castrated men carries the sub-theme of eunuchs being commonly desired as sexual partners (Mitamura, 1970; Roller, 1999; Tougher, 2002). The eunuchs' knowledge of sex was demonstrated in the emperor's quarters where they were in charge of the emperor's sex education (Mitamura, 1970).

In medieval Islam, “[s]exual relations of various forms with eunuchs were very common, as it seems, everywhere. The eunuchs did not lose their sexual desire, either as passive or active partners...” (Ayalon, 1999). There was, however, confusion regarding eunuchs in the realm of sexuality. What was their role in the bedroom, “... as sexual penetrators or as sexually penetrated” (Kuefler, 2001)? As it turns out, eunuchs' gender ambiguity granted them opportunities to explore intimate relations with both men and women (Hester, 2005; Kuefler, 2001; Wassersug, 2004). As such, they could indulge in a range of partners, with women, and both actively or passively, with men (Cheikh-Moussa, 1982; Rowson, *in ms.*). Their gender status, which made them neither fully man nor woman, proved attractive to both sexes: “[t]hus a man would love a eunuch because he resembled in some ways a woman; and a woman because he resembled in some ways a man” (Ayalon, 1999). In the world of sexuality, Hester (2005) succinctly explains, “...eunuchs were universally characterized by the frequency, ease of and adeptness with which they performed sex acts with both men and women”. Possessing qualities of male and female, eunuchs in certain societies developed a sexuality which encompassed aspects of both. They were far from obligatorily asexual, and depending on time and place often served as the objects of desire for men and women alike.

The ninth century writer, al-Jahiz, commented extensively on the topics of sex and gender. Both Rowson (*in ms*) and Cheikh-Moussa (1982) offer translations and valuable insights into al-Jahiz's writings, which pay particular attention to eunuch sexuality in ancient Islam. These texts present eunuchs as sexually active and strongly desired as sexual partners. Rowson's (*in ms*) translation from al-Jahiz suggests why, in this case, eunuchs with penises intact were viewed in this light:

[A] eunuch combines everything a woman could want. She detests all those who are quick to

ejaculate but slow to recover... but the eunuch is quick to recover after having been slow to ejaculate, as well as being sure not to impregnate her. Thus with him the woman remains secure from the supreme disgrace which is a powerful stimulant to her pleasure and lust.

Cheikh-Moussa (1982) similarly paraphrased al-Jahiz's writings on the desirability of eunuchs:

[T]he eunuch is beloved and even sought out by women for the indescribable voluptuousness with which he provides them—voluptuousness all the more intense for crossing the boundaries into the forbidden without any sense of danger. A woman can thus consume this forbidden fruit without incurring dishonor... the eunuch becomes less fatigued during intercourse (which is one of the secrets of his longevity), and thereby satisfies the women much more.

These various authors discuss eunuch sexual capabilities as they relate to the degree of genital mutilation. Cheikh-Moussa (1982) evaluates a variety of forms of castration and concludes that, “...these different sorts of castration... do not in any way prevent the eunuch from having sexual relations...[e]ven if his member is truncated, he still retains something of that that may please women even more... he is not prevented from enjoying a second round by the ejaculant [sic] he produces...”. Obviously, the eunuch could pleasure a female with his hands or a prosthetic phallus (a ‘dildo’) and such paraphernalia have been associated with the harem setting (Wassersug, 2004; see also Gray & Klotz, 2004; plus Warkentin, Gray, & Wassersug, 2006 in terms of dildo use by modern PCa patients).

Clearly, the chastity so often presumed of eunuchs is contradicted in the works of al-Jahiz and other pre-modern writers. In certain cultures, eunuchs were perceived as proficient sexual partners and even in erotic matters, “...the equal of a mature man...” (Cheikh-Moussa, 1982). Considering some of the anatomical and physiological effects of castration, the term ‘equal’ may be an exaggeration. Nonetheless, these writings strongly affirm that eunuchs, in medieval Islam as well as elsewhere, were not obligatorily asexual.

