as malign creatures who lured men into homosexuality, and there were admittedly homosexual castrati, as Casanova's accounts of eighteenth-century Italy bear witness. He mentions meeting an abbé whom he took for a girl in disguise, but was later told that it was a famous castrato. In Rome in 1762, he attended a performance at which the prima donna was a castrato, the minion of Cardinal Borghese, who supped every evening with his protector. From his behavior on stage, "it was obvious that he hoped to inspire the love of those who liked him as a man, and probably would not have done so as a woman." He concludes by saying that the holy city of Rome forces every man to become a pederast, even if it does not believe in the effect of the illusion which the castrati provoke.

The Catholic Church does not permit eunuchs, or those known to be impotent, to marry; and this rule was applied to the castrati, so that they had no hope of heterosexual married life. The principle that marriage was solely for procreation barred any concession to a husband who could not father offspring. Hence the castrati were officially stamped as asexual beings, even if they clandestinely gratified their own and others' homosexual impulses.

Opponents of castration have claimed that the practice caused its victims an early loss of voice and an untimely death, while others have affirmed that castration prolonged the life of the vocal cords, and even that of their owner. There is no solid evidence for either contention: the castrati had approximately the same life span as their contemporaries, and retired at roughly the same age as other singers. The operation appears to have had surprisingly little effect on the general health and well-being of the subject, any more than on his sexual impulses. The trauma was largely a psychological one, in an age when virility was deemed a sovereign virtue.

Aftermath. Toward the end of the eighteenth century castrati went out of fashion, and new styles in musical composition led to the disappearance of these singers. Meyerbeer was the last composer of importance to write for the male soprano voice; his *Il Crociato in Egitto*, produced at Venice in 1824, was designed especially for a castrato star. Succeeding generations regarded their memory with derision and disgust, and were happy to live in an age when such products of barbarism were no longer possible. A few castrati performed in the Vatican chapel and some other Roman churches until late in the nineteenth century, but their vogue on the operatic stage had long passed.


Warren Johansson

CASTRATION

See Eunuchs.

CATAMITE

The Latin common noun, *catamitus*, designating a minion or kept boy, is usually derived from the Greek proper name Ganymedēs, the favorite of Zeus. Another possible source is Kadmilos, the companion of the Theban god Kabeiros. The word entered English in the sixteenth century as part of the Renaissance revival of classical literature, and has always retained a learned, quasiexotic aura. The term could also be used as a verbal adjective, as "a catamited boy."

In modern English the termination -ite tends to be perceived as pejorative, as in Trotskyite (vs. Trotskyist) and sodomite. Hobo slang records a turn-of-the-century expression gey cat, for a neophyte or young greenhorn, of which the second element may be a truncated form of catamite, though this is uncertain. In keeping with the Active–Passive Con-
The catamite is commonly perceived as the passive partner of the sodomite or pederast.

*See also Ingle; Minions and Favorites.*

**Cather, Willa** (1873–1947)

American novelist, short story writer, poet, and editor. Cather was born to a cultivated country family in Virginia. When she was nine the family moved to Red Cloud, Nebraska, where the ruggedness of the frontier still persisted. Arriving at the University of Nebraska in Lincoln in 1890 dressed as William Cather, her opposite-sex twin, Willa soon learned to tone down her image. Still she stood out as a brilliant eccentric. A large, ungainly girl, she was too outspoken and socially unsure of herself to adjust comfortably. She also had a habit of developing crushes on women: classmates, faculty wives, and acquaintances. The intensity of her feeling repelled its objects, and Willa would sulk. Nonetheless, her writing skills matured and she joined a Lincoln newspaper as a reviewer. In her art reviews she praised the beauty of female sitters in portraits. Later, her device of male narrators in her novels allowed her to set forth the varied charms of female characters at length.

Cather did not long remain in Nebraska. She got a better job in Pittsburgh, where she met Isabelle McClung, the beautiful sixteen-year-old daughter of a judge. Swept off her feet, Willa committed herself without reservation. In return Isabelle granted affection but not passion. Although Isabelle married in 1916, her close connection with Willa lasted for forty years. Cather settled into a Greenwich Village apartment with her companion Edith Lewis, who was a copyeditor at the magazine. Together they created an orderly life that allowed Cather to produce her masterpieces. One of her greatest pleasures was music, which meant more to her creative life than the conversation of New York intellectuals. As World War I ended, she had already written *O Pioneers!* and *The Song of the Lark*, and her best-known novel, *My Antonia*. Successful from the first, the books allowed her to travel to the Southwest and to Europe. For forty years Lewis was her indispensable friend, companion, and secretary. To outsiders their relationship was a typical *Boston marriage*, an arrangement that suited two professional women. It is uncertain whether there was any genital aspect. Cather’s heart was still pledged to Isabelle McClung.

Her novels tell little of sex and marriage. *Death Comes for the Archbishop* (1927) is the story of a French missionary priest in New Mexico, and *My Antonia* (1918) depicts the world of immigrant settlers in Nebraska’s open spaces. In each the beauty and strength of the land is central. Cather is rightly regarded as a quintessentially American writer. But she was sophisticated as well, and her novels bear comparison with the best that England and Europe could offer at the time. She did not choose to become an open lesbian, though it was always women that she loved, their support that made her work possible. Unfortunately, she decided to destroy her letters to Isabelle McClung, but there survives a revealing series to