The Battle for Chastity: Miraculous Castration and the Quelling of Desire in the Middle Ages

JACQUELINE MURRAY
University of Guelph

In 1985 French philosopher Michel Foucault published an essay entitled "The Battle for Chastity" in which he examined the struggle of holy men, hermits, and the desert fathers to control their sexual desires and their bodies.[1] The essay was based primarily on a close reading of the work of the monk and theologian John Cassian (ca. 360–ca. 435), specifically, the *Institutes* and the *Constitutions*. Cassian spent considerable time traveling through the Egyptian deserts, particularly in Nitria and Scetis, west of the Nile and south of Alexandria, where there were an estimated five thousand monks and ascetics fleeing civilization for the harsh life of the desert. The experience of these monks formed the origin of the "myth of the desert," a belief that isolation brought freedom from the world and its temptations.[2] Cassian recorded their amazing feats of asceticism and absorbed and embraced their ascetic values and discipline, which were the foundation of his subsequent reflections on monasticism and chastity.

Many people have been supportive of this project. I would like to acknowledge Steven Kruger, Mathew Kuefler, and Konrad Eisenbichler for their advice and encouragement. I received many helpful comments at presentations at the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies; the Department of Mediaeval History at the University of St Andrews; Green College, University of British Columbia; and the Queer Middle Ages Conference at CUNY. Colleagues at the University of Guelph in the Faculty Writing Workshop and the Department of History's Summer Research Seminar provided excellent feedback. William Edwards, Abigail Young, Fr. Allan Smith, and Caley McCarthy all provided critical academic support, for which I am most grateful. The Library of the Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies provided a much-appreciated research home. This essay has truly emerged as a work born of collegiality.

[1] Michel Foucault, "The Battle for Chastity," in *Western Sexuality: Practice and Precept in Past and Present Times*, ed. Philippe Ariès and André Béjin, trans. Anthony Forster (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 14–25. Foucault's essay had, in fact, appeared earlier, in volume 3 of *L'histoire de la sexualité*, *Le souci de soi* (Paris: Gallimard, 1984); English translation: *History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self* (New York: Pantheon, 1986).

[2] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 215–16.

Journal of the History of Sexuality, Vol. 28, no. 1, January 2019

DOI: 10.7560/JHS28104

When a theological dispute precipitated a monastic diaspora, Cassian left the Egyptian desert to move to Western Europe. He brought with him a determination to introduce the desert experience because he believed that the battle for chastity was inherent in all men.[3]

According to Foucault, Cassian's framework for self-analysis, especially of the progress of a man along the path to perfect chastity, was central to the process of the subjectification, the becoming of the individual self, which he considered to be characteristic of the West. Significantly, as Foucault observed, much of Cassian's discussion of the battle for chastity did not take place in the context of resisting actual sexual relations; rather, it was an internal battle with the self.[4] As a result, although women (and occasionally boys) populate the background of desire in Cassian's account, they are unspoken, unremarked upon, and unseen. The battle for chastity is a male discourse, but it is one that is informed by and aimed at the invisible women against whom the man theoretically contends.

Foucault notes that for Cassian the eradication of nocturnal emissions was the important external indication that the holy man had won the battle for chastity. Certainly, the suppression of nocturnal emissions was a major consideration in Cassian's discussions of chastity. But there were other issues at stake. Cassian does not focus solely on the end goal but also lays out a path through the minefield of bodily sexual desire, recognizing that traditional practices such as avoiding wine, women, and food could fail to calm a body and that fasting and self-flagellation could simply result in emaciated and wounded ascetics still riven by sexual frustration.[5] While the control of seminal, particularly nocturnal, emissions was one of the highest forms of chastity, other factors inherent to the emission of semen, such as the "movements" of the genital organs themselves, also needed to be considered.

For early Christians, castration was embedded in the discourse of chastity. Castration and eunuchism had a cultural meaning quite different from the Roman focus on the punishment of criminals, the emasculation of slaves,

[3] Ibid., 420.

[4] Foucault, "Battle for Chastity," 18.

[5] Cassian treated the question of nocturnal emissions and spontaneous erections in the *Institutes of the Coenobia*, book 6, "On the Spirit of Fornication," and the *Conferences*, book 12, "On Chastity," and book 22, "On Nocturnal Illusions." The Latin texts can be found in *Conlationes*, ed. Michael Petschenig, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 13 (Vienna: C. Geroldi filium, 1886); and *De institutis coenobiorum*, ed. Michael Petschenig, Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum 17 (Vienna: F. Tempsky, 1888). English translations are available in *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 57 (New York: Newman Press, 1997); and *The Institutes*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, Ancient Christian Writers 58 (New York: Newman Press, 1997). For a discussion of Cassian's views on nocturnal emissions, see Terrence Kardong, "John Cassian's Teaching on Perfect Chastity," *American Benedictine Review* 30 (1979): 249–63; and Kenneth C. Russell, "John Cassian on a Delicate Subject," *Cistercian Studies Quarterly* 72 (1992): 1–12.

or the priestly *castrati* of Cybele or Attis. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus explicitly links the suppression of male sexual desire and castration. Modern English translations of the Vulgate tend to smooth over the stark meaning of the words attributed to Jesus. A more explicit translation that emphasizes the physicality of the Gospel text reads: "For there are eunuchs who were born thus from their mother's womb; and there are eunuchs who are made by men; and there are eunuchs who castrate themselves on account of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12).[6] The church fathers understood the metaphor of "eunuchs who castrate themselves on account of the kingdom of heaven" as the abandonment of the body and the rejection of lust and sexual desire. As a metaphor, castration indicated that the battle for chastity had been won and the organs no longer threatened sin. Early on, these verses perpetuated this metaphorical meaning. As Clement of Alexandria (150–215) observed: "The true eunuch, however, is not he who is unable, but he who is unwilling to gratify his passions."[7] The theologian and church father Augustine of Hippo (354–430) focused on the metaphor of castration: "I might have more carefully listened to these words [about chastity] and, thus made a eunuch for the kingdom of heaven's sake, I might have more happily awaited Thy embraces."[8] While Augustine certainly believed in chastity as the epitome of Christian life, he was also sympathetic to daily

[6] An overview of castration in physical and cultural manifestations across medieval society is found in Larissa Tracy, ed., *Castration and Culture in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2013). For an introduction and overview on eunuchism, especially in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, see Mathew S. Kuefler, "Castration and Eunuchism in the Middle Ages," in *Handbook of Medieval Sexuality*, ed. Vern L. Bullough and James A. Brundage (New York: Garland, 1996), 279–306. For eunuchs in the Byzantine East, see Shaun F. Tougher, "Byzantine Eunuchs: An Overview, with Special Reference to Their Creation and Origin," in *Women, Men and Eunuchs: Gender in Byzantium*, ed. Liz James (London: Routledge, 1997), 168–84; and Kathryn M. Ringrose, "Living in the Shadows: Eunuchs and Gender in Byzantium," in *Third Sex, Third Gender: Beyond Sexual Dimorphism in Culture and History*, ed. Gilbert Herdt (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 85–109. On eunuchs in antiquity, see Arthur Darby Nock, "Eunuchs in Ancient Religion," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft* 23 (1925): 25–33; reprinted in *Essays on Religion and the Ancient World*, ed. Zeph Stewart (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 1:7–15; and Walter Stevenson, "The Rise of Eunuchs in Greco-Roman Antiquity," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1995): 495–511. For a useful cross-cultural discussion, see Jennifer W. Jay, "Another Side of Chinese Eunuch History: Castration, Marriage, Adoption, and Burial," *Canadian Journal of History* 28 (1993): 460–78.

