Observations on the Castrati in Britain

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Paul F. Rice

Cambridge
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Publishing

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-9083-6
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-9083-0

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PREFACE

This book is a diverse collection of essays concerning castrato singers in Britain during the long eighteenth century. While the essays do not form a continuous narrative, they are connected in that they all relate to the castrato experience in Britain. These singers found themselves in extraordinary situations, much different from their professional and personal experiences on the Continent. Not only were the language and customs different, Italian opera had been a recent importation to Britain and was largely restricted to London. Furthermore, the castration of pre-pubescent boys to preserve their high singing voices had never been practised in Britain. As a result, the voice type was largely unknown there. The castrati must have experienced a terrible sense of isolation because there were never more than a handful of them in Britain at any given time. They were rare birds, indeed.

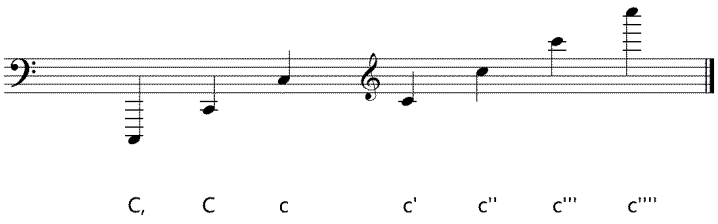
The castrati challenged the accepted views of masculinity and femininity (as varied as they may have been) by seemingly transcending traditional gender norms. While ostensibly male, the castrato did not have the secondary sexual characteristics of a post-pubescent male, was unable to reproduce, and had a singing voice that sounded in the female register. Many were taller than average or had other obvious physical differences. They challenged accepted gender roles, and thus created controversy and oftentimes disgust wherever they went.

I have cast my net widely for the subjects of these essays. The threat that a foreign art form posed to Britain is examined in the first chapter, as well as how such views coloured the reception accorded to these singers. The question of what constituted masculinity was a major social concern in eighteenth-century British conversations, especially during the second half of the century, as society grappled with new and differing views of masculinity and emerging feminist views of the rights of women in society. The role that the patriarchy played in warning women away from forming romantic attachments to the castrati is examined as well as the leadership roles that they achieved during their years in the country. An examination is made of Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci's use of specific operatic roles to create a personal brand. The evidence presented in the infamous Gooch divorce trials which implicated Venanzio Rauzzini as a seducer is reviewed. Finally, the social-political attitudes of the early nineteenth century are

examined in relation to the 1825 operatic performances by Giovanni Battista Velluti.

I happily acknowledge a grant from the Seed, Bridge and Multi-disciplinary Fund from the Office of the Vice-President Research at Memorial University, which assisted in this research. I am indebted to many institutions and individuals in the writing of this study. It was a privilege to discuss ideas with colleagues in various countries. I extend my sincere appreciation to Kathleen James-Cavan (Associate Professor, Department of English, University of Saskatchewan), Judith Slagle (Professor Emerita, Department of Literature and Language, East Tennessee State University), Ray Stephanson (Professor Emeritus, Department of English, University of Saskatchewan), Peter Sabor (Canada Research Chair in Eighteenth-Century Studies and Director of the Burney Centre, McGill University) and Simon McVeigh (Emeritus Professor of Music, Goldsmith, University of London).

The assistance of the librarians of the Queen Elizabeth II Library at Memorial University of Newfoundland was invaluable. I was given much appreciated assistance in my research by the British Library, Cardiff University Archives, and the University of Michigan Library. Stephanie Adams, Archives Assistant at the Bath Record Office, and Susan Fox MA, AMA, Collections Manager, Roman Baths and Pump Room, kindly answered my questions about materials once stored at the Bath Pump Room. Rosemary Hall, Special Collections Assistant at the National Library of Scotland, provided valuable information at a time when travel was not possible. I wish to acknowledge the wonderful storehouse of materials available on the Gale Cengage Databases; without this online resource, much of the research would not have been possible during a time of pandemic. Finally, I offer my thanks to Mr. Eric Taylor Escudero for his editorial insights. The Helmholtz pitch-classification has been used throughout this study:



CHAPTER ONE

A FEAR OF CONTINENTAL INFLUENCE

Throughout the eighteenth century, visiting castrato singers to Britain experienced variable receptions. Todd S. Gilman's comment that the castrati were "loathed as much as they were admired" is an apt description.[1] By contrast, the leading castrati on the Continent were often treated like royalty. Angus Heriot has written at length about how Senesino (Francesco Bernardi, 1686−1758) and Farinelli (Carlo Broschi, 1705−82) became operatic superstars, attracting the public attention reserved today for film stars and popular-music sensations.[2] For singers with an established reputation in Europe, the mixed nature of their British reception likely came as a surprise. This was certainly the case when Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci (*c*.1735−90) and Venanzio Rauzzini (1746−1810) sang outside of areas where the castrato voice was known. Rauzzini directed a prestigious concert series in Bath from 1780 until his death, and Tenducci was a featured soloist there until 1783. Bath, being a spa town, attracted the elite of British society, and Rauzzini's autumn concert series was a means of entertaining this audience for whom the castrato voice was nothing unusual.

Outside the rarefied atmosphere of the Bath concerts, however, troubles could arise. In March of 1782, both singers took part in performances of Handel's *Messiah* and *Judas Maccabæus* in Bristol. The *Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser* (April 2 and 3, 1782) reported on the frosty reception given to them, and the second of the two stories records that "the poor Signiors encountered a world of mortifications; the rude *Bristolians*, uncorrupted by the vicious taste of the times, looked upon them as objects of ridicule rather than admiration." It is telling that the author of the second report equates the castrato voice with "corruption" and a "vicious taste." This reaction is less surprising when one examines the history of distrust in Britain where eunuchs were concerned.

An Inheritance from Seventeenth-Century Drama

It was inevitable that depictions of eunuchs from the pre- and post-Restoration stage would colour public views concerning beings outside of the norms of the British male/female paradigm. Two examples will illustrate the point. In *Valentinian* (1610−14) by Beaumont and Fletcher, there are three eunuchs, with the character of Lycias being used by Valentinian in his plot to seduce the virtuous and married Lucina. Valentinian's line, "Fetch me a Eunuch/That never saw her yet; and you two see/The Court made like a Paradise" (Act 2, sc. 1), is telling.[3] Lycias is not summoned by name but by a character type, with the sole purpose of aiding and abetting a devious scheme. Thus, the eunuch is presented as someone associated with dishonesty. In 1677, John Dryden's *All for Love* (based on the same subject matter as Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*), includes the eunuch Alexas, who Cleopatra uses to secure her control over Antony.[4] Alexas has been described by Wallace Jackson as "insidious and darkly opportunistic" and "a product of Cleopatra's dissolute court and a greater force for evil than anything Shakespeare's Egypt yielded."[5] Once again, the eunuch is seen as a character type, this time a trouble maker who is skilled in disseminating misinformation and creating mischief. Drama, then, provided a set of available stereotypes about eunuchs that were readily transferable to the castrati who came from Italy to perform on British stages at a later time.

