The tenth-century *Life of Saint Andrew the Fool* contains an episode in which two eunuchs are revealed to be other-worldly beings: one an angel and the other a demon.\(^1\) According to the text, Andrew encountered a monk who was collecting offerings, but was enriching himself instead of distributing them to the poor. The monk looked virtuous to everyone, but the saint, a holy fool, could discern what others could not. Around the monk’s neck he saw a three-headed dragon and an inscription labeling the beast as greed floating in the air around him. Looking behind the miserly monk Andrew saw two “eunuchs (δύο τινὰς τῇ φύσει εὐνούχους) engaged in a trial for [the monk’s] sake. One of them was black with darkened eyes, the other was white, flashing brighter than the sun. The black one said to the most dazzling angel (πρὸς τὸν φαεινότατον ἄγγελον) who guarded him” that the angel’s task of salvation was in vain for the monk did what the demon directed.\(^2\) After an extended squabble, the angel and demon decided to simply ask the Judge, who granted the demon first right to the man’s soul. Andrew, of course, intervened, the monk learned the error of his ways, the dragon fled, and the angel regained his right to the man.\(^3\)

This episode is intriguing for the contrast between what is evident and what requires a label. The dragon is accompanied by an inscription to tell us that the monk is beset by the sin of

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\(^1\) The text was likely written in the 950s: Nikēphoros, *The Life of St. Andrew the Fool*, ed. Lennart Rydén, trans. Lennart Rydén, vol. 1 (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 1995), 48-56.

\(^2\) Ἀπὸ δὲ ὁ μὲν εἷς μέλας ἐπικτισμένους ἔχων τοὺς ἀφθαλμούς, ὃς ἔπει στράτον ἐν ἱερύς ἐξαστράπτων ὑπὲρ τὸν ἠλιόν. Ἐλεγε δὲ ὁ μέλας ἐκεῖνος πρὸς τὸν φαεινότατον ἄγγελον τὸν φυλάσσοντα αὐτῶν; transcription in and translation modified from ibid., vol 2: ch. 32, Ins. 1973-76, pp.144-146.

\(^3\) Ibid., for the whole episode ch. 32, pp. 142-153.
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greed. Andrew uses this information to shock the monk by revealing his secret sin and to berate him. For the two eunuchs, however, the *Life* simply renames them as an angel and a demon. The descriptions of their bodies are presented as sufficient proof of their respective natures. The blackness of the demon and the whiteness of the angel are presented as signs to be read.

The demonic and angelic eunuchs encapsulate Byzantine attitudes toward castrated men. On the one hand, they could be angelic and loyal; on the other hand, they were perceived as sinful and duplicitous. In the story, the “evil eunuch” is black and is later called Ethiopian and the “good eunuch” is white and angelic. The comparison of visionary white and black eunuchs presents the opportunity to pry open some of the paradoxes surrounding eunuchs as social outsiders who were also highly valued within the middle Byzantine court.

Key to this project is work on how bodies are gendered and racialized. Feminist and poststructuralist thinkers, especially Judith Butler, have explored how gender is read into bodies who look and act in ways a society has grown to consider male or female. More recent work on western medieval literature has considered the similar process of racialization. In her important study on the history of racial-thinking, Geraldine Heng defines race as “a structural relationship for the articulation and management of human differences, rather than a substantive content.” Her understanding privileges how society and culture continually make differences, sometimes dividing by skin color or another biologically-defined trait, at other times by religion or behavior. Similarly, Cord Whitaker investigates how racial difference is a “mirage created and maintained through rhetoric.” His approach explores “the imaginative space between stimulus

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4 Ibid., ch. 32, ln. 2090, pp. 150-151.
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and interpretation.”7 In each of these instances, the appearances of bodies and behavior of individuals only take on significance when categories and divisions are articulated and made to signify.