[7] Although Clement of Alexandria's original text was written in Greek, it has been translated into English in Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon P. Wood, Fathers of the Church 23 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1954), 3.4.26, 221. Clement was a theologian based in Alexandria who had been influenced by Hellenistic philosophy and Stoicism. *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New Advent), accessed 9 September 2018, http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/04045a.htm.

[8] Augustine, *Confessiones*, book 2, in Augustine, *Confessions*, vol. 1, *Introduction and Text*, ed. James J. O'Donnell (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 16. The English translation is from *Confessions*, trans. Vernon J. Bourke, Fathers of the Church 21 (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1953), 2.2.3, 35.

struggles and believed that the genitals could experience movements despite the individual's desire for chastity. For Augustine, metaphorical castration meant overcoming undisciplined flesh.[9] Similarly, Jerome (347–420), who embraced a more rigorous form of asceticism and eventually left Rome for the deserts of the Holy Land, also distinguished freely chosen, spiritual eunuchism from physical castration: "It is necessity that makes another a eunuch, my own choice makes me so."[10] These metaphors of the eunuch permeated Christian teaching and discourse, despite Clement of Alexandria's admonition to value personal choice over physical incapacity.

Various cultural, social, and religious understandings of the metaphors of eunuchs and castration coexisted in the third and fourth centuries. A too literal understanding of the eunuch metaphor may have inspired Origen (d. ca. 253/254) to castrate himself.[11] Eusebius (d. ca. 339/340), explained that Origen had castrated himself so that he could teach Christian doctrine to both men and women without causing scandal.[12] Thus, from an early period, the Gospel metaphor linked eunuchs to questions about the social relations between men and women and raised questions as to whether these would lead inexorably to men experiencing uncontrollable sexual desire or being vulnerable to accusations of sexual scandal. From Clement's perspective, Origen could be seen to have cheated by castrating himself to avoid the struggle to control his physical desires.

This perspective could also be linked to the legend of the beaver, which dates back to antiquity and was included in *Aesop's Fables* among other ancient sources. The story was reiterated throughout the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance.[13] The beaver, pursued by hunters and unable to escape, realizes the hunter only wanted his testicles. So the beaver bit off his testicles, threw them at the hunter, and scampered away, safe for another day. Karl T. Steel has suggested that twelfth-century natural history

[9] Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 14.16.

[10] Jerome, Letter 22, *Ad Eustochium*, CSEL, 54. The English translation is from *The Letters of Saint Jerome*, trans. Charles Christopher Mierow, Ancient Christian Writers 33 (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1963), 1:150.

[11] A number of scholars have raised questions about the veracity of the story of Origen arranging to be castrated. See, for example, Henry Chadwick, *Early Christian Thought and the Classical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966); and, more recently, Christoph Markschies, "Kastration und Magenprobleme? Einige neue Blicke auf das asketische Leben des Origenes," in *Origeniana Nona: Origen and the Religious Practice of His Time*, ed. G. Heidl and R. Somos (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 2009), 255–71. On the other hand, Peter Brown considers that there is sufficient and reliable evidence that at the least Origin was believed to have been castrated. Brown, *The Body and Society*, 161–69.

[12] Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. Geoffrey Arthur Williamson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965; repr., 1981), 8.5, 247–48.

[13] Kenneth Gouwens, "Emasculation as Empowerment: Lessons of Beaver Lore for Two Italian Humanists," *European Review of History / Revue européenne d'histoire* 22, no. 4 (2015): 536–62.

commentaries interpreted the beaver to be a holy man who, to achieve his religious self, only needed to get rid of the specific organ, the testicles, that attracted the devil to him in the first place.[14]

The ambivalence surrounding self-castration led to moral ambiguity and such concern that the Council of Nicaea (325) condemned self-castration by clerics, especially for purposes of sexual control.[15] The council insisted that castration "on account of the kingdom of heaven" would henceforth be strictly metaphorical. A man who had been surgically castrated for medical reasons or violently mutilated by barbarians could remain a cleric. However, "if anyone in good health has castrated himself, if he is enrolled among the clergy he should be suspended, and in future no such man should be promoted. . . . This refers to those who are responsible for the condition and presume to castrate themselves." In future, castration "on account of the kingdom" was to be exclusively metaphorical and achieved solely through ascetic discipline. But Nicaea did not signal the disappearance of surgical self-castration or self-mutilation, especially in the deserts and the geographic margins of Christendom.[16] The metaphor of castration continued to hold out hope for a definitive solution to the perceived weakness of the male body. Despite the suppression of the physical practice, the phenomenon of mystical castration, that is, castration by supernatural intervention, appeared less than a hundred years after the deliberate suppression of castration by the Council of Nicaea.

In the post-Nicaean Christian world, the earliest example of mystical intervention to tame physical sexual desire is discussed in Cassian's *Conferences*.[17] Cassian reports that in 395, within seventy years of Nicaea, he visited Abbot Serenus in the desert.[18] Serenus was renowned for his chastity,

[14] Karl T. Steel, "Nothing to Lose: Medieval Castration, Clerical Celibacy, and a Strange Story from Peter of Cornwall's Book of Revelation," *Brewminate: A Bold Blend of News and Ideas*, 27 February 2017, accessed 9 September 2018, http://brewminate.com/nothing-to-lose-medieval-castration-clerical-celibacy-and-a-strange-story-from-peter-of-cornwalls-book-of-revelation/.

[15] 1 Nicaea (325) c. 1, in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 1, *Nicaea I to Lateran V* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 6.

[16] Piotr O. Scholz has argued that castration remained widespread, particularly among the desert ascetics. *Eunuchs and Castrati: A Cultural History*, trans. John Broadwin and Shelley L. Frische (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2001), 172–77.

[17] There may be an earlier example of mystical castration preserved in Jewish tradition. This is the case of the Egyptian Potiphar, who, according to tradition, was castrated by the Archangel Gabriel for making sexual advances on Joseph. However, as a functionary in the pharaoh's service, Potiphar may have been a eunuch. Aaron D. Panken, "D'var Torah: Joseph and Potiphar; The Named, the Neutered, and the Neutralized," *RJ Org*, 28 November 2010, accessed 9 September 2018, http://blogs.rj.org/blog/2010/11/28/dvar_torah_joseph_and_potiphar/. Although there is no evidence that this tradition influenced the medieval discourse of mystical castration, it is significant that this story also has an angel effecting the castration, as in most of the later Christian examples.

[18] "Serenus (4)," in *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, ed. William Smith and Henry Wace (London: John Murray, 1887), 4:616. This source, although based on Cassian, does not discuss Serenus's remarkable chastity nor the visit by angels.

which seemed "beyond the possibilities of human nature."[19] He followed the conventional pathways to chastity, praying and enduring increasingly strict fasts until he no longer experienced even the smallest natural movement of the flesh. Success at extinguishing sexual fantasies, nocturnal emissions, and movements of the flesh was considered to be the indication that a man had achieved chastity.[20] Nevertheless, Serenus was not yet content or certain of his chastity. After much weeping and prayer, Cassian reports that "there came to [Serenus] an angel in a vision of the night. He seemed to open his belly, pull out a kind of fiery tumour from his bowels, cast it away, and restore all his entrails to their original place. 'Behold,' he said, 'the impulses of your flesh have been cut out, and you should know that today you have obtained that perpetual purity of body which you have faithfully sought.'"[21] Cassian concludes that this "came from the grace of God."[22] The exact nature of the "fiery tumour" that was removed from Serenus's abdomen is unclear ("quandam ignitam carnis strumam de eius uisceribus auellens").[23] Perhaps Cassian thought that lust resided in the body like a cancer and was best excised surgically. There was a long medical tradition that situated sexual desire in the kidneys.[24] Equally, Cassian may have envisioned the excision as removing the locus of the humoral heat responsible for physical desire. Because Cassian indicates that the angel restored the organs into the abdomen, it is clear that the experience included physical evisceration, but it also suggests that Serenus's body was once again made whole and pure. In the end, however, while tempering Serenus's already mitigated physical desires, given the ambiguity about which organs were involved, this was not an explicit act of mystical castration. It is, however, a clear precursor and bears what would become the standard characteristics of accounts of mystical castration. The angel's excision of the tumor, which confirmed that the eradication of sexual desire was a gift from God, singled out Serenus's extraordinary virtue and purity.