The first Castrati in Britain

The first recorded castrati appeared in London in the 1660s, but their names are shrouded in mystery as they are simply referred to as "eunuchs" in the surviving documentation. This likely indicates a bias against these individuals because of their altered physiognomy. A castrato was seen on the stage of the Duke of York's Theatre in Lincoln-Inn-Fields in July of 1661, when part two of Sir William Davenant's *The Siege of Rhodes* (1656) was presented. This was not strictly a revival because the work had been "recast and a sequel added, making it a two days entertainment."[6] Davenant's libretto was presented as an all-sung opera, comprising of a composite score with vocal music by Henry Lawes, Matthew Locke and Henry Cooke, and the instrumental music by Charles Coleman and George Hudson. The music is now lost. The novelty of this theatrical presentation was the inclusion of a castrato, likely Italian, and his presence may have been thought appropriate for an all-sung opera in the traditions of Continental Italian opera.[7] Unfortunately, John Downes, prompter at the

theatre, does not mention the singer in his *Roscius Anglicanus*, a primary source of information for the period. Samuel Pepys attended performances in July, noting that the unnamed castrato was unappreciated and hissed off the stage.[8] Still, the opera ran for twelve nights. This singer may not have been the first castrato singer to visit London, but he appears to have been the first to appear in a theatrical role there. While his performances prejudiced Pepys against the voice type to a degree initially, he did not reject it altogether.

When Charles II married Catherine of Braganza in 1661, the marriage contract allowed her to have a Catholic chapel in all of the royal residences.[9] She brought with her musicians from Portugal, some of whom left London by 1662 because their performances had found little favour with the English court. By 1666, Italian musicians had been imported for the queen's service, including at least two castrati.[10] These were likely the two eunuchs who Pepys encountered while out walking on February 16, 1666, their height having impressed him considerably ("two eunuches, so tall, that Sir T. Harvey said well that he believes they do grow large by being gelt as our oxen do").[11] On April 7, 1667, Pepys went to the Queen's Chapel to hear the Italian musicians. He retained his reservations about the castrato voice, stating that the sound was agreeably mellow, but that he had been equally satisfied by several women's voices. At the same time, Pepys was willing to concede that every nation had its distinctive sound in music and composition that was a part of its national identity and taste.[12] By 1668, Pepys was more receptive to the sound of the castrato voice. On October 14, 1668, he went to the King's Theatre to attend a performance of Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess*. On that occasion, he heard someone he identified as the French eunuch. The author records that he was content with both the performer's singing and acting.[13]

The so-called French eunuch that Pepys heard in Fletcher's play has subsequently been identified as Baldassare Ferri (1610−80) who may have been French born, but had spent much of his life in Italy. Other castrati visited during this period, some very well known. In 1687, Giovanni Francesco Grossi (better known as Siface) (1653-1697), came to London, where he attracted considerable attention. He was a guest singer in the chapel of James II at Whitehall and performed for the aristocracy with some regularity. Siface had achieved renown as an operatic and liturgical singer in major Italian centres before being sent by Duke Francesco d´Este, his patron, to London in 1687. Unfortunately, Siface's time in London was brief and he left the country that same year because of his dislike of the British climate. Pepys managed to entice the singer to give a private concert at his home on April 19, 1687, but only with considerable

difficulty. Siface, it seems, preferred to sing for the nobility. John Evelyn (1620−1706) attended the concert and praised "his holding out & delicatenesse in extending & losing a note with that incomparable softnesse & sweetness," but otherwise found him to be "a mere wanton, effeminate child; very Coy, & prowdly conceited."[14]

Peter Leech writes of the strong possibility that Giuseppe Sansone was at the Whitehall chapel of James II in 1688. Sansone had considerable performing experience and had been active in Rome during the 1680s.[15] Although documentation of the period is thin, there is little reason to doubt that castrato singers were attracted to the musical possibilities of London and came and went with some regularity. The possibility that Britain would return to being a Catholic country after two successive Catholic monarchs (Charles II and James II) further gave the appearance of future musical possibilities in Britain for Italian singers. The financial rewards were potentially considerable, and Leech records that Sansone's salary at the court of James II was considerably higher than had been offered to him by the Elector Palatine.[16] Such possibilities were soon to end, however. James II reigned only from February 6, 1685, until December 11, 1688, at which time he was deposed as a part of the Glorious Revolution. The birth of his son and heir in June of 1688 had posed too great a risk of the return of a Catholic dynasty. Rebellion followed and James II went into exile in France in 1688. The following year, the Protestant William of Orange and his wife Mary became joint monarchs in Britain. As a result, the possibility of Catholic chapels at court offering castrati lucrative employment ceased.

A Source of Wonderment and Confusion

From their earliest days in Britain, castrato singers were perceived as much by their physical differences as their musical talents. A loss of androgen development in the bodies of the castrati (testosterone, in particular) caused many of them to gain weight excessively. Some developed female-like breasts and a barrel chest, the latter likely a result of the extensive breathing exercises they practiced as students. Others suffered from macroskelia and developed elongated limbs, while many were taller than average. While generally male in appearance, the castrati did not develop the secondary sexual characteristics of males.[17] Furthermore, their voices remained in the pitch range of a child or an adult woman, although the voices of some castrati deepened with increased age. These considerations placed the castrati well outside the social and heteronormative constructs of British society. As a result, they were sometimes the cause of bewilderment and distrust.