In the Roman Empire, “...men were judged by a feminine standard of sexual restraint and sexual exclusivity” (Kuefler, 2001). Contrary to the ideals of modern western societies, there was masculine virtue encompassed in avoiding sexually licentious

behavior. The door was thus opened for eunuchs because, “[t]he unmanliness of eunuchs also meant that they were presumed to have no ability to restrain themselves from all kinds of sexual vice—but then, neither did the women” (Kuefler, 2001). Roller (1999) similarly describes the castrated adult males of the Cybelean priesthood as sexually active and even lascivious. They were in fact offensive to contemporary Roman males who considered the sexual allure of both eunuchs and women to be a source for potential weakness. By once again filling a liminal gender space that separated them from what it meant to be fully male, but still desired as such by women, eunuchs were presented with a unique sexual opportunity. Any sexual act that involved a man providing, instead of receiving, pleasure was considered unmasculine from a Roman perspective, “...but eunuchs had no masculine reputation to preserve” (Kuefler, 2001). Even when castration had left a eunuch unable to engage in penetrative sex, other methods of genital stimulation remained (Hester, 2005).

Marriage and family

In China, the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere, despite his inability to fertilize, the eunuch was allowed to legally marry (Brownell & Wasserstrom, 2002; Mitamura, 1970; Rowson, in ms.; Taylor, 2002; Tsai, 2002). One major exception was in the Christian world; from Byzantium to the Castrati movement (see below), eunuchs’ sterility led to church edicts prohibiting their marriage (Taylor, 2002).

Although in Byzantium eunuchs did not marry, the Byzantine emperor Leo VI (886–912 AD) allowed eunuchs to adopt children. In Islam, the accomplished eunuch could marry and acquire slaves to tend to his house (Penzer, 1993; Rowson, in ms.). A similar custom was present in China where, “[m]any eunuchs not only married but kept concubines...” (Mitamura, 1970). For Chinese eunuchs, family life after castration was entirely possible. This was because “...eunuchs were permitted to adopt sons, and [as a result] their power grew with their wealth...” (Tsai, 2002). In fact, the adopted heir of a court eunuch rose to rule China around the turn of the third century.

Castrati: a special case

No discussion of eunuchs and sexuality is complete without mention of the Italian Castrati,

the operatic sensations who stole the stage and the hearts of women in 17th and 18th century Europe (Barbier, 1996; Scholz, 2001). The unique talents of the Castrati led them to immense fame and fortune, where they enjoyed celebrity status. “Their voices were enchanting, their nobility and refinement on stage were seductive...” (Barbier, 1996).

The respect that the Castrati received for their talents and stardom spilled over to the realm of sexuality where they were the “...perfect Don Juans in everyday life, in the salons and even in the intimacy of the bedrooms” (Barbier, 1996). European women relentlessly pursued the Castrati with sexual intent despite a clear understanding that castration was at the core of their operatic success. Taylor (2002) describes the attraction towards the Castrati to be tied to the fact that “...they offered sexuality without semen, and so without pregnancy”. In an era without reliable birth control, this could be viewed as a valuable attribute. Especially, considering that “...many young aristocratic women were forced to marry men they did not love, even sullen elderly barons” (Barbier, 1996).

Barbier (1996) suggested that “...most Castrati could experience virtually normal sexual relations”, although physiologically their libido may have been on average lower than intact males. In fact, the sexual capability of these singers was so infamous that one of the first histories of castration was written to warn women of seduction by Castrati (cited in Taylor, 2002).

Many Castrati were celebrities and sophisticated socialites, who were both wealthy and charming, while posing no risk of pregnancy. It is easy to see why they, like their eunuch counterparts from previous eras, served as objects of sexual desire.

Summary of Sexuality

Eunuchs of the past had opportunities to be intimate with and trusted by high-status women; in turn, they had sexual opportunities. However, the extent and nature of the sexual activity that the eunuchs engaged in may never be definitively known, simply because we lack reliable first-hand reports either from eunuchs or their partners. As with women of the past, eunuchs did not write their own stories (Ringrose, 1996; Wassersug, 2004).