The contemporary case of Elias developed in a different context. His story was recorded by Palladius (ca. 360–ca. 420), who, much like Cassian, traveled to the Egyptian desert to meet and live for some years with the ascetics and desert fathers. He recorded details of their lives in the *Lausiac History*. One young man, Elias, had established a monastery for female ascetics, but because he was young, he was tempted by lust.[25] Elias fled his

[19] John Cassian, *Conference* 7.1, in Cassian, *Conférences I–VII*, ed. E. Pichery, Sources chrétiennes 42 (Paris: Cerf, 1955); and Cassian, *The Conferences*, 247–48.

[20] Brown, *The Body and Society*, 230; and Foucault, "Battle for Chastity," 19–21.

[21] Cassian, *Conference* 7.2; Ramsey, 248.

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid.

[24] J. N. Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (London: Duckworth, 1982), 92.

[25] It appears that Elias is only known through the account by Palladius, *Historia Lausiaca*, 8.35, in Migne, *PL* 73.1135–36. The English translation is from Palladius, *The Lausiac History*, trans. Robert T. Meyer, Ancient Christian Writers 34 (Westminster, MD: Newman

monastery of women and fasted and prayed, "O Lord, either kill me outright . . . or take away my passion." While he was asleep, he was approached by three angels, who agreed to help him if he swore to return to his monastery and the women who depended on him. When he did, "they took hold of him, one by the hands and one by the feet, and the third took a razor and castrated him—not actually, but in the dream."[26] The ambiguity that surrounded Serenus's experience has disappeared; this is explicit castration. Palladius states unambiguously that one of the angels "cut off his testicles with a razor" (accepta novacula excidet ejus testiculos). Elias was held down by two of the angels while a third performed the surgery, a form of restraint reminiscent of physical castration and something not required by Serenus. Did this perhaps reflect Elias's youth and the strength of his desires compared with Serenus, who already had great control of himself? Palladius makes clear that Elias was not a man struggling against his own body or a generalized, unfocused desire, as in the case with Serenus, who had no evident source of temptation. Elias's temptation was specifically related to the women in his monastery, much like Origen, who sought to teach women. Like Serenus, Elias seemed changed by his mystical surgery.

Stories of other holy men who experienced mystical castration appear across the early Middle Ages.[27] They were by no means marginal, nor do they reflect the values or fears of an extremist ascetic minority. Indeed, some carried the greatest moral and spiritual authority. For example, in his *Dialogues*, Pope Gregory the Great (540–604) discussed the experience of his own contemporary, Equitius (d. 571). According to Gregory, Equitius was "much distressed as a young man by violent temptations of the flesh."[28] To control these desires, he prayed fervently; then "[one] night while he

---

Press, 1965), 88–90. One of the only modern discussions of this holy man states that Elias "had a vision of angels who so strengthened his mind while he slept that he awoke a different man." Smith and Wace, *A Dictionary of Christian Biography*, 2:89.

[26] Palladius, *The Lausiac History*.

[27] Some other desert ascetics were reputed to have experienced a form of mystical castration, but there is only shadowy information about them, compared to the more effusive discussions of the famous examples. For instance, Heraclides (fl. 403), who became bishop of Cyprus, is reputed to have spent time in the Scetis desert, where other men experienced mystical castration. He was also accused of having Origenizing tendencies and perhaps to have been a eunuch, but it is not clear if he was a physical or mystical castrate, and he has left little mark on the historical record. Henry Wace, "Heraclides Cyprius," in Smith and Wace, *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, 2:909; Henry Delahaye, "Saints de Chypre," in *Analecta Bollandiana* 26 (Brussels, 1901), 238–39. An English translation is found in the *Ecclesiastical History of Sozomen*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, 2nd ser. (1894; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 2:403 (chap. 6).

[28] Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman (New York: Fathers of the Church, 1959), 1.4, 16. Significantly, Gregory was the first Latin writer to report on mystical castration, Cassian and Palladius being Greek Christians traveling in the Egyptian deserts. Gregory came from an elite Roman family, was a secular and ecclesiastical figure, and was pivotal in preventing the Lombards from overrunning Rome. He was also interested in monasticism, which may account for his discussion of Equitius.

was earnestly begging God for a cure in this issue, he saw himself made a eunuch while an angel stood by."[29] Subsequently, Equitius was no longer troubled by sexual desire; indeed, some scholars have suggested that from this time forth it was as if he no longer had genitals or was himself gendered.[30] Gregory used the verb *eunuchizari*, which makes explicit the exact nature of what occurred: castration in a dream. It is unclear, however, who actually performed the surgery. Gregory's account is ambiguous, stating that "the angel stood by." According to Gregory, "Relying on this virtue, which God had helped him to acquire, [Equitius] took upon himself the guidance of communities of women just as he had done of monks."[31] As with the example of Elias, then, mystical castration endowed Equitius with the ability to resist the sexual temptation of women and prepared him to take on the responsibility to teach and minister to them without compromising his chastity.

The experience of mystical castration was not limited to solitaries or ascetics such as the desert fathers, as is clear in the case of the Visigothic cleric Ildefonsus, who became archbishop of Toledo (657). Although his early years were spent in a monastery,[32] as a young monk he founded a monastery for nuns. The early accounts of Ildefonsus's life make no mention of a mystical castration, but his biographer, Cixila, also an archbishop of Toledo (774–83), embellished the standard biographies,[33] asserting that Ildefonsus was cut "not by an iron blade but by a divine sword, nor did he cut his desire but he won holiness in himself by means of a heavenly reward."[34] This is a unique passage because of the explicit denial of any physical self-mutilation, juxtaposing the iron blade and the divine sword. Cixila emphasizes the authenticity of Ildefonsus's mystical castration with compelling rhetoric. Perhaps this story was part of local lore, which Cixila added to the more conventional *vita*.

The story of the monk Walfred provides a different departure. He was a wealthy merchant living in Lombardy around 750, and in middle age he founded the monastery of Monteverdi.[35] He was a married man with five

[29] "Cum hac in re ab omnipotenti Deo remedium continuis precibus quaereret, nocte quadam assistente angelo eunuchizari se vidit" (*Dialogues*, 1.4, in Migne, *PL* 77.165).

[30] Steel, "Nothing to Lose."

[31] *Dialogues*, 1.4, in Migne, *PL* 77.165.

[32] S. J. McKenna, "Ildefonsus of Toledo," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New Advent), 7:358.

[33] The role of Cixila is discussed by Sr. Athanasius Braegelmann, who believed that Cixila spoke with younger contemporaries of Ildephonsus who described to him additional miracles. Otherwise, little is known about Cixila. *The Life and Writings of Saint Ildefonsus of Toledo* (Washington, DC: University of America Press, 1942), 23.