There were many reasons for this kind of bewilderment. Only the wealthiest members of British society, who were able to travel to the Continent during the seventeenth century, might have heard castrati performing in the larger Catholic churches or in operatic performances. The voice type had become necessary in churches because of Saint Paul's edict which silenced women, thus causing problems for church choirs once complex polyphony had been introduced into the liturgy during the sixteenth century.[18] Who would sing the highest lying lines in polyphonic music? The range of most falsetto voices did not encompass the entire soprano range. While many boy sopranos had the notes, they had a relatively short "shelf life" before their voices broke and they were no longer useful. Castrati were more viable because their careers potentially could be much longer. These voices could be heard in the larger Italian churches by the mid-sixteenth century. By the seventeenth century, the castrato voice was deemed unexceptional, and the singers were accepted as a part of the social fabric of Italian society. Roger Freitas's study of the castrato Atto Melani (1626−1714) reveals that no fewer than four of the seven sons in the Melani family were castrated so that they could pursue musical careers.[19]

For many in the modern era, the castration of children is unthinkable, and the practice on such a scale within a single family invites the vilification of Atto Melani's parents. Freitas, however, argues that the father was "helping his children ascend by the very normal method of arranging their education and social connections. He was not a man forced into an extreme act . . . he was equipping them with uncommon skills that could appeal to future patrons."[20] These "potential patrons" were members of the nobility and the church; the era of the operatic castrato earning large salaries in public theatres had not yet begun when Atto Melani's high voice was preserved.

By comparison, the Anglican Church used countertenors and boy sopranos in their choirs. The idea that British families might have their sons castrated *en masse* to provide singers for the Church was unthinkable. As noted above, a few castrato singers visited Britain during the second half of the seventeenth century, but their visits were brief and sporadic. It was not until the eighteenth century, which saw the introduction of Italian opera in London, that the castrato voice became a regular presence - a full century after the development of opera on the Italian peninsula. Those hundred years of earlier history had given the Italian people the opportunity to grow accustomed to the concept of an entertainment where people sang their dialogue rather than speaking it, and where the principal male characters sang in the pitch range of women because their high voices had

been purposely preserved prior to puberty. By contrast, many in Britain found the concept of the castrato to be disturbing; as a society, the British had never had the chance to grow accustomed to this voice type in previous centuries.

For those who had not had the experience of attending Italian opera performances in London during the eighteenth century, the first exposure to a castrato could be unsettling. This situation was well captured by Tobias Smollett in his novel *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771), where the character of Lydia Melford, a country girl making her first trip to London, commented on the performance of music at the Rotunda of the Ranelagh Gardens: "There I heard the famous Tenducci, a thing from Italy−It looks for all the world like a man, though they say it is not. The voice to be sure is neither man's nor woman's; but it is more melodious than either and it warbled so divinely that, while I listened, I really thought myself in paradise."[21] The references to the singer as a "thing" and an "it" are cringe-worthy, but they speak to the levels of confusion that existed in British audiences when confronted with a being who did not conform to traditional societal norms.

The Introduction of Italian Opera in London

The visits of Italian castrati were too sporadic to permit the regular staging of Italian opera in London during the seventeenth century. Further complicating that possibility was the lack of British singers who could sing roles in Italian. As a result, Italian-style, all-sung, dramatic music had to be translated into English, so that the native-born singers and the audience could cope. The first of these experiments was *Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus*, produced at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, on January 16, 1705. This opera was based on a work that had been produced in Bologna in 1677, to a text by Tomaso Stanzani and music by Petronio Franceschini. For the London production, the libretto was translated and adapted into English by Peter Anthony Motteux, and set to music by Thomas Clayton. Whether or not his score was original or, as is more likely, a pastiche made by Clayton has been much debated. Charles Burney's examination of the opera found the translation of the original libretto to be "wretched" and the score to be "absurd."[22] The opera attracted audiences, however, and was even revived the next year. A taste for all-sung dramatic entertainment had begun to develop.[23]

Arsinoe was followed by *The Loves of Ergaso* (April 9, 1705), *The Temple of Love* (March 7, 1706) and *Camilla* (March 30, 1706). These were all-sung and performed in English, although a change to this practice

was introduced to *Camilla* when the castrato Valentino Urbani (*fl.*1690–1722), better known as Valentini, joined the company in December of 1707.[24] The theatrical scene into which Valentini entered was one of considerable turmoil and intrigue. Christopher Rich (1657–1714) had managed the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane (along with the Dorset Garden Theatre), since 1693. Rich's autocratic manner infuriated some of his leading actors and, led by Thomas Betterton (1635–1710), they defected to a theatre in Lincoln's Inn Fields where Betterton had obtained a patent. Betterton subsequently moved his troupe closer to Rich's enterprise in 1705 when the company transferred to a newly built theatre in the Haymarket. Known as the Queen's Theatre (later, the King's Theatre), the structure had been designed by John Vanbrugh to be an opera house. In 1706, Vanbrugh leased his theatre to Owen Swiney (1676−1754), who was Christopher Rich's agent. In the process, Rich gained control over the three London theatres.

All should have been smooth sailing, but Rich's integrity was suspect and the Lord Chamberlain, Henry Grey, 1st Duke of Kent, intervened on December 31, 1707, ordering all of the actors back to the Drury Lane theatre and restricting the Queen's Theatre to the production of opera. Swiney took the lease on the Queen's Theatre, breaking with Rich's management, and thereby gaining a monopoly over the production of opera in London.[25] Valentini had been in London less than a year before the city's theatrical world was turned upside-down. He had originally been hired by John Vanbrugh, but now found himself working under new management with a company that was having to redefine itself. This must have been a matter of some confusion for the singer because his English was very limited at the time.

One of the more confusing elements for Valentini must have been the need for his operatic roles to be sung in Italian, while the rest of the cast sang in English. Bilingual performances remained a necessity for several years due to the lack of English singers who could sing convincingly in Italian. Finally, on January 19, 1710, the pastiche *Almahide* was presented totally in Italian. The impresario J.J. Heidegger still found it necessary to apologize to the more nationalist contingent of his audiences in the preface to the libretto for *Almahide*:

> Several People of Quality, and Encouragers of the Opera's, having found fault with the Absurdity of those Scenes, where the Answers are made in *English*, to those that sing in *Italian*, and in *Italian* to those that recite in *English*; and it being impossible to have the whole Opera perform'd in *English*, because the chief Actors would not be able to perform their parts in our Language: I hope I shall be pardoned, if I have made all the Parts in

> Italian, 'Tis a Language with more Vowels, softer, and more adapted to Music than any other; besides, for the convenience of those who do not understand it, I have translated the Opera litterally [sic] on the other side of the Book. I must only beg their Favour in making Allowances for the Italianisms, and the flatness of a literal Translation, when it is known that all Originals suffer, when Translated.[26]