An additional confounding factor is that the women who engaged in sexual activity with eunuchs did not become pregnant; therefore, the sexual liaison could not be discovered by the traditional

marker of sexual relations before modern contraception. There is a famous epigram from the Latin poet Martial, “*Cur tantum eunuchos habeat tua Caelia quaeritis, Pannyche? Futui velut Caelia nec parere*”, which can be translated as: “You ask, Pannychus, why your Caelia consorts with eunuchs only? Caelia wants to copulate, not give birth”.

Since celibacy was often the expected outcome of their castration (dependent on the culture), eunuchs did not benefit from disclosing their sexual escapades. Similarly, the women whom they interacted with were often in no hurry to report their sexual exploits with a eunuch. After all, part of the appeal of a eunuch was that he was a discreet—infertile—sexual partner. With neither party profiting from divulging the details of their affairs, we are left without the voices of those directly involved.

Discussion

The characteristics that history tells us were common, if not consistent, for androgen-deprived males in the past could be suppressed or expressed based on cultural setting. Society influences traits even of a biologically essentialistic nature. Castrated males today exist in the equivalent of a Byzantine eparchy (Ringrose, 2003) that is guarded by ‘bearded men’; i.e., the eugonadal heteronormative model males. The ‘bearded men’ of today’s world tend to prize the hegemonic masculine qualities which society reveres—stoicism, aggression, and emotional restraint (see Oliffe, 2005 and other references cited therein). Wall and Kristjanson (2005), Gray et al. (2005), Oliffe (2005, 2006) all explore the impact of hegemonic masculinity and its effect on castrated PCa patients’ ability to adjust to the challenges of their condition. They suggest that the dominant ideal of what it means to be a man limits castrated patients by obfuscating potential alternative forms of masculinity (cf. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Wall and Kristjanson (2005) go so far as to recommend reframing the concept of masculinity in order to allow the androgen-deprived male to experience a life not defined solely by loss and deprivation, but to explore in a positive light their deviance from the hegemonic male ideal. However, without a special cultural niche, such as that offered in the past via court and church, castrated PCa patients are left to define themselves as ‘male’ and use deception, avoidance, and denial for any departure they feel from the hegemonic heteronormative masculine model (Navon & Morag,

2003). Although sociologists argue that the gender construct for males in contemporary society is not rigidly set (e.g., Butler, 1988, 1990; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), this may not apply to older men who were acculturated into their social roles in the last century and are now challenged by emasculating medical therapies. There is limited space in contemporary society for any unique and positive qualities of eunuchs to be displayed. Rather, the castrated patients and the surrounding society they live in, uneducated in the history of eunuchs, are unforgiving and unaccepting of their special status. This is particularly evident in the pejorative language of emasculation, as evidenced by the vulgar description of an ineffectual individual as a person who ‘has no balls’ (Yamamoto et al., submitted).

The question remains: could modern androgen-deprived men achieve the high social status and display the same sexual prowess of eunuchs of the past? Their biological wiring suggests ‘yes’, but the dominant pejorative view of castration, plus our society’s strict adherence to hegemonic masculinity, stand as major roadblocks (cf. Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Social identity

Historically, eunuchs were viewed as more trustworthy than uncastrated males in a vast number of roles. A large part of the eunuchs’ ability to serve society was seated in their concern for and sensitivity to the needs of others. That sensitivity, more commonly aligned with the stereotypic female, resulted from freedom from the male’s testosterone-fueled primal drives for social or sexual advancement. Eunuchs tended to excel as intermediaries in unique social settings where it was best to avoid conflict, and aggression was a negative rather than a positive trait.