[34] Cixila, *Vita S. Hildefonsi*, in Migne, *PL* 96.45; G. Bareille, "Ildefonse," in *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique,* ed. Alfred Vacant, Eugene Mangenot, and Emile Amann (Paris: Letouezey et Anâe, 1908), vol. 7, cols. 740–43. Kuefler includes Ildephonsus in his list of mystical eunuchs. "Castration and Eunuchism," 283.

[35] Clare Pilsworth, "Sanctity, Crime and Punishment in the *Vita Walfredi*," *Hagiographica* 7 (2000): 181–99. Walfred is mentioned briefly in Ross Balzaretti, "Sexuality in Late

sons, four of whom entered the monastery with him. Walfred placed his wife in a convent so he was freed from his marital responsibilities, most crucially, the conjugal debt. This enabled him to become abbot of the community. Walfred was, however, a man with real sexual experience who embraced monastic chastity late in life. Despite prayers, fasting, and vigils, sometime after entering the monastery he was attacked by an "evil spirit of fornication."[36] He publicly confessed his struggles with fornication to the brothers and sought God's help to repel the attack and "to cut away the vice of pollution from his flesh. And behold! one night he saw an angel coming to him, who he declared made a eunuch of him and thoroughly cut away all his male members."[37] This cured him so thoroughly that he was not troubled by sexual desire for the rest of his life.

The language used to describe Walfred's mystical castration is more ambiguous than in other cases. It was quite clear that the angel had earlier "excised [Elias's] testicles" (excidet ejus testiculos), but according to Walfred's *vita*, the angel "made him a eunuch" (eunuchizare) and "cut away all his male members" (omnia virilia abscidisse). That Walfred was made a eunuch is clear and unambiguous, but it is not clear which organs of the genitalia were removed. Generally, the term *membrum* is used in the singular to refer to the penis,[38] while *virilis* refers to the external genitalia in general, and *testiculos* refers to the testicles specifically. The use of the plural "male members" (omnia virilia) is unusual. It is not found in other examples of mystical castration.[39] Consequently, it is possible that the angel castrated Walfred in the normal way, suggested by *eunuchizari*, and removed only the testicles. However, the plural "all his male members" opens the possibility of a penectomy that removed all external genitalia, both penis and testicles. As with the other examples, there is no direct testimony beyond the man himself. Whether there were somatic implications from the mystical act remained hidden underneath Walfred's habit.[40] The evidence of the body, however, did not necessarily reflect what had happened to it. As Palladius observed about Elias, he was castrated not actually but in a dream, and his physical body bore no signs of the mystical emasculation.

Lombard Italy, c. 700–c.800 AD," in *Medieval Sexuality: A Casebook*, ed. April Harper and Caroline Proctor (New York: Routledge, 2008), 7–31. An edition of the *vita* is included in Karl Schmid, *Vita Walfredi und Kloster Monteverdi: Toskanisches Mönchtum zwischen langobardischer und fränkischer Herrschaft* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1991).

[36] Schmid, *Vita Walfredi*, chap. 6, 46, 48.

[37] "Hec agens Deum fortiter petebat, ut a se hanc impugnationem repelleret et vitium pollutionis a sua carne abscideret. Et ecce quadam nocte ad se angelum venire conspiciens, quem se eunuchizare et penitus sua omnia virilia abscidisse testatus est; confestimque ab eo pugna recessit et ultra sue carnis pollutio nulla fuit usque dum Dei servus vitam finiret" (ibid., chap. 6, 46).

[38] Adams, *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary*, 46.

[39] This usage is not discussed in ibid.

[40] Pilsworth, "Sanctity, Crime and Punishment," 189.

One holy man apparently did bear the outward physical signs of his mystical encounter, and he deployed them publicly for his own safety and benefit. Methodius (787?–847) was the patriarch of Constantinople during the Iconoclasm.[41] The iconoclasts bribed a young woman to charge Methodius with seduction. During an official enquiry, Methodius offered incontrovertible evidence of his innocence. In front of the assembly, "in the sight of everyone, he bared his genitals [*pudenda*]. Everyone saw that they had withered from a disease and were deprived of all natural strength."[42] When asked how his genitals had been mutilated, Methodius explained that years earlier, while in Rome, he had been consumed by concupiscence. Saints Peter and Paul had come to him in the night and touched his genitals, which had removed all lust from him and left him with useless, shriveled sex organs.[43] There is in this description an internal contradiction. The observers initially suggest that the withered genitals resulted from a physical disease. Methodius himself attributes their condition to the touch of the two saints, who, in effect, might be understood to have cured in him a spiritual disease, thus highlighting the dichotomy of physical and spiritual disease.

Physical incapacity achieved by mystical intervention provided a twofold protection for Methodius. First, he was saved from his own sexual desire and bodily urges; he had won the battle for chastity. Second, he was saved from false accusations of sexual misconduct. Following convention,

[41] The Iconoclast Controversy was a particularly violent and extreme period in the Byzantine Eastern Empire lasting from 720 to 842. The emperor sided with the iconoclasts, who believed that images of religious people amounted to idolatry. The patriarch upheld the traditional use of icons to facilitate worship. For over a century, the factions rioted in the streets, and the iconoclasts destroyed priceless artwork. This civil and religious disorder allowed for this attack on the patriarch of the Eastern Byzantine Church.

[42] "Homo omni reverentia atque honore dignissimus, in conspectu omnium pudenda nudavit: quae nemo non videbat morbo quodam emarcuisse, omnique naturali vi esse privata" (*Acta Sanctorum* 23 [June 14]). The shriveling of the male genitalia or, specifically, the testicles is not a side effect of many diseases. The most likely could be mumps, which can induce some shrinkage of the testicles, although not as dramatically as the description of Methodius's withered genitals. The mumps were mentioned in the Hippocratic literature so may have been known in the Middle Ages. Robert Sallares, *The Ecology of the Ancient Greek World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 232. The shriveling of the genitals could also reflect the medieval interpretation of the humors, discussed, for example, by Constantine the African. Constantine's treatise *De coitu* (On coitus) concludes that a man with cold and dry testicles will lack sexual desire. Paul Delany, "Constantinus Africanus' *De coitu*: A Translation," *Chaucer Review* 4, no. 1 (1970): 55–65.

[43] This section is omitted from the *vita* in the *Acta Sanctorum*. It was recorded in the *Annales* of the twelfth-century Byzantine historian Zonaras. Johannes Zonaras, *Epitome Historiarum*, ed. Ludovicus Dindorfius (Leipzig: Teubner, 1868), 16.1, 4:3. It is unclear how well known this story was in the Latin-speaking West. I am grateful to Sheila Campbell for her assistance with the Greek text. In the sixteenth century, Johann Weyer referred to Zonaras's account in his study of witchcraft, *Witches, Devils, and Doctors in the Renaissance: Johann Weyer's "De praestigiis daemonum,"* ed. George Mora and Benjamin Kohl, trans. John Shea (Binghamton, NY: CMERS/SUNY, 1991), 4.2, 334.

the miraculous agents had appeared to the man at night. The fact that Methodius identified them as Peter and Paul can be attributed to his being in Rome. Although the account does not state that Methodius was castrated, something happened to render his genitals visibly deformed and unusable, as the court could observe. The "shriveled, withered" genitals could refer specifically to testicles after castration by ligature. This procedure cuts off the blood supply to the testicles, which wither and dry out.[44] Methodius is unique among the holy men who experienced mystical castration, given that the supernatural intervention appeared to leave observable physical results on the man's body.