Valentini's voice was not strong, however, and there were those who believed that he could not secure the future of Italian opera on the London stage. Valentini put a brave face on the situation, and suggested in 1708 that Nicola Francesco Leonardo Grimaldi (1673−1732), better known as Nicolini, should be invited to London.[27] Although both Nicolini and Valentini were judged to be excellent actors, Nicolini's worth as the better singer is reflected in his salary. Vanbrugh writes: "Allow a Thousand pounds for Nicolini, to stay here two Winters; That is, to be here in Sep^{t}: And at Liberty to go away again the May come twelve month after. A Thousand pounds, I think makes about 1200 Pistols; which undoubtedly he may Carry away clear in his Pocket; for he can't fail of Advantages otherways Sufficient to defray his Expences over and over."[28] This was a very great sum of money in 1708, something that would have been increased by the rewards of his benefit evenings, the first of which was said to have netted the singer 800 guineas on January 19, 1709.[29] Vanbrugh feared that Valentini would have a change of heart where Nicolini was concerned, and he writes that "I have good reason to believe that Valentini (tho' he pretends to wish for Nicolini's Coming) will underhand do all he can to discourage him for he has link'd himself with Mrs [Catherine] Tofts (who is wonderfully improv'd) and in order to make a great bargain for themselves for next Winter, will certainly play some trick, to hinder both Nicolini and a Woman from coming over; if y^{r} Ldship don't Apprise 'em ont."[30] If any tricks were played, they appear not to have worked and, in fact, the two castrati appear to have been cordial colleagues.

Charles Burney records that Nicolini was a "great singer, and still greater actor." His voice "was at first a *soprano*, but afterwards descended into a fine *contralto*."[31] Both castrati proved to be valuable assets to Handel, with Valentini playing the *secondo uomo* to Nicolini's *primo* in several works, beginning with *Rinaldo* in 1711. Charles Burney believed that Handel relished in pushing Nicolini to his limits: "his part in this opera [*Amadigi di Gaula*, 1715] must have drawn out all his powers, both as a singer and actor."[32] It must be noted that Burney's accounts are based on second-hand information because he never witnessed performances by

either singer. Burney was born in 1726, long after both singers had left Britain.

Reactions to Italian Opera

Once the rumours spread that Italian opera would be introduced to the London stage, alarms over its damaging effects were quickly sounded. John Dennis (1658−1734) was an influential critic who penned *An Essay on the Opera's* [sic] *after the Italian Manner . . . with some Reflections on the Damage which they may bring to the Publick* (1706); this was written within a year of the production of *Arsinoe*. Dennis followed this with an *Essay Upon Publick Spirit* followed in 1711. In part, these essays were the reaction of a playwright fearing that a foreign art form would suppress native drama. Dennis was a strong proponent of the style of opera composed by Henry Purcell; furthermore, he was the author of nine dramatic works, several with music by John Eccles.[33] As a playwright, he had much to lose should Italian opera take hold in London.

In 1706, Dennis warned the British public of the perceived dangers of Italian opera: "Italian Opera, another Entertainment, which is about to be establish'd in the room of Plays, is a Diversion of more pernicious consequence, than the most licentious Play that ever has appear'd upon the stage."[34] The author feared that the sensual qualities of Italian music would subjugate intellect to sensuality, resulting in reason being sacrificed to emotional instability: "pleasure of Sense being too much indulged, makes Reason cease to be a Pleasure, and by consequence is contrary both to public and private Duty."[35] Furthermore, "as soft and delicious Musick by soothing the Senses, and making a Man too much in Love with himself, makes him too little fond of the publick, so by emasculating and dissolving the Mind, it shakes the very foundations of Fortitude, and so is destructive of both branches of public Spirit."[36]

By the time of his second essay, Dennis likely realized that Italian opera was no passing fad in London. He took a more general approach in 1711, railing against luxury and the imitation of foreign arts and fashions. Here, Dennis tried to raise fears concerning Catholic dogma and sodomy, a practice that Dennis believe to prevalent in the Italian-speaking regions.[37] Dennis writes that "the Ladies, with humblest Submission, seem to mistake their Interest a little in encouraging *Opera's*; for the more the men are enervated and emasculated by the softness of the *Italian* Musick, the less will they care for them, and the more for one another."[38] Thomas McGeary also points to the author's Whig politics, his support of a constitutional monarchy, and support of male-dominated societal norms as

reasons for his distrust of Italian opera.[39] Such entertainments were "feminine" and thus threatened the traditions of the patriarchy, potentially weakening the traditional leaders of society through an interest in sensuality and luxury. These concerns were not new. Throughout the seventeenth century, questions about appropriate models of British masculinity had been raised. In part, these discussions may have resulted from the increased travel to the Continent, which had made wealthy Britons increasingly aware of luxury and given them a desire to copy their Continental peers. Dennis saw the introduction of Italian opera in London as another step in the corrupting influence of the Continent.

These fears were to remain a constant for some throughout the eighteenth century. Frederick C. Petty draws attention to a published essay from 1770, "An Essay upon the unfortunate Charms and Power of Music". The author gives his name as Andrew Marvell and dates it as November 7, 1769, at Elysium. Given that the celebrated Andrew Marvell had died a century earlier, the signature is a pseudonym for someone who believed himself to be channelling the author's spirit from the beyond.

> . . . then did the Romans lose their laurels, and suffered their courage, manhood, and virility to be taken from them, to make singers; then did they dwindle into squeaking *Italian* eunuchs, and bowed their necks to the rough, unpolished, *unmusicall'd Goth* and *Vandal.* Hardy dogs, unbitten by that damned spider of Italy, the *Tarrantula*.—O! Hapless ENGLAND; thou who gavest laws to the world, declareth this *italick* madness. Will not the soft transporting voice of our beauteous countrywomen, captivate the soul, without raking amongst the nerveless sons of Italy for eunuchs![40]

The author uses the fears attendant to the country being at war (the first Anglo-Mysore War: 1767–1769), coupled with cultural xenophobia, to conclude that music has the ability to soften men and render the aristocracy (the traditional leaders of the country) ineffectual:

> If we must have music, let it be martial, let it be calculated to stimulate the soul, rather than enervate, relax and effeminate! Effeminate! 'tis well if it goes no further; for, if our men only retain the courage of *our women*, we yet will beat the French. […] Instead of the lives of heroes, the exercise of the chace, and the various noble studies taught in these kingdoms, we find their company is resigned to the Italian *spunges*; and the furniture of the rooms changed to a harpsichord, guittar, flute, fiddle, and a pile of sonatas.[41]

The fear of cultural contamination having a softening effect on British men is particularly evident in the essay, with music the agent of subversion.