Building on these approaches, this paper probes how they might be applied to the bodies of eunuchs. Several scholars have already discussed eunuchs as represented in literature and as narrative devices.8 As a part of my larger interest in how eunuch bodies were important sites of representation in the Byzantine world, I see the current essay as my own first step in grappling with the intersectionality of race and gender in my work. Focusing on The Life of Saint Andrew the Fool and the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch and its depiction in manuscripts, I ask how the contrast of black and white was made to signify.

A Brief History of Byzantine Eunuchs

Eunuchs were paradoxically valued figures in the Byzantine world. Though their making was outlawed within the borders of the empire, there were a significant number who filled high offices close to the emperor. They were most powerful during the Macedonian dynasty and their numbers and importance significantly declined under the Komnenoi (1080-1185).9 In the Byzantine world, castrated men were most likely easily identifiable. Conflated first with celibacy and then with social impotence, the term eunuch has become a confused category, expanding

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9 Eunuchs were outlawed under Leo I (457-474) and Justinian (527-565), but prosopography and examination of ceremonial texts like Constantine VII Porphyrogenetos’s De Cerimoniis attest to their continuing importance; see especially Rodolphe Guilland, "Les eunuques dans l’empire byzantin. Etude de titulature et de prosopographie byzantines," Études byzantines 1(1943): 197-238. On their decline see Shaun Tougher, The Eunuch in Byzantine History and Society (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 119-127.
beyond physiology. For the Byzantines, however, a eunuch was simply a man who cannot procreate, either through natural causes or through castration. Byzantine castration methods were straightforward and involved only the removal of the testes. They would either be excised or crushed in a warm bath. By and large this operation took place in childhood before the onset of puberty. For this reason, eunuchs produced less testosterone, causing a change in their appearance. They would not grow facial hair, they might store fat more like a woman in their breasts and hips, and, because testosterone causes growth plates to fuse, they might grow very tall with long extremities. In other words, eunuchs made before the onset of puberty (which was probably the case for most Byzantine court eunuchs) were visually identifiable.

Though we do not know how many eunuchs served in the palace of Constantinople, it is important to recognize that the Byzantines were not an aberration and palatine eunuchs were quite common for much of human history. Byzantine court eunuchs derived from their use in Rome, but the tradition of eunuchs in upper class and royal households was common throughout the Mediterranean and Asia. It is also an ancient practice. The castration of human beings probably began between 4500 BCE and 3500 BCE among populations in Persia, Anatolia, or Mesopotamia who had developed the systematic castration of herd animals like cattle and sheep. As Gary Taylor explains, the castration of animals is a way of turning excess and otherwise non-productive males into labor. A prime example of this phenomenon is the ox, a term which commonly refers to a castrated bovine. A cattle herd requires relatively few males to maintain the population and surplus males can be a drain on a farmer’s resources. One solution would be to

kill them; however, cattle are large enough to be used as draft animals and farmers probably discovered quickly that castrating bulls made them less aggressive, easier to train, and therefore suitable to pull carts and plows. Taylor posits that the same reasoning was applied to male captives. Rather than kill their enemies, ancient armies could castrate and enslave them, making use of their sexual and political rivals.12

The tenth-century *Geoponika*, a compilation of agricultural knowledge made for Constantine VII Porphyrogennetos (945-959), gives some idea about how the uses of bodies, both animal and human, were considered in an agricultural context. The text describes straightforwardly what to look for in females and males when breeding. Suitable cows, for example, have a long list of ideal traits, including an oval shape, a snub nose, blackish lips, straight feet, and a yellowish in color with black legs.13 It also advises what kind of farm workers are best for particular jobs. Boys are best for farm work because “they are bred up to labour, obedient, and keenly responsive to whatever arises.” The ploughman needs to be tall to bear down on the plough, while those who work in the vineyard should not be so tall as to tire from bending down to tend the vines; the cattleman needs to have a loud voice.14 While boys will be shaped by experimentation and learning from their elders, the *Geoponika* also suggests that bodies can be shaped in other ways. It explains that calves “should be castrated in their second year; after this castration is not appropriate.”15 Presumably, after this point cattle retain the secondary sex characteristics of bulls, including aggression.16 In other words, to change a bull into an ox,

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14 Ibid., Book 2, ch. 2, pp. 69-70.
15 Ibid., Book 17, ch. 8, p. 319.
16 Dorfman and Shipley note that castration after a certain age in humans does not lead to a loss of secondary sex characteristics like facial hair; Dorfman and Shipley, *Androgens*, 321-25.
castration must be done before the bodily changes wrought by testosterone are permanent.