Thus far, the examples of mystical castration have come from the early Christian world and from the early Middle Ages, contexts prone to the perpetuation of legend and exaggeration. However, there is a more certain example coming out of the twelfth-century Renaissance, one that was carefully analyzed and is attested to by multiple sources. Hugh of Avalon (1135/40–1200) was a French nobleman who began his career as a Benedictine and subsequently joined the Carthusians. King Henry II brought him to England, and he was elected bishop of Lincoln (1186). He was renowned for his holiness and was canonized in 1220. The story of his mystical castration is attested by three independent observers.

As a young man, Hugh was plucked from the safety of his cloister and assigned to be deacon in a parish. This appears to be where he first interacted with women and began his battle for chastity. A "particular young woman made an attempt upon the heart of Saint Hugh, bringing with her as it were conclusive arguments for passion." Despite Hugh's resistance, the woman persisted and even touched his arm. Hugh was overwhelmed by shame and anger, and in his haste to distance himself from lust, he cut out the flesh that she had touched, an act of physical mutilation that foreshadows his mystical castration. Hugh was so traumatized that he ultimately fled parochial work and again sought refuge in the hermetical life of the Carthusians.[45]

Hugh sought to control his sexual attraction to women by fleeing from them and from the world. Nevertheless, lust and sexual temptation again consumed him while he was in the Carthusian cloister. As Henry of Avranches (d. 1260) describes it: "The furnace of the enticement set his vitals on fire, and the very depth of his heart was challenged by overpowering

[44] Compression was one of two methods of castration, the other being excision, discussed in the *Seven Books of Medicine* by Paul of Aegineta. Paulus Aegineta, *The Seven Books of Paulus Aegineta*, trans. Francis Adams (London: Sydenham Society, 1846), 6.68, 2:379.

[45] Henry of Avranches, *The Metrical Life of Saint Hugh of Lincoln*, ed. and trans. Charles Garcon (Lincoln, England: Honywood Press, 1986), lines 229–60, 22–23. Henry of Avranches was a thirteenth-century cleric and wandering poet. He wrote a number of hagiographic lives in Latin verse. The case of Hugh of Lincoln is examined in Jacqueline Murray, "Mystical Castration: Some Reflections of Peter Abelard, Hugh of Lincoln and Sexual Control," in *Conflicted Identities and Multiple Masculinities: Men in the Medieval West*, ed. Jacqueline Murray (New York: Garland Publishing, 1999), 73–91.

heat."[46] According to Gerald of Wales (ca. 1144–ca. 1223), an angel appeared to Hugh in the shape of a man and cut off his genitals with forceps that he was holding.[47] Adam of Eynsham identified the surgeon as Basil, a Carthusian prior.[48]

Adam of Eynsham (ca. 1155–1233) was a close companion of Hugh. His authoritative account of the mystical castration is written in Hugh's own voice:

> "My loving father and venerable master, the law of sin and death which is in my members torment me to the death, and unless you assist me as you were wont to do, your disciple will assuredly die." He had scarcely uttered these words when the holy man said briefly "It is well, I will aid you." He immediately cut open his bowels with a knife which he seemed to be holding in his hand, and extracting something resembling red hot cinders, he flung it out of the cell a long distance away.[49]

Adam was eager to assert the veracity of his version of the story:

> Hugh briefly narrated this to me many times in private conversations. The full and detailed account that I have now given I heard from his own lips in his last illness. . . . I have written about this, because I have heard that someone else gave another version in which our Lady, the Blessed Virgin Mother of God, appeared to him and made him a eunuch, so that he was completely cured and did not thereafter experience the slightest carnal inclination. I have therefore set down truthfully what I heard from his mouth about the circumstances of the healing and who healed him.[50]

[46] Henry of Avranches, *The Metrical Life*, 27.

[47] Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church (Gemma ecclesiastica)*, trans. John J. Hagen (Leiden: Brill, 1979), 2.17. Significantly, just before his discussion of Hugh of Lincoln, Gerald included an account of the mystical castration of Elias. Gerald of Wales was a learned cleric who traveled in illustrious English circles, having served as clerk to the king and to two archbishops. Although he does not claim to have known Hugh of Lincoln, he might well have done and at the very least would have been privy to information about the events he describes.

[48] Adam of Eynsham, *The Life of St. Hugh of Lincoln (Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis)*, ed. and trans. Decima L. Douie and Hugh Farmer, 2 vols. (London: Thomas Nelson, 1961), 2.2, 1:50–52. Adam was a chronicler and Benedictine monk at the Abbey of Eynsham. He also served as chaplain to Hugh of Lincoln and was a close companion prior to Hugh's death. Thus, Adam's account also had authority given his personal relationship with the saint.

[49] "'O,'ait 'pater bone et nutritor meus piissime, affligit me usque ad mortem lex peccati et mortis que est in menbris meis, et nisi more solito auxilieris michi, en morietur puer tuus.' Vix dictum compleuerat, et sanctus sic paucis: 'Bene,' inquit, 'auxiliabor tibi.' Moxque patefatics nouacula, quam manu tenere uidebatur, uisceribus eius quasi strumam igneam inde uisis est exsecuisee et longius extra cellam proiecisse" (ibid., 2.2, 1:51–52).

[50] "Horum summam cum ab ipsius ore Hugonis, secretius mecum loquentis, pluries acceperim, in extrema demum egritudine sua planius et diligentius totius euentus ordinem, sicut eum modo digessi, michi enarrauit. . . . Hec idcirco dixerim quia aliter de his alium quemdam scripsisse accepi, asserentem uidelicet quod per beatam Virginem dominam nostrum

As in the earlier cases of Elias, Equitius, and Ildefonsus, after his mystical castration, when he became bishop, Hugh was able to "invite devout matrons and widows to eat at his table. He used to lay his holy hands on their heads and make the sign of the cross and even sometimes reverently embrace them."[51] Gerald of Wales believed that mystical castration allowed Hugh to withstand the extravagances of the English court.[52] While praising Hugh's chastity, however, Adam of Eynsham explicitly denies that Hugh was made a eunuch. This may simply be a question of semantics between versions of the story, or perhaps Adam believed that there was a difference between castration and removing red hot cinders, which echoes the "fiery fleshly tumour" removed from Serenus. Other aspects of the story resemble the more explicit castration of Elias and Equitius. Gerald of Wales and Henry of Avranches both suggest that Hugh's mystical castration was widely known. Adam may have wanted to quash a rumor that could bring scandal and sully Hugh's memory. But there were too many independent versions circulating for him to control the narrative.

In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, despite generations of ecclesiastical condemnation, castration—actual and mystical—continued to be viewed as a sign of God's blessing. William of Ashby (c. 1200), one of the first Franciscans to land in England, reportedly castrated himself in order to maintain his chastity.[53] This may be one of the last known examples of self-mutilation, following the model of Origen. But there were also changes in attitudes to castration as a mechanism to preserve chastity. For example, while Gerald of Wales admired Hugh's mystical castration, he also betrayed ambivalence. He wrote that "no one is obliged to castrate himself, nor should we make ourselves eunuchs (but to do so out of fervent faith and devotion is laudable)."[54] While it is tempting to interpret Gerald of Wales's words as metaphorical, the example of William of Ashby was nearly contemporaneous. The mental association between chastity and castration endured into the thirteenth century, although tainted by the whiff of scandal. There are additional examples of men who experienced forms of miraculous chastity that fall within the discourse of mystical castration.