There is little that is new in the argument, only the author's view that women appear to have more courage than the effeminate men of the country.

Fearing the Feminized Man

At the time when John Dennis was writing, the ordering of British society was hierarchical. Social and political leadership was expected to come from the higher levels of this hierarchy, with primacy given to the king. On the surface, the gender roles of men and women during the seventeenth century might appear to have been fairly static, with men being cast in the dominant warrior stereotype and women as their subservient helpmates. This kind of generalization is not accurate on several levels. Firstly, it does not represent the various socio-economic strata in British society. Secondly, the perceptions of masculinity and femininity were in considerable flux by the end of the seventeenth century and certainly well into the next. Admittedly, women were greatly restricted in their lives throughout both centuries. They were generally viewed in society as lesser beings than men, although superior to children.[42] Once married, women could not own property, they were not enfranchised and they were expected to fulfill their duties as wives without question. For genteel young women, this included becoming "graceful companions" to the men they would marry in addition to having children and managing the home.[43] For women of a lower socioeconomic situation, a far starker reality could face them and their very survival often depended upon finding a husband. They could never hope to become only a "graceful companion;" they would have to undertake physical labour as much as their husbands. Regardless of their social and economic status, women were inculturated to be subservient to men. Emily Sunstein draws attention to a conduct manual for women by Thomas Marriott. Written in verse, *Female Conduct* (1759) underscores the prevailing gender norms from the open pages. Marriage is the appropriate goal of all women, and thereafter to please their partner.

Man, domed by Birth, to Labor, Care, and Strife,
With various Ills, must struggle, thro' his Life;
In Wedlock, to acquire a proper Mate,
Is the chief Care of Woman's happier State.
PLAUTILLA, learn the Art, our Sex to please,
By Genius prompted, you will learn with Ease.
Of wanton Love, let *Ovid* teach the Art,
To gain a Husband, I the Skill impart.

> I too teach Wives, to please the Mate, they gain,
> Not low the Science, nor the Office mean.[44]

This conduct manual contains similar sentiments throughout its many pages. By the end of the eighteenth century, some women rebelled against such notions. Educated women, such as Elizabeth Montagu (1720−1800) and Elizabeth Carter (1717−1806) paved the way forward for a change in thinking that is perhaps best represented in the work of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759−97), a philosopher whose feminist beliefs shocked many of her peers.

At the same time that some women were challenging the patriarchal tenets, there were those questioning the kind of leadership that aristocratic men had provided British society during the previous hundred years. Indeed, what constituted masculinity was at the core of these concerns. The evolution of masculine behaviours in Britain is especially complex and has challenged contemporary critics as they have attempted to plot its course. The studies of Randolph Trumbach and Philip Carter have been influential in this area.[45] Both authors are much concerned over the development of British masculinity during a time when social behaviours based on politeness and gentlemanly conduct came to be promoted. Wealth and aristocratic breeding were expected to bring forth refinement of conduct and the visible means of projecting status. Such attributes ran counter, however, to the "alpha male" image expected of leaders, especially those in the military. Further complicating this issue was that the lower social orders often wanted to copy their aristocratic superiors so that they could develop the necessary social skills to compete in polite society. Manuals were published during the eighteenth century to provide just that kind of instruction, David Fordyce's *Dialogues Concerning Education* being but one example.[46] One might not be a member of the *beau monde* or be able to afford a Grand Tour to the Continent, but an understanding of refined manners and appropriate social conduct was necessary for success in the professions.[47]

The increasing interest in visible refinement and sartorial lavishness amongst the aristocracy, itself perceived as a foreign influence, was a concern expressed in the theatrical character of the "fop." Although the word can be traced back to Shakespeare, it took on a different meaning following the success of George Etherege's play *The Man of Mode, or, Sir Fopling Flutter* (1676).[48] Thereafter, to be called a fop was a criticism of a man's concern for extreme luxury and fashion. Such a person was viewed as weak and foolish in the extreme, having been feminized by the elaborate finery that he wore. Subsequent authors were quick to use the fop type in their plays. Two examples will suffice: Aphra Behn's *The*

Town Fop was published in 1677, and John Vanbrugh introduced the character of Lord Foppington in his *The Relapse* of 1696. Etherege's character brought with him an added layer of political concern that persisted well into the next century. H.M. Scott records that Britain was at war with France (and sometimes Spain) for over half of the time between 1688 and 1815; such long periods of conflict evoked strong feelings of patriotism and distrust for those who flaunted French tastes and fashions.[49] Although only a secondary character in Etherege's play, Flutter is described as an "Imitation of the People of Quality in *France*."[50] From the outset, the fop was embedded with a political connotation, one that announced that "French" foppishness would serve foreign needs as it undermined the strength of British men. The level of distrust that the character type evoked is given voice by the character of Squire Tyrrel in William Godwin's novel, *Caleb Williams* (1794): "I do hate a Frenchified fop with all my soul."[51] While the fop character did not initially carry with it any sodomitical overtones in the theatre, Laurence Senelick has observed that real-life fops ultimately were absorbed into the general view of the homosexual, along with figures such as the molly (gay man) and the queen (effeminate man).[52]

A subsequent type of foppishness might be mentioned in passing, that of the macaroni movement. During the 1770s, some privileged young men adopted Italian manners and customs as their model, often following their visits to the Italian peninsula as a part of a Grand Tour. For those who remembered the writings of John Dennis, their devotion paid to Italian culture would have been a red flag. Dennis had suggested that Italy was the birthplace of sodomy, raising the spectre of a homosexual subculture thriving amongst the very individuals from whom the leaders of society were expected to emerge. The members of the macaroni set were highly visible because they affected striking costumes while enjoying a Dionysian lifestyle in public places. They were called "macaronis" after their habit of describing things then in high fashion as being "very macaroni." Their behaviour was often affected, and Amelia Rauser notes that "the figure of the macaroni became a catalyst for debate over how Britons could heed the siren call of luxurious consumption, individualism, and cultural sophistication" without exceeding the bounds of fashion.[53] For many, this group had transgressed more than the bounds of fashion because they appeared to be disinterested in traditional masculine pursuits and were slaves to foreign cultural tastes. In 1770, the *Oxford Magazine* published an article in which the alleged ungendered nature of the macaroni set is strikingly similar to comments that had been raised about the castrati: "There is indeed a kind of animal, neither male nor female, a

thing of the neuter gender, lately started up among us. *It* is called a *Macaroni*. *It* talks without meaning, *it* smiles without pleasantry, *it* eats without appetite, *it* rides without exercise, *it* wenches without passion."[54] One is left to wonder if the author believed that such a creature could even be human. The reasons for the fears that surround these comments are numerous; however, they were exacerbated by fear of invasion and foreign subjugation in times of war. Adopting the visual attributes of Continental culture − be it French or Italian − was seen as a sign of weakness and emasculation.