Characteristics that are common, if not innate, to the androgen-deprived condition endowed eunuchs with the abilities to repeatedly fulfill prestigious and important social roles. Eunuchs became valued for the skills they possessed, and were entrusted with critical tasks that went well beyond the mere guarding and protecting of women. As educators, advisors, and even generals, they excelled in social settings where high levels of testosterone could be more of a handicap than an advantage. Indeed, eunuchs in history may have been less belligerent than uncastrated males (Wassersug, 2003). Data

from modern males on anabolic steroids suggest that high androgen males are low in empathy and self-control (i.e., ‘roid rage’; see Porcerelli & Sandler, 1995). In contrast, the eunuchs’ social sensitivity was recognized and cherished independently in many societies isolated from one another by geography and time.

Androgen deprivation may have also enhanced the survival of individual eunuchs. Aggression in males of a dominating nature, which appears to be testosterone-dependent (McBride Dabbs & Goodwin Dabbs, 2000), has recently been shown to account for the high mortality of males worldwide. Stanistreet, Bambra, and Scott-Samuel (2005) specifically examined rates of violence against women for 51 countries around the globe. Systematic male dominance, as measured by violence toward women, explained half the discrepancy in life expectancy between the sexes. The higher the rate of female murders, and therefore the greater the male domination, the higher are the death rates among men—and the shorter their life expectancy.

Sexual identity

By compiling accounts of the sexual activity of eunuchs in history, we can begin to accept the position that ADT need not have asexuality as an invariant outcome. As Barbier (1996) suggests:

[C]astration could...render each man’s performance unpredictable, but it certainly did not destroy sexuality, as the many amorous adventures we know about serve to prove. How far did sexuality go in each case? Certainly...that will remain a secret for ever, but medically speaking it can be assumed that in the best case it was more or less normal.

Presumably, sexual desire among individuals, as with many other personal attributes, exists on a continuum. Some uncastrated men are far more sexually driven and aggressive, while others exist at the opposite end of the continuum. Just as uncastrated men are not always sexually charged, castrated men are not invariably asexual and lacking desire (Weinberger, Sreenivasan, Garrick, & Osran, 2005). As history suggests, to castrate is not to turn off a switch, which leaves a male obligatorily uninterested or unresponsive sexually. Libido is typically reduced, but not necessarily eliminated, in males who are androgen-deprived as adults. Barbier (1996) offers an explanation regard-

ing the variation in sexual desire that is observed from one castrate to another:

[I]t seems obvious that sexual appetite among the Castrati varied greatly from one man to the next and could be ‘voracious’ in one case and virtually non-existent in another. This depended in particular on the operation itself, on which it had been performed and at what age.

Whereas many studies of PCa patients report that approximately 80% of patients experience loss of sexual function after treatment (e.g., Potosky et al., 2002; Schover, 1993), that still leaves some 20% who could be sexually active (Schover, 1999). The proportion of males castrated to reduce recidivism for sexual crimes, who retain some ability to perform sexually, is estimated to range from 0% to 25% (Alexander, Gunn, Cook, Taylor, & Finch, 1993; reviewed comprehensively in Weinberger et al., 2005).

Age, motivation, and co-morbidity may be important variables for androgen-deprived PCa patients. One otherwise healthy PCa patient in his fifties, who had had radical prostatectomy and was on ADT, not only had orgasms but multiple orgasms (Gray & Klotz, 2004; a neuroanatomical mechanism for how this was possible is described in Warkentin et al., 2006).

A large part of individual eunuchs’ prowess, be it sexual or social, was rooted in their ability to transcend boundaries and occupy both male and female domains. Hester (2005) credits the social status of eunuchs to their being:

...perceived to be neither celibate or morally chaste, but...[a] gender formation whose ability [was] to navigate within and take on properties of both male/masculine and female/ feminine worlds (physically, sexually, socially, culturally, even politically)...

The general prejudice that contemporary society currently holds towards the castrated man is, as history tells us, unjustified. The capabilities and accomplishments of eunuchs in the past gives patients on ADT grounds for viewing themselves in a positive light, where they are not obligatorily socially impotent or sexually chaste.

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