Dei genitricem, sibi apparentum uisitatus, eunuchisatus et curatus ita fuerit quod nullam deinceps carnis titillationem omnino expertus sit. Verum que ab ore illius de curatione et curatore eius audiui, uerissime expressi" (ibid., 2.2, 1:52).

[51] "De cuius priuilegii munere securus, religiosas interdum matronas similiter quoque et uiduas more aliorum episcoporum suo in mensa lateri assidere faciebat" (ibid., 2.2, 1:47).

[52] Gerald of Wales, *Gemma ecclesiastica*, 2.17.

[53] Thomas of Eccleston, *De adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam: Tractatus Fr. Thomæ vulgo dicti de Eccleston de adventu Fratrum Minorum in Angliam*, ed. Andrew G. Little (Paris: Fischbacher, 1909), 6. This episode is discussed in Laurence Moulinier-Brogi, "La castration dans l'Occident médiéval," in *Corps outragés, corps ravagés de l'Antiquité au Moyen Âge*, ed. L. Bodiou, V. Mehl, and M. Soria (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2011), 195.

[54] Gerald of Wales, *Gemma ecclesiastica*, 2.20.

In *The Golden Legend* (ca. 1260), the Dominican scholar Jacobus de Voragine (ca. 1230–98) included a miracle involving Reginald, one of Dominic's early companions. As Reginald lay dying, Saint Dominic saw the Virgin Mary anoint his ears, nostrils, hands, and feet. She also anointed Reginald's loins, saying, "May your loins be girt with the cincture of chastity." Not only did Reginald recover from his illness, but "the fires of concupiscence were extinguished in him, so that he later confessed, he no longer felt the slightest movement of lust."[55] The Dominican preacher and inquisitor Étienne de Bourbon was busy collecting stories and exempla around this same time. He included this story about Reginald's girdle of chastity in his collection of exempla.[56]

The existence of these two contemporaneous versions suggests that the story of Reginald's girdle of chastity circulated among Dominican networks. It is perhaps not surprising, then, to find virtually the same story attached to the eminent Dominican Thomas Aquinas (1225–74). The hagiographer William of Tocco (1240–1323) reports that his family, famously unhappy with his decision to enter the Dominicans, imprisoned him and sent a young woman to seduce him, confident that young Thomas would succumb to the pleasures of the flesh. Thomas's encounter with the woman was reputedly challenging, and he found it difficult to resist the desires she elicited. Aquinas prayed for divine intervention to preserve his virginity: "When, thus tearfully praying, he fell asleep, behold two angels of Heaven appeared to him . . . and bound tight his loins, saying, 'Behold, on behalf of God, we gird you with a belt of chastity, as you asked.' And until his death he never felt his virginity violated."[57] Assuming that his family constrained Thomas

[55] Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Readings on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 2:50. Jacobus was an Italian Dominican who eventually became archbishop of Genoa. *The Golden Legend*, his compilation of lives of medieval saints, which also incorporated thirteenth-century miracle stories, was one of the most popular books in the Middle Ages. It was translated into a variety of European languages and appeared in multiple printed editions in the fifteenth century.

[56] Étienne de Bourbon (d. ca. 1261) was a Dominican preacher and inquisitor. He recorded strange occurrences, folk tales, and other matters of interest from his journeys through France. Étienne de Bourbon, *Anecdotes historiques, légendes et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d'Étienne de Bourbon dominicain du XIIIe siècle*, ed. Albert Lecoy de la Marche (Paris: Librairie Renouard, 1877), 108–9. He also collected other stories in which the Virgin Mary was involved in curing a man's lust. In one story, a brother felt lasciviousness of the flesh beyond his ability to control. He called upon the Virgin Mary for assistance and, exhausted, fell asleep. The Virgin appeared to him, dragged him by his hair, and flayed him. In the morning, he had new skin and no movements of the flesh. This example does not use the metaphor of mystical castration; however, the actions attributed to the Virgin Mary reinforce the credibility of her bringing a girdle of chastity to holy men unable to control their bodies or sexual desire (ibid., 109).

[57] William de Tocco, *Ystoria sancti Thome de Aquino de Guillaume de Tocco (1323)*, Cap. 11, ed. Claire le Brun-Gouanvic, Studies and Texts 127 (Toronto: PIMS, 1996), 111. Written between 1318 and 1323, de Tocco's account is the oldest biography of the saint. It is partly based on his personal knowledge as a disciple of Thomas.

in 1244, when he was about nineteen years old, this event would have preceded the story of Reginald that was compiled by Jacobus de Voragine and Étienne de Bourbon, but not by very long.

As in so many earlier encounters, the angels intervened both to perform the mystical intervention and to reinforce it as an act of grace.[58] Like Reginald, Aquinas did not experience mystical castration by excision or other surgical intervention. Their stories, however, are suggestive of castration by ligature, the euphemistic girdle of chastity serving as the ligature that bound the genitals. No matter if they used sword, knife, forceps, or ligature, these encounters ultimately ended with mystical castration, the eradication of sexual desire, and God's grace.

Since so few allusions to Reginald have survived, it is perhaps understandable that some scholars would seek to sanitize the stories of Reginald and Thomas Aquinas. Just as with the earlier case of Hugh of Lincoln, a saint of the stature of Aquinas might be compromised by association with such an unorthodox miracle. Moreover, as Ruth Mazo Karras has argued, strong masculine saints are better understood to aspire to and embody heroic chastity, a testament to their strength and determination. Mystical castration is then understood as a sign of weakness rather than robust masculine holiness.[59] But by the time Aquinas encountered the angels, mystical castration had been understood to be a great gift from God for close to a thousand years. The use of a ligature, a tight band or girdle, around the loins, the genitals, was well known as a means of castration in medical circles. In a less violent era, it might well have seemed more palatable for this more passive form of mystical castration rather than earlier forms of excision. And no matter how uncomfortable, the stories of Reginald's and Thomas's mystical castration follow the same trope as in earlier dreams and visions from the fourth century onward: a holy man struggles with chastity and is visited in the night by a divine agent, most frequently one or more angels. It may be controversial or even scandalous to suggest that Aquinas's girdle of chastity was the instrument for miraculous castration by ligature. However, for Aquinas, as for the others, the supernatural intervention was linked directly to sexual temptation and a man's doubt that he could win the battle for chastity.

The consistency in the discourse of mystical chastity becomes even more evident upon examining stories that deviate somewhat from the norm. For example, Caesarius of Heisterbach (ca. 1180–ca. 1240) recorded a story in his *Dialogus miraculorum* (*Dialogue on Miracles*) that reveals the battle

[58] Kuefler also highlights the parallels between the mystical castration and Aquinas's experience. "Castration and Eunuchism," 283.