William Beckford as a "Feminized Man"

While the singing of the castrati was often appreciated, the fears that the castrato voice could feminize British males never diminished throughout the eighteenth century. Perhaps no greater example of a man who became completely under the spell of a castrato was William Beckford (1760−1844), who came to idolize Gaspare Pacchierotti (1740−1821). Beckford was born into a wealthy family; his father had twice been a Lord Mayor of London, and owned sugar plantations in Jamaica as well as a large estate in Wiltshire. As his father's only legitimate son, all of this came to the young Beckford in trust when his father died in 1770. The family's wealth permitted the child to be educated at home where he developed interests in painting, architecture, music and literature. From an early age, Beckford also demonstrated an interest in sensual pleasures.[55] Beckford is often referred to as a proto-Romantic – both the events of his life and his artistic output invite comparisons to Lord Byron (1788−1824) and Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792−1822). Beckford's writings, however, have never been held in the same regard as those of Byron and Shelley. Elinor Shaffer believes this to be the result of too great a critical focus on the more salacious elements of Beckford's biography:

> The elements of legend are in place: spoilt child, mad fantasist, spendthrift 'lord', demonic solitary, failed visionary. Beckford became an 'eccentric', at best an 'English eccentric', whose dangerous and dark side could be comfortably accommodated and his oddities trivialized. His career as a writer has only barely survived the prurience, condescension, envy, malice and snobbery roused by these 'facts'.[56]

As would be expected of someone of Beckford's wealth and breeding, he undertook a Grand Tour of the Continent, beginning in June of 1780. Beckford was impatient to arrive on Italian soil; Venice, Naples, and

Rome all intrigued him, but it was in Lucca where he found his greatest happiness. In a letter to Fanny Burney on October 1, 1780, Beckford writes "Of an Evening I walk on the ramparts with Pacchierotti, which are the only ornaments Lucca has to boast." Elsewhere in this letter, the complex nature of Beckford's emotional makeup is revealed:

> I shall be contented with such commendations slight as they are. If ever you see ambition beginning to fire my bosom, quench the flame, and continually repeat that it is better to be meanly happy than illustriously miserable. I have never greater need to be reminded of this belief, than during some moments of Pacchierotti's declamation, which breathes such exalted heroism, that, forgetting my peaceful schemes, I start up, grow restless, stride about and begin to form ambitious projects. Musick raises before me a host of phantoms which I pursue with eagerness. My blood thrills in my veins, its whole current is changed and agitated, I can no longer command myself, and whilst the frenzy lasts would be willingly devoted to destruction.[57]

As Simon During has observed, the Grand Tour might not have been in Beckford's best interests because it "gave the young Beckford the opportunity further to develop the sensibility that his family had begun to fear."[58] That Beckford writes that the sensuous nature of music caused him to lose control over himself is a very telling comment.

Upon Beckford's return to Britain, just prior to his twenty-first birthday in 1781, he must have been overjoyed that Pacchierotti would be returning to the King's Theatre as *primo uomo* from November 17, 1781, to June 15, 1782. Beckford organized two parties to celebrate gaining his majority and control over his vast wealth, both at his father's mansion in Wiltshire known as Fonthill Splendens. The first was a formal affair which featured a variety of entertainments. Pacchierotti figured prominently in these entertainments, taking part in the cantata, *Il tributo*, composed by Venanzio Rauzzini. Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci and Rauzzini also sang in the work, and this appears to be the only time that the three great castrati sang together.

A surviving letter from Beckford to Pacchierotti asking that he spend the summer with him in Wiltshire was written in Paris on March 12, 1781. It does little to dispel the image of Beckford being under the great singer's spell:

> I think of settling at Fonthill in June—and could you but do the same, I should cease to think myself unhappy. You will find my attachment invariable. It is more than a Day we have passed together, and every hour increased my good opinion. If you act wisely, my dear Friend, if you value

> an existence which does so much honour to Humanity—if, in short, you have any regard for me−take a firm resolution−and before two months elapse, let me repeat to you over and over again−how sincerely I am
>
> Your most affectionate and obliged Servant[59]

Earlier, Beckford had written to Fanny Burney, stating that "You see how perfectly our modern Timotheus is my sovereign."[60]

During records that Beckford had embraced a "demonic twist" while in Italy. This element in his nature was to emerge strongly in the second party in Fonthill organized the following Christmas - a far more private affair during which Beckford and Louisa Beckford, wife of Peter Beckford (William's cousin), dabbled in sorcery, black magic and Satanism.[61] These concerns were beginning to dominate Beckford's psyche and similar interests are found in his Gothic novel *Vathek* (1781), which deals with ghosts, demons and the supernatural world. Beckford's world came crashing down on him in 1784 when he was accused of sexual impropriety with William Courtenay, the sixteen-year-old son of Beckford's friends, in their family home of Powderham Castle. Whether or not Beckford had actually seduced the boy was never proved. However, the accusation was eventually reported in the press, and was generally believed. An earlier application made on his behalf for a peerage was withdrawn, and Beckford and his wife fled to Switzerland in 1785, where she died in 1786 after giving birth to their second child. He returned to Britain the following year, but soon left for foreign lands, only returning to Britain in 1796.[62]

I do not suggest that Beckford's alleged seduction of the sixteen-year-old Courtenay in 1784 was the result of his enchantment with Pacchierotti's voice; surviving evidence shows that the bisexual Beckford had been enamoured by the boy since the latter was eleven, two years before Beckford left for Italy. Rather, it seems more likely that Beckford was greatly influenced by luxury and sensual indulgence associated with foreign culture even before his Continental Tour, and his subsequent association with Pacchierotti had only exacerbated these tendencies. Beckford had become the ultimate feminized man - someone who would want ambition beaten down in him, rather than aspire to any form of civic leadership. He had become the representation of John Dennis's greatest fears from the beginning of the century.