Though it is a florilegium of different voices, a consistent thread throughout the Geoponika is that certain bodies lend themselves to particular uses.

Eunuchs, it seems, were particularly fitting as servants and administrators.\(^\text{17}\) Whatever their origins, they came to be a regular feature of royal courts, even mythologically: Romans attributed their invention to Semiramis, an Assyrian queen.\(^\text{18}\) Eunuchs were also found in the courts of Assyria and Egypt, while China had a very long tradition of palace eunuchs, the last of whom died only in the twentieth century.\(^\text{19}\) The most common explanation for the proliferation of eunuchs around rulers is their outsider status. Early court eunuchs were most likely slaves and were thus spatially separated from their home and families. In their new environment they were reliant upon their masters, and so, induced to loyalty. Non-castrated slaves might eventually be freed and form families, creating bonds that outlived them, but eunuchs were doubly severed from social networks. Because they could not reproduce, the social ties of eunuchs were defined by the present. This inability to produce an heir also meant that eunuchs originating from within the society they served could be equally placed outside the social order.\(^\text{20}\) In the Byzantine empire the power of castration is particularly apparent; an outsider like Basil I (867-886) could become emperor, but a eunuch’s mutilation—even if he were of imperial lineage\(^\text{21}\)—disqualified him from gaining the crown.

While most scholars agree on the importance of eunuchs as a constructed outsider group,


\(^{19}\) The Eunuch, 7-13; Ringrose, Perfect Servant.

\(^{20}\) See discussion of Hopkins and Patterson below and also Perfect Servant, 5,129, 184-193; Tougher, The Eunuch, 42-53.

\(^{21}\) For example, the patriarch Ignatios was the son of Michael I and, along with his brothers, was castrated and tonsured when his father abdicated so that he could not regain the throne in the future.
opinions are divergent on precisely why eunuchs were chosen. Within some contexts, such as the
Ottoman harems, eunuchs are employed as “safe” guardians of women, but Roman and
Byzantine eunuchs were not exclusively associated with the protection of female spaces.
Historian Kieth Hopkins argued that eunuchs were a sort of buffer between the increasingly
defied Roman emperor and the aristocracy. They could be easily sacrificed as scapegoats in the
event of political scandal. Orlando Patterson, noting that Hopkins’ theory does not sufficiently
explain why eunuchs were chosen over any other outsider group, has taken a symbolic
anthropological approach to argue that the ultimate ruler required the ultimate slave. Because
eunuchs were often characterized as dirty and depraved, he argues that their lowliness and
extreme subjugation set the greatness and potency of the ruler into relief. However, eunuchs
were not only disparaged but could be described positively with special traits and powers of their
own. Analyzing middle Byzantine textual references to eunuchs, Ringrose has argued that they
had a gender identity that was characterized by “perfect service.” Additionally, over and above
their value as servants, eunuchs also fit snuggly into Byzantine ideals of youthful, male beauty.
The remainder of this paper delves into how the particular appearance of eunuchs shaded
judgments of their character.

Saved: The Ethiopian Eunuch

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch revolves around a royal eunuch servant.

Acts recounts how Philip came upon a eunuch official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians. The

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23 Orlando Patterson, Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982).
24 Ringrose, Perfect Servant.
eunuch, sitting in his chariot, was reading Isaiah. Philip asked if he understood it to which the eunuch replied that he required a guide. After listening to Philip tell him about Christ, the eunuch asks to be baptized immediately. Philip does so and then is whisked away by the Spirit (Acts 8:26-40).

