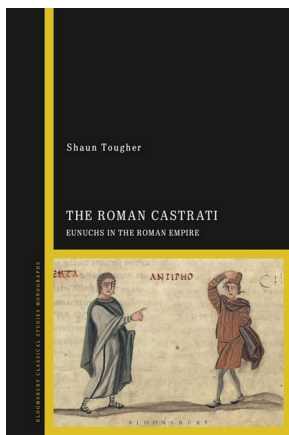


The Roman Castrati. Eunuchs in the Roman Empire

Tougher (S.) Pp. 217, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021. Paper, £28.99. (Cased, £85), ISBN: 978-1-350-18823-5. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/roman-castrati-9781350188235/>

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Tougher's work is, surprisingly, the first monograph devoted to Roman eunuchs throughout the empire's full history. It is a timely one given the current societal interest in gender – a crucial aspect in the study of eunuchs and one which is a near-constant presence in Tougher's book. He is, however, explicit that 'this is not a book about gender' (p.viii) and, beyond a brief comment that 'in the early twenty-first century we are more conscious than ever that... the male/female binary system does not suffice' (p.5), explicit discussion of

modern gender theory is almost entirely absent.

The Roman Castrati introduces the reader to a range of eunuchs, spanning the Republican period to late antiquity across seven chapters, in broadly chronological order, each devoted to a way in which 'eunuchs existed, were experienced, and utilised in the Roman Empire' (p.4).

Chapter 1 discusses eunuchs within the cult of the Great Mother, particularly with regard to Atis and the infamous self-castrated Galli. Tougher gives a full account of the cult's arrival in Rome and uses a good range of sources, most effectively Martial and Catullus, to analyse Roman attitudes to these figures, focusing in particular on their portrayal as feminine in both appearance and behaviour. In this context the omission of Ovid's discussion of the Galli's overly-pampered nature and 'soft hands' (*Ars am.* 1.507) seems a missed opportunity. Unfortunately, a single chapter cannot address this fascinating subject in the complete way that it deserves. There is little real analysis, for example, of the way in which Roman writers use the Galli to wrestle with questions about their own identity as both men and Romans. Overall, the chapter is a useful introduction to eunuchs within the cult and good notes throughout direct the reader to fuller treatments of the subject.

Chapter 2 addresses Terence's *Eunuch*. There is a detailed summary of the play, assuming no prior knowledge. It analyses the attitudes towards eunuchs demonstrated by the play and what we can learn about the audience's general understanding and experience of eunuchs. For students studying the A Level Greek Theatre module this chapter could offer an interesting extension.

Chapter 3 discusses eunuchs in the imperial court with specific reference to Sporus and Earinus. Tougher analyses the attitudes towards these figures and discusses attempts to recreate the realities

of their lives. This is a strong section which employs and questions the work of others well, particularly that of Vout, Champlin and Woods. Roman views of eunuchs as feminine are highlighted, while Domitian's outlawing of castration is effectively discussed.

Chapter 4 introduces the 'born eunuch' with particular reference to Favorinus of Arles, an individual 'who would now be categorised as intersex' (p.55). In contrast to the eunuchs previously discussed, Favorinus was neither a slave nor a religious self-castrate. Indeed he was socially distinguished and part of Tougher's reasoning for devoting a chapter to Favorinus is his feeling that as an intersex individual he 'has particular currency in the early twenty-first century' and that 'he deserves to regain his fame.' (p.71). This chapter would therefore be of particular interest to any students with an interest in gender. It ends with a useful appendix listing all the appearances and mentions of Favorinus by his student Aulus Gellius.

Chapter 5 discusses the court eunuchs of late antiquity, particularly under the emperor Diocletian. This chapter focuses particularly on the grand chamberlains Eusebius and Eutropius. Tougher effectively highlights the negative and unpleasant views of such men from not only antique sources but also twentieth century scholars. He makes good use of Hopkins' writings on the rise of eunuchs in the late antique court, although anyone interested in this subject would be better served by going directly to this work.

Chapter 6 discusses eunuchs in the context of early Christianity and the important distinction made between those who were castrated against their will or for medical reasons and those who willingly underwent the procedure. Tougher uses an excellent range of sources and this is one of the book's strongest sections. Nevertheless, there are areas in which deeper analysis would be welcome. It is mentioned, for example, that Nereus and Achilles were 'originally two soldiers who in the version of their passion told around the beginning of the sixth century by a Roman cleric have become transmogrified into eunuchs' (p.113), but there is no discussion of why this should have been done and what this tells us about the views of eunuchs among early Christians.

Chapter 7 looks at eunuchs in late antique military roles and in particular at the career of Narses, a eunuch and celebrated general of the sixth century. This is an important counter to the general assumptions that, politically, late antique eunuchs were limited to roles within the court. Tougher analyses the reasons for Narses' success and discusses the benefits for emperors of appointing eunuchs, who were disqualified from taking imperial power, to such roles. A highlight is the analysis of the ways in which successful eunuch generals were cast as masculine, but those who failed were depicted as feminine.

This timely monograph has much to recommend it. It offers a wide range of sources and subjects of study, with every reader likely to encounter an area about which they had previously known little. A particular strength of the work is its clear focus on individuals. Most chapters analyse a theme through close study of individuals, giving to (or rather reclaiming for) these eunuchs a sense of identity which has often been denied them. There is a real humanity about Tougher's treatment of his subjects throughout.

While having the potential to be useful for undergraduate students and beyond, there is little scope for this monograph to be used in a school setting. Its subject naturally involves regular discussion of sexual themes, making it suitable only for more mature students. Furthermore, there is extremely little crossover with the A Level curriculum and those subjects covered which are most likely to be of interest to students might be better introduced through other works.

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