The fear that the aristocracy had become unfit to fulfill traditional leadership roles was particularly strong during the second half of the eighteenth century. This concern was exacerbated by the conflict between Britain and France that raged over three Continents during the Seven Years' War (1756−63). Gerald Newman notes that there was "an emergent

nationalistic philosophy, anti-French and anti-aristocratic, linked to sharpening moral, social and historical concerns, as well as aesthetic and commercial ones."[63] Newman points to published satires in which soldiers weakened by foreign luxuries no longer wanted to fight for their country, but remain in their comfortable civilian homes.[64] The taste for luxury would thus make the country vulnerable to foreign attack. The *Morning Herald* (May 15, 1786) gave voice to such fears in a review of a performance by the castrato Giovanni Rubinelli:

> On Saturday night the opera was the scene of confusion and distress, that no serious opera, with all its *cantabile* faintings, rapes, battles and murders ever produced. On the drawing up of the curtain, it was not a Roman legion in marshal array that caught the eye. No, it was a corps of the sons of feathers and fashion—British bucks—British beaus; armed with *wanhee* walking sticks, knapsacks, snuff boxes and scented waters; all of whom were determined to keep their ground and be *ravished* by the *enchanting* Rubinelli.

The presence of audience members on the stage likely proved to be a distraction to the performance, yet it was not the disruption of the drama that is criticized in the newspaper, but the presence of young men of London society (and its future leaders) displaying their scented waters in the most visible part of the theatre. That they had chosen this part of the theatre so that they could be visibly "ravished" by the castrato voice is italicized in the account.

If the effect of the sensuous luxury of Italian opera was a potential danger to men, its affect on women was considered to be equally pernicious. Should the siren voice of the castrato make women more interested in castrati than in "normal" males, the patriarchal ordering of British society would crumble. As a result, great pains were undertaken to paint such romantic attachments in negative terms. This situation will be discussed in chapter two, "The Castrati and Women."

Notes

[1] Todd S. Gilman, "The Italian (Castrato) in London," 50.
[2] Angus Heriot, *The Castrati in Opera*, 67−69 and 91−110.
[3] Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, *The Tragedy of Valentinian*, 18.
[4] In Shakespeare's play, it is the character Mardian who is identified as a eunuch.
[5] Wallace Jackson, "Dryden's Emperor and Lillo's Merchant," 537.
[6] Eric W. White, *History of English Opera*, 82.
[7] Edward J. Dent writes extensively on the *Siege of Rhodes*, but omits any reference to the presence of the castrato in the 1661 revival. *Foundations of English Opera*, 43−77.
[8] Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, 2:130−31.
[9] Peter Leech, "Musicians in the Catholic chapel of Catherine of Braganza, 1662−92," 571.
[10] Ibid., 575−78.
[11] Pepys, *Diary*, 8:65.
[12] Ibid., 8:154.
[13] Ibid., 9:329.
[14] E.S. de Beer, ed. *Diary of John Evelyn*, 4:544.
[15] Peter Leech, "Music and Musicians in the Catholic chapel of James II at Whitehall," 384.
[16] Ibid.
[17] These issues are examined by Peter W. Vogelaar, "Castrati in Western Art Music, Part 1: Historical Perspective and Musical Importance," and Part 2: "Selection and Musical Training: Physical and Psychosocial Implications," 94−99 and 146−54, respectively. See also, Enid Rhodes Peschel and Richard E. Peschel, "Medical Insights into the Castrati in Opera," 578−83.
[18] First Corinthians 14:34.
[19] Roger Freitas, *Portrait of a Castrato*, 25.
[20] Ibid., 26.
[21] Tobias Smollett, *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker*, 1:194.
[22] Charles Burney, *General History of Music*, 4:199−201. I. Walsh published the arias from the score: *Songs in the Opera call'd Arsinoe, Queen of Cyprus* (1706). This edition contains all 37 of the vocal pieces in the opera, as well as the overture. An earlier edition had contained only a selection of the music. The score makes the claim that Clayton composed the music.
[23] The early years of all-sung dramatic entertainment in London are examined in greater detail by White, *History of English Opera*, 137−52.
[24] Valentini's debut date in London is contested. Milhous and Hume assign a conjectural period of January 1708 to the documents outlining Valentini's hiring by Vanbrugh. *Vice Chamberlain Coke's Theatrical Papers*, 61−62. This appears to be too late because the castrato appeared in *Camilla* on December 6, 1707.
[25] White, *History of English Opera*, 143. Things did not work well for Rich subsequently. He quarreled with actors and interfered in their contractual rights. Ultimately, Rich was expelled from the theatre's management. Ibid., 156.

[26] John Jacob Heidegger, *Almahide. Opera*, [iv]. It should be noted that the principal roles were all sung by foreign singers (Nicolini, Valentini, Giuseppe Cassani, Margherita de L'Epine and Isabella Giradeau), while only the three secondary roles were undertaken by British singers.
[27] Vanbrugh writes that Valetini was "mighty earnest with me to get Nicolini over tho' he knows he so much exceeds him; but he wou'd fain See Opera flourish here, and is mightely [sic] pleas'd with the Civill Treatment he meets with." *The Complete Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, 4:17.
[28] Vanbrugh to the Earl of Manchester (May, 11, 1708). *Complete Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, 4:21. Also quoted by Milhous and Hume, *Coke's Theatrical Papers*, 106−07.
[29] Milhous and Hume, *Coke's Theatrical Papers*, 118.
[30] *Complete Works of Sir John Vanbrugh*, 4:21. The reference to a female singer may have been to Signora Maria Santini, but she was not engaged. *Coke's Theatrical Papers*, 84.
[31] Burney, *General History of Music*, 4:207.
[32] Ibid., 4:255.
[33] Dennis's contributions to drama are discussed by Kathryn Lowerre, *Music and Musicians on the London Stage,* 96−109.
[34] John Dennis, *An Essay on the Opera's after the Italian Manner*, [v].
[35] Ibid., [iii].
[36] Ibid., 9.
[37] Todd S. Gilman, "The Italian (Castrato) in London," 50−51.
[38] John Dennis, *An Essay upon Publick Spirit*. 25.
[39] Thomas McGeary, "'Warbling Eunuchs': Opera, Gender, and Sexuality on the London Stage," 4−5.
[40] Andrew Marvel (pseud.), "An Essay upon the unfortunate Charms and Power of Music," 41−42.
[41] Ibid., 42.
[42] Emily W. Sunstein, *A Different Face; The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft*, 18.
[43] Ibid., 23.
[44] Thomas Marriott, *Female conduct*, 15−16. The publication appears to have been quite successful and there were subsequent editions in 1760 and 1775.
[45] Randolph Trumbach, *Heterosexuality and the Third Gender in Enlightenment London*, (1998) and Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain: 1660-1800. Women and Men in History* (2001). Karen Harvey examined the changing critical views on the development of British masculinity up to 2005. She points to key interpretative differences in this process between the views of Randolph Trumbach and Philip Carter. "The History of masculinity, circa 1650−1800," 296−311.
[46] David Fordyce, *Dialogues Concerning Education*, 2 vols. London: 1745 and 1748.
[47] These ideas are discussed in considerable detail by Lawrence E. Klein, "Politeness for plebes. Consumption and social identity in early eighteenth-century England," 362−82.