[59] Ruth Mazo Karras, "Thomas Aquinas's Chastity Belt: Clerical Masculinity in Medieval Europe," in *Gender and Christianity in Medieval Europe: New Perspectives*, ed. Lisa M. Bitel and Felice Lifshitz (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press), 52–67.

for chastity and miraculous castration wrapped in anger and retribution.[60] A monk from Clairvaux was troubled by unmanageable sexual temptation. The usual monastic disciplines of prayer and confession provided no relief. At last, the monk decided to leave the monastery and return to the world "because he could not be without a wife" (eo quod non posset carere muliere).[61] Upon hearing this, the prior implored him to stay for just one more night, and the monk agreed. That night he fell asleep and dreamed that "he saw at a distance a horrible man, in the likeness of an executioner, hastening towards him, holding in his hand a long knife and with a huge black dog following him. At this sight he trembled. And no wonder. The man, seizing him violently, cut off his genitals and threw them to the dog, which immediately devoured them. Waking up from the horror of the vision, the monk thought he had been made a eunuch. Which indeed was so, though not, as the vision showed, with a material knife, but by spiritual grace."[62] Despite the fear and violence of this account, despite the executioner and his dog bearing no resemblance to or parallel with the angels and saints who were God's agents in other visions of mystical castration, Caesarius interprets the story positively, as if it were a conventional dream of mystical castration. He records that the monk was subsequently considered virtuous and, significantly, remained a physiological virgin.[63] Caesarius conveys something of the fear and violence of castration in lived reality, as well as in the monk's dream. This fear, however, fades in comparison with a more abiding monastic fear: the monk avoided the snare of marriage and

[60] Caesarius of Heisterbach was a member of the Cistercian order, an order widely renowned for asceticism. He was a monk at the Cistercian Abbey of Heisterbach, eventually rising to the position of prior. Sometime between 1219 and 1223 he compiled a collection of 746 miracle stories. The pedagogical intent of the collection is reflected in its structure as a dialogue between a monk and a novice. The miracle stories present instances of supernatural intercession into daily life. The collection was popular, and the stories were frequently used in sermons.

[61] Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. Joseph Strange (Cologne: J. M. Heberle, 1856) 4.97, 1:265–66. While *coniunx* was the more formal term for wife, by the twelfth century *mulier* was commonly understood to mean married woman or wife. *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, fascicule VI, M., ed. Ronald Edward Latham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975–2013), 1852.

[62] "Vix tenuiter obdormierat, et ecce conspexit eminus virum horribilem in effigie carnificis ad se properantem, et cultellum longum in manu tenentem, sequebaturque eum canis magnus et niger. Quo viso contremuit. Nec mirum. Ille vero multum impetuose arreptis eius genitalibus abscidit, canique proiecit. Quae mox ille devoravit. Evigilans autem ex horrore visionis, putabat se fuisse eunuchizatum. Quod revera ita erat, et si non ut visio ostendit cultro materiali, gratia tamen spirituali" (Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. Strange, 4.97). The translation is my own. The only English translation omits the detail of the dog and softens the horror conveyed in the original Latin. *The Dialogue on Miracles*, trans. H. von E. Scott and C. C. Swinton Bland (London: George Routledge, 1929), 1:302–3.

[63] For the challenges of identifying a man as being a physiological virgin, see John Arnold, "Labour of Continence: Masculinity and Clerical Virginity," in *Medieval Virginities*, ed. Ruth Evans et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003).

the lust that necessarily accompanied having a wife. This antimatrimonial and misogynistic stance came well after the rehabilitation of marriage and conjugal relations in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. It also stands in contrast with earlier stories in which mystical castration allowed the holy man to interact with women while remaining chaste. Clearly, marital chastity did not enter into Caesarius's understanding of the battle for chastity. Ultimately, the story is supposed to be positive, celebrating how God freed a man from his sexed body, but it is also an example of monastic bullying, leaving the impression that the prior knew what was going to happen if the monk stayed just one more night. It is also a story imbued with misogyny: castration is preferable to legitimate conjugal relations.

Caesarius of Heisterbach promoted a castration miracle that was far removed in tone, temperament, and action from the nearly thousand-year discourse of mystical castration. The profoundly frightening and psychologically disturbing aspects of Caesarius's version of the mystical castration story link back to the earlier and widely popular story about Gerald, the Pilgrim of Compostela.[64] One of the earliest and best-known versions of this miracle story is by Guibert of Nogent (1064?–ca. 1125).[65] Primarily rooted in the miracles of Saint James of Compostela, different versions feature miraculous protagonists, including the Virgin Mary, Saint James, and the devil.[66] For Guibert of Nogent, miraculous castration was more complex than the control of desire, as demonstrated by the changes and innovations he introduced into the well-known story of a man on pilgrimage

[64] Numerous variations of this story are found across Europe in a variety of vernacular languages. For examples, see Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, rev. ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955), 5:232, 408, 465.

[65] Guibert of Nogent was a Benedictine monk, a historian, and the author of what is generally considered to be the first autobiography by a medieval person. The book reveals a psychologically tumultuous man sexually twisted by his difficult childhood. For a discussion of Guibert of Nogent's sexual repression and his preoccupation with castration, see Jonathan Kantor, "A Psycho-Historical Source: The Memoirs of Abbot Guibert of Nogent," *Journal of Medieval History* 2 (1976): 281–304, esp. 288–91 and 298; Guibert de Nogent, *Histoire de sa vie (1053–1124),* ed. Georges Bourgin (Paris, 1907); and *A Monk's Confession: The Memoirs of Guibert of Nogent*, trans. Paul J. Archambault (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). For ease of moving between editions, hereafter the autobiography will be cited as *De vita sua* followed by the book and chapter numbers.

[66] An overview of some versions is provided by Ryan D. Giles, "The Miracle of Gerald the Pilgrim: Hagiographic Visions of Castration in the *Liber sancti Jacobi* and *Milagros de nuestra señora*," *Neophilologus* 94, no. 3 (2010): 439–50. For a highly useful overview of the evolution of the understanding of the devil from late antiquity to the early modern period, see Richard Raiswell's introduction to *The Devil in Society in Premodern Europe*, ed. Richard Raiswell and Peter Dendle (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2012), 23–65. In the later Middle Ages, the devil would seem to have approached women more frequently than men with respect to sexual behavior. See Walter Stephens, *Demon Lovers: Witchcraft, Sex, and the Crisis of Belief* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

to Compostela.[67] The devil, in the shape of the Apostle James, torments the unfortunate pilgrim about his sexual sins because he was involved in a relationship with a woman, very likely an informal but stable marriage of the kind ubiquitous in the eleventh century.[68] Unlike all the other men, the pilgrim is not a monk or cleric or ascetic by any measure. He was a married man not engaged in the struggle for chastity, as were the others. After being harangued by the devil about his supposed sexual crimes, Gerald asks Saint James / the devil how he should expiate his apparently shameful behavior of engaging in conjugal sex. The devil replies: "If you wish . . . to produce penitential fruits that are worthy of the turpitudes you have committed, cut off that member by which you have sinned—your penis, that is—as a sign of fidelity to God and to me. After that, do away with your own life, which you have conducted so badly, by slitting your throat."[69]

The context and details of this story are very different from those of other miraculous castrations. Most obviously, Gerald was not a holy man, and he was not calling upon God's help in the battle for chastity. The angels, saints, and other agents of God have been replaced by the devil, masquerading as Saint James. This must surely account for Gerald's naive, almost blind trust; if there was any one saint that the Pilgrim should have been able to trust while en route to Compostela, it was James. Unlike the other men who were passive recipients of the castration surgery, Gerald is tricked into self-mutilation of the most horrid kind. The act of penectomy would have been lethal in the absence of medical technology to staunch the blood flow.[70] Significantly, it was Guibert of Nogent who introduced the penectomy into his version of the story, reflecting his widely acknowledged obsession with genital mutilation.[71] To this, he added that the Pilgrim should slit his own throat, ensuring that Gerald would die, unshriven and unforgiven. This scene far exceeds the violence presented by Caesarius's executioner and the dog. At least the monk was a passive victim in the coerced castration, and the outcome somehow reflected God's grace. But for Gerald, there were no mitigating factors.

Unlike other mystical *castrati* whose physical bodies appeared untouched, Gerald is left a bleeding, suffering, mutilated dupe, a twisted exemplar for a perverted interpretation of chastity. Even after the Virgin Mary and Saint James interceded and he was miraculously resuscitated, Gerald's body bore

[67] See the discussion of Guibert of Nogent's additions and editorial changesin Jacqueline Murray, "Sexual Mutilation and Castration Anxiety: A Medieval Perspective," in *The Boswell Thesis: Essays on Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, ed. Matthew Kuefler (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 254–72.