The scene is pictured in the so-called Menologion of Basil II, which dates from around 1000 (Figure 1). In the miniature Philip and the eunuch draw near to a river as they chat in the chariot drawn by four horses, two white, one brown, and one black. The eunuch’s smooth face, weak chin, and small, round head signal that the Ethiopian is castrated. While the demonic eunuch behind the miserly monk might lead us to expect that this black figure should be caricatured in some way, he is instead visually pleasing. He is well and richly dressed in pink and dark blue with sparkling golden details and a jeweled shoulder clasp. This is especially notable in comparison with other images of dark-skinned executioners in the manuscript. Those threatening Thomas on page 93, for instance, wear a costume that is clearly not Byzantine (Figure 2). They don short, one-shouldered tunics with tall boots and turbans on their heads. Prominent in and serenely in control of his orderly scene, the eunuch is unique among his dark-skinned companions in the manuscript.26

The “Menologion” miniature is also notable because it is a rare example wherein the Ethiopian is shown as black. An earlier representation of the scene found in the ninth-century Khludov Psalter shows the eunuch as fair with rosy cheeks, blond, and clothed in all white (Figure 3). His horses, too, are all white and draw a bright red chariot. He is as white and luminous as the angelic eunuch vying for the miserly monk. This is the more common way of

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depicting the eunuch, perhaps because a dark-skinned eunuch was a paradoxical proposition.²⁷

Skin color intersects with gender in the Byzantine world. As Myrto Hatzaki has shown youthful pale skin, rosy cheeks, and blond hair were considered ideal beauty standards, but ones generally applied to women, adolescent men, and eunuchs. Men are generally cast as darkened by the sun through their martial exploits, whereas women who ideally stay inside are pale. Eunuchs fall into the latter category and are often castigated for being “raised in the shade” like women.²⁸ Thus, a dark-skinned Ethiopian eunuch presents a paradox. Roland Betancourt has suggested that in representations of the scene wherein the eunuch is fair, the gender identity of the eunuch is stressed over his identity as an Ethiopian.²⁹ Representing the Ethiopian eunuch as blond and rosy-cheeked may have been an iconographic solution to make him legible as a eunuch.

Brightness and whiteness may also have served a symbolic function. In the large survey The Image of the Black in Western Art, Jean Devisse and Jean Marie Courtès surmised that black and white were symbolic rather than racially pejorative.³⁰ The episode with the miserly monk suggests that black and white appearances could be thought about metaphorically and applied to a single individual. When Andrew is chastising the monk he says:

“How can it be that you, who had wings like the seraphim, permitted Satan to cut them off? Why have you, who had the shape of lighting, assumed the shape of darkness? Alas! Although you had eyes like the many-eyed, you were blinded by the dragon, and having been like a sun you have gone down, dark and gloomy like

²⁷ For a survey of representations of the Ethiopian eunuch see ibid., 163-169.
²⁹ Betancourt, Byzantine Intersectionality, 164.
Andrew’s words liken the monk to his angelic guard by utilizing the language of flashing like lightning and the brightness of the sun. Dark descriptors equally compare him to his demonic guard. He has been like both. In this instance black and white do seem to symbolize the state of the monk’s soul rather than associate any particular group with sinfulness.  