[48] The word is also to be found in Shakespeare's *King Lear* (Act 1, sc. 2): "Go to the creating a whole tribe of fops, Got 'tween asleep and wake?" Shakespeare's meaning appears to be "foolish," as demonstrated in the Fool's song in Act 1, sc. iv: "Fools had ne'er less wit in a year; For wise men are grown foppish/They know not how their wits to wear/Their manners are so apish."
[49] H.M. Scott, "Britain's Emergence as a European Power, 1688-1815," 434.
[50] George Etherege, *The Man of Mode*, or *Sir Fopling Flutter*, 19.
[51] William Godwin, *Caleb Williams*, 132.
[52] Laurence Senelick, "Mollies or Men of Mode?" 36−37.
[53] Amelia Rauser, "Hair, Authenticity, and the self-Made Macaroni," 101.
[54] *The Oxford Magazine* 4 (June, 1770), 228.
[55] For further biographic information, see Anita McConnell, "Beckford, William Thomas (1760–1844), writer and art collector" in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography.* 23 Sep. 2004. https://www-oxforddnb-com.
[56] Shaffer, "Composing and decomposing the corpus of William Beckford," 261.
[57] Lewis Melville, *The Life and Letters of William Beckford of Fonthill*, 91−92.
[58] Simon During, "Beckford in Hell: An episode in the History of Secular Enchantment," 272.
[59] Melville, *Life and Letters*, 104.
[60] Ibid., 92−93. It is not clear whether Beckford refers to Timotheus of Miletus or the musicians of the same name in the court of Alexander the Great.
[61] Malcolm Jack, *William Beckford: An English Fidalgo*, 18.
[62] McConnell, "Beckford, William Thomas," 6. The accusation sexual impropriety was brought forward by William Courtenay's uncle, someone who Elinor Shaffer claims was a political enemy of Beckford. "Composing and decomposing the corpus of William Beckford," 256.
[63] Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism; A Cultural History: 1740−1830*. 73.
[64] Ibid., 130.

CHAPTER TWO

THE CASTRATI AND WOMEN

The British patriarchy of the eighteenth century went to great lengths to portray the castrati in a negative light. This was accomplished by published essays, stories planted in newspapers, and visual caricatures, all designed to present these singers as deceitful, abnormal and even monstrous. Should the implied warnings about the castrati be ignored, individuals could find themselves the brunt of social scorn and public ridicule. This chapter will investigate some of these attempts to prevent the castrati from being seen as romantic figures and thus having influence on society, particularly on women.

In the modern era, some might wonder why anyone would have seen the castrati as being romantically attractive when their physical beings were often far less so. Yet, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the castrati were frequently the centre of romantic intrigue and controversy. Martha Feldman writes of the "seductive figures of idyllic, heroic youth" commanding the utmost respect in the seventeenth century.[1] On stage, the castrato portrayed sexualized characters, yet the image that they projected was one of a purity not found in normal female/male relations. Alan Sikes writes perceptively on this subject that the castrato's move from liturgical settings to the opera stage brought with it a change in function. "While the performances of castrati in the choir suggest a renunciation of sex, their performances on the stage suggest a movement towards its idealization; this idealization of sex through musical performance channelled longing into the pursuit of virtue and transformed the corruption of sin into the ennobled and ennobling force of Love."[2] When Italian opera finally reached the British stage in the early years of the eighteenth century, many of the libretti featured stories about virtuous love between honourable people. Sikes writes that the "castrati thus experienced along with their shift to the opera stage a related shift in their sexual function−a move toward an idealization of sex that reflected the highest aspirations of the subject."[3] This move posed a significant threat to the traditional male/female dynamic of British society when Italian opera found its place in London.

The effect of these seemingly forever youthful singers on women, young women in particular, cannot be denied. A modern parallel might be found in the "boy bands" of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, whose members suggested a sexualized image that often did not seem grounded in physical realities. The reports of young females swooning over the likes of a fifteen-year-old Justin Bieber do not read that differently from the "vapours" experienced by young women who idolized Rauzzini or Pacchierotti. For many, the castrato opera singer became the figure of idealized eroticism and, as Roger Freitas states, the "spectacularly exaggerated embodiment of the ideal lover."[4] Not surprisingly, the most vocal critics of the castrati and Italian opera were men because the playing field was distinctly uneven. Fear mongering began immediately after the earliest castrato singers became established in London. Even before Nicolini appeared in Handel's *Rinaldo*, Richard Steel had proclaimed the singer's greatness as an actor:

> [He] sets off the Character he bears in an Opera by his Action, as much as he does the Words of it by his Voice. Every Limb, and every Finger contributes to the Part he acts, insomuch that a deaf Man might go along with him in the Sense of it. There is scarce a beautiful Posture in an old Statue which he does not plant himself in, as the different Circumstances of the Story give Occasion for it. He performs the most ordinary Action in a Manner suitable to the Greatness of his Character . . .[5]

Of course, if the singer was so great an actor on stage, many feared that he would continue his "performance" off of it.

For many years following Nicolini's departure from London, stories of his romantic successes were repeated and discussed. Constantia Phillips in *The Happy Courtezan: Or, the Prude demolish'd* (1735) writes the following: "Did not fat *Nicolini*, tho' a Clown, Enjoy the greatest Beauties of the Town?"[6] At some point in Nicolini's London career, it was generally believed that an unnamed young lady in London became determined to marry him, to the distress of her family. In 1718, the British publisher Edmund Curll released a translation of Charles Ancillon's 1707 French study on the castrati under the title of *Eunuchism Display'd*.[7] Ancillon's name is omitted in the publication, and replaced by "a Person of HONOUR" - perhaps to disguise the French origins of the original.[8] Nicolini is made a particular target in the publication, and the title page contains the following: "Occasion'd by a young Lady's falling in Love with Nicolini, who sung in the Opera at the *Hay-Market*, and to whom she had liked to have been Married." Ancillon's original study contains no such reference, thus making the accusation against Nicolini a specific frame of