[68] This may well have been the kind of stable but unofficial union described by Ruth Mazo Karras in *Unmarriages: Women, Men, and Sexual Unions in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

[69] Guibert of Nogent, *De vita sua*, bk. 3, chap. 19.

[70] This is discussed in Murray, "Mystical Castration."

[71] Guibert of Nogent, *De vita sua*, bk. 3, chap. 11.

the scars of his perilous encounter with the miraculous. Guibert relates: "It was reported that a large scar was still quite visible on his throat, giving the miracle wide publicity; and where the severed penis had been there was some sort of small orifice, so to speak, for passing urine."[72] This departs significantly from earlier accounts; Palladius, for example, explicitly states that the castration of Elias was in a dream and not on his physical body, and while Methodius experienced some form of physical mutilation, he apparently retained his genitals, albeit in a shriveled state. The physical remnants of Gerald's miraculous castration underscore its departure from the earlier discourse. Moreover, it is important to reiterate that this miraculous castration, part trick and part punishment, was the result of a layman having licit conjugal sexual relations with his wife.

In the later Middle Ages, these stories—the positive and inspiring ones—again garnered attention in a way that reaffirms mystical castration's essential role in the battle for chastity. The attestation comes from an unlikely source: the *Malleus Maleficarum* (*The Hammer of Witches*, 1486).[73] Coming out of the tradition of scholastic theology, this work used scholastic methodology to identify and extort confessions from witches, perpetuating gender-based calumny in the process. Much of the perspective of the authors, Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, is misogynistic vitriol and wild accusations against women/witches for harming men's genitals and indeed stealing them.[74] However, perhaps surprisingly, these witch-hunters also included a discussion of the miraculous gift of chastity that had been enjoyed by various saints over the years. Kramer and Sprenger mention Serenus, Heraclides, Elias, Equitius, and Thomas Aquinas. The list is significant. The inclusion of Serenus and Equitius can be attributed to the enduring influence of John Cassian and Pope Gregory the Great, who, respectively, recorded their stories. Palladius's account of the mystical castration of the Egyptian Elias also circulated in the High Middle Ages. Gerald of Wales included a reference to Elias just before his discussion of Hugh of Lincoln's mystical castration.[75] Given the prominence of these saints, it would be helpful to know how the shadowy and virtually anonymous Heraclides is also included in the discussion.[76] Finally, the last example is Thomas Aquinas. By the late

[72] Ibid., bk. 3, chap. 19.

[73] *Malleus Maleficarum*, ed. and trans. Christopher S. Mackay (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). On the importance and influence of the *Malleus Maleficarum,* see Elaine Camerlynck, "Féminité et sorcellerie chez théoriciens de la démonologie à la fin du Moyen Age: Étude du *Malleus Maleficarum*," *Renaissance and Reformation* 19 (1983): 13–25; and Sydney Anglo, "Evident Authority and Authoritative Evidence: The *Malleus Maleficarum,*" in *The Damned Art: Essays in the Literature of Witchcraft*, ed. S. Anglo (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977), 1–31.

[74] Walter Stephens, "Witches Who Steal Penises: Impotence and Illusion in *Malleus Maleficarum*," *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28, no. 3 (1998): 495–529.

[75] Gerald of Wales, *The Jewel of the Church*, 2.17.

[76] Wace, "Heraclides Cyprius," in *Dictionary of Christian Biography*, 2:909.

fifteenth century, he was long canonized and was the most respected and revered member of the Dominican order. Kramer and Sprenger, Dominicans both, thus included Aquinas to gain authority and respectability for their discussion of miraculous chastity. The inquisitors then provide unexpected support for the interpretation of Aquinas's chastity miracle belonging to the discourse of mystical castration.[77]

From the fourth to fifteenth century the discourse of miraculous castration evolved within the context of chaste monastic life. Serenus was alone in the desert with few temptations to distract him, yet he was distracted by himself. His own innate nature caused him to fear losing his battle for chastity, so he reached out for divine assistance. This very much reflects Cassian's own understanding of the battle for chastity. As Foucault points out, nowhere in Cassian's precise analysis of fornication (lust) did he mention relationships with other people or even specific sex acts. For Cassian, the battle for chastity occurred within an individual, and it was achieved when erotic desire and nocturnal pollution were eradicated.[78] Thus, for Cassian and for Serenus, the battle was with the self.

A different field for the battle for chastity confronted Elias and Equitius. Each monk wished to live among holy women and to teach. But these women became the source of temptation and threatened the monk's resistance. In these examples the battle for chastity has been externalized, and the monks seek miraculous assistance to maintain their chastity. This is even more the case when the battle for chastity moves out of the monasteries and into the world. Between the fourth century and the seventh century, the battle ground shifted somewhat. Ildefonsus, like Equitius and Elias, founded a monastery for women. It is unclear, however, if it was this or his movement into ecclesiastical politics as archbishop of Toledo during the Islamic occupation that caused him to seek a divine sword to wield in the battle for chastity. By the eighth century, the movement between the world and the monastery had changed. Rather than leaving monastic life, Walfred ran to embrace it but found that the spirit of fornication and his experience as a married man came with him. The mystery surrounding his mystical castration endures: Was it to tame his flesh, which knew more about sexuality than most brethren, or was it the strategy of an embattled abbot? Equally as complex as Walfred is the example of Methodius, the patriarch of Constantinople. Heavily involved in political battles, Methodius needed his miraculous castration and his ruined genitals to prove he had not lost the battle for chastity and had not consorted with a woman. Somewhat later, at the end of the twelfth century, Hugh of Lincoln left the safety of the monastery to become a bishop, encountering the worldly temptations that accompanied high office. His office required interaction with women, which seems to have been at least part of the impetus for Hugh's mystical

[77] *Malleus Maleficarum*, 2.90.
[78] Foucault, "Battle for Chastity," 19, 21.

encounter with Basil. About fifty years later, Aquinas, too, feared that his resolve would fail when locked in a room with a woman. The women are not always anonymous nuns or women bearing false witness or serving as seductresses. Wives, too, are found in stories of mystical castration. Walfred abandoned his wife, Gerald the Pilgrim was punished for having a wife, and the Cistercian monk was terrorized for wanting a wife. The latter was particularly scandalous, coming after the sacramentalization of marriage in the twelfth century. This was the hard ground on which the battle for chastity was waged in the High Middle Ages.

Over the course of a millennium, the details of the mystical castration stories move away from the individual man's battle for chastity, but the battle remained a quintessentially male discourse embedded in male experience and the male body. Over time it lost its focus on the male self, as seen in the stories of Cassian and Serenus. Mystical castration was a way to reassure men that they could win their individual battle for chastity, whether they were desert ascetics, men of the world, or men of the cloister. By the later Middle Ages, a more sophisticated moral theology had supplanted the earlier need to repress all movements of the flesh and nocturnal emissions. By the time of Aquinas, these were considered to be bodily actions devoid of culpability unless deliberately incited. Thus, a thousand years after John Cassian traveled the deserts of Egypt chronicling the battles for chastity fought by individual ascetics, at last the battle for chastity had been won.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JACQUELINE MURRAY is professor of history at the University of Guelph. Her research focuses on masculinity and male embodiment in the Middle Ages, including the physiological, spiritual, and cultural implications of castration, impotence, and nocturnal emissions.