While symbolism of dark and light may be an important metaphorical expression, demons are consistently described as Ethiopians. Devisse argued that the cosmopolitan nature of Constantinople and continued trade between Byzantium and Africa meant that the depiction of figures as black people was reflective of realism and not pejorative intent. While this does apply to the images surveyed by Devisse, we cannot ignore that demons are verbally linked to a particular group. When the monk’s spiritual eyes are opened, he sees the demon as a “black Ethiopian, smoke coming forth from his eyes.” Demons as eunuchs also appear in the roughly contemporary *Life of Basil the Younger*. The work of Heng and Whitaker shows that these descriptions are precisely how we learn to read arbitrary groupings and bodily traits. Thus, the “good” Ethiopian eunuch adds another paradoxical twist to the miniature in the “Menologion.” The figure is dark but a eunuch, and Ethiopian but a willing convert to Christianity. Sean Burke’s social-rhetorical reading of the Ethiopian eunuch suggests that the eunuch was meant to

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35 Betancourt has argued that the representation is an overall positive one that treads a middle ground between luminous eunuch and dark-skinned Ethiopian, celebrating the particular beauty of the eunuch by likening him to the figure of night; Betancourt, *Byzantine Intersectionality*, 194-203.
encapsulate the inclusivity of the church. If this challenging figure can accept baptism, anyone can.\textsuperscript{37}

If the Ethiopian eunuch of the “Menologion” stresses the reach of the church, it is also leaves the viewer with a final twist by reversing the pastoral wisdom of the \textit{Geoponika}. The prominent genitalia of the foremost horse suggests that all four should be read as stallions. The beauty and behavior standards of good horses are reflected in the image. They should have “a small head, black eyes, […] a long mane, slightly curled and falling on the right side of the neck, a broad and muscular chest, big shoulders, straight arms, a firm belly, small testicles, […] straight legs, muscular haunches […]” Mentally, a horse should not be “timid, […] not yielding to a rival but pushing it aside, and when faced by rivers or lakes not waiting for another to go first but going ahead bravely itself.”\textsuperscript{38} The white horse in the foreground fulfills these parameters with a straight belly and legs, muscular chest, and slightly curling mane laying on the right side of his neck. Though it is difficult to infer behavior from the image, all four seem to strut bravely forward as the \textit{Geoponika} would like. Eunuchs are often thought to be the opposite of these well-formed beasts.\textsuperscript{39} Ammianus and Basil of Caesarea describe their feet and limbs as twisted.\textsuperscript{40} In behavior they were thought to be soft, subservient, and overly emotional. If in authority, they might be criticized for operating through cunning rather than straightforward action.\textsuperscript{41} The

\textsuperscript{37} Burke, \textit{Ethiopian Eunuch}, esp.15, 248.
\textsuperscript{38} This description is attributed to Apsyrtos. The next chapter by Pelagonios disagrees that black eyes are preferred and advises that horses with differently colored eyes are the finest. Pelagonios also approves of all three colors of horses drawing the eunuch’s chariot; \textit{Geoponika}, Book 16, ch. 1-2, pp. 308-310.
\textsuperscript{39} Though I have not been able to access the book yet, I am thankful to Christina Maranci for alerting me to an equine comparison in a letter from the Armenian Catholicos Khatchik to the Metropolitan of Sebastea. In his discussion of eunuchs he brings up mules, animals made by crossing a horse and a donkey who are always sterile; Tim Greenwood, \textit{The Universal History of Step’anos Tarōneč’i: Introduction, Translation, and Commentary}, ed. Step’anos (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).
\textsuperscript{41} Stewart has recently argued that many Byzantine commanders might be described as cunning and that we should
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Ethiopian eunuch, though, holds the gathered reins in a relaxed and confident grip. He is an image of calm control. While his body would surely be read as castrated, within the rhetoric of the image, the eunuch transcends gender norms. Here, his subservience, his willingness to follow Christ, and chastity is strength.

_Damned: Epiphanios' Friend in the Life of Andrew the Fool_

One could, however, be too submissive.

While the goodness of the angel behind the miserly monk is conveyed by describing him as beautiful, beauty was not always correlated with moral goodness. Instead it could bring temptations and unwanted attention. In a disturbing episode of victim blaming, Andrew damns the friend of his protege, Epiphanios, the future patriarch of Constantinople. Andrew was sitting in front of the house of Epiphanios’ father when a young eunuch, a chamberlain of one of the nobles and a childhood friend of Epiphanios came along. The text describes him as beautiful: “His face was like a rose, the skin of his body white as snow, he was well-shaped, fair-haired, possessing an unusual softness, and smelling of musk from afar.” Because Andrew was sitting naked in the cold, the eunuch expressed concern. Epiphanios, covering up Andrew’s sanctity, lied and said the saint was possessed. Taking pity on him, the eunuch gave him all of the dates he was carrying. Andrew however refused the gift and cruelly shamed the eunuch for sodomy. Explaining his actions to Epiphanios, Andrew says that he rebuked the eunuch so harshly because he is Epiphanios’ friend, otherwise he would not have bothered. Epiphanios protested that the eunuch is a slave and is forced by his master to do whatever he desires. To which

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reconsider whether this was a gendered comment; Michael Edward Stewart, _Masculinity, Identity, and Power Politics in the Age of Justinian: A Study of Procopius_ (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 125-153.

Andrew replied that a slave should only serve his master’s physical needs and not those of the devil. Epiphanios defended his friend once more, saying that if he did not submit he would be brutally punished. To which Andrew replied “This, my son, is the martyrdom of Jesus Christ at which he hinted when he said, ‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.’ Thus, if the slaves do not bow to the abominable sodomitic passion of their masters they are blessed and thrice blessed, for thanks to the torments you mention they will be reckoned with the martyrs.”

The text constructs the eunuch as a sensorial experience. His beautiful form appeals to sight, his perfume to smell, and he even appeals to the tongue by offering dates. Even though the eunuch is not sexually tempting Andrew, he reacts as if he is, rejecting his help and driving him away. From a present-day perspective, the text builds sympathy for the eunuch. He is good, and kind, and beautiful, and Epiphanios’ defense suggests that he is trying to survive as best he can. But with Epiphanios as a surrogate for the reader, the text instructs that sympathy and concern for the physical well-being of the eunuch is misplaced.

The story of Epiphanios’ friend, especially compared to that of the miserly monk, reveals that the playing field was not level for eunuchs. Patriarchal structures weigh far heavier on the beautiful eunuch than they do on the monk, but the narrative leans heavily on the eunuch’s body to make its points. A body that looks like his, that of the angel, is rhetorically valuable to represent the contrast between the shining angel and the black demon. In the context of a eunuch servant, however, it is presented as a sexual temptation. However kindly he behaves toward Andrew, the eunuch exists as a dangerously available and desirable passive sexual partner. In the

43 Nikēphoros, Andrew the Fool, vol. 2, Bk.17, pp. 82-85.
44 Basil the Younger rebukes the Arab eunuch Samonas (who was an actual official in the Byzantine court) on similar terms for being a passive sexual partner; Sullivan, Talbot, and McGrath, Basil the Younger, Part I, ch. 7, pp. 76-77.
world of the text, the beauty of the eunuch’s body does not match the state of his soul, but his circumstances foreclose any possibility of a happy ending. He will either be damned or suffer and possibly die for refusing his master.

**Conclusion**

Both the Ethiopian eunuch and Epiphanios’ friend are visually or narratively effective because they shimmer between oppositions and challenge gender and racial assumptions. The story of the miserly monk with which we began sets up an opposition between a black Ethiopian demon and a white, luminous angel. Expanding out to consider the story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch, however, reveals that black was not a hard and fast signifier of sin or depravity. Further, luminosity and youthful beauty are not reliable signifiers of sanctity and may, in fact, damn their possessor. Existing as social outsiders within the very center of the empire, eunuchs were fitting rhetorical figures for the exploration of boundaries of gender and race.


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Figure 1 Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, “Menologion” of Basil II, vat. gr. 1613, fol. 107, c. 1000
Figure 2 Thomas, “Menologion” of Basil II, vat. gr. 1613, fol. 93, c. 1000
Figure 3 Philip and the Ethiopian Eunuch, Khludov Psalter, Moscow State Historical Museum, MS ГИМ gr. 129, fol. 65r., mid-ninth century