

“CALL ME NOT A LORD, FOR I AM LADY”: ELAGABALUS’ EFFEMINACY AND SUBVERSION OF ROMAN SEXUAL AND GENDER PARADIGMS

MARYBETH OSOWSKI

Ancient Romans lived in a society where the presentation and discussion of sexual conduct were prominent in everyday life. From being the subject of murals decorating homes, to being written about in poetry, to being the subject of graffiti, sex was rather prevalent in the Roman world. This is not to say, however, that Roman writers accepted and acknowledged all sex as equal, specifically when the emperor was involved. Roman sexual ideology was tied up with a relatively strict set of ideals concerned with masculinity and power, especially when it came to same-sex relationships. When confronted with individuals who blatantly disregarded the sexual paradigm, Roman writers were anything but positive. One such individual was the emperor Elagabalus, who attained the throne at age fourteen and was assassinated four years later, his body dumped into the Tiber to ensure he would not receive a proper burial. Instead of upholding the traditional paradigms of sexuality and gender, Elagabalus subverted them by appearing effeminate and dressing like a woman, a position fundamentally incompatible with his role as Emperor.

In the ancient world, distinctions between sexualities were not as distinct as they are in the modern world. This makes the study of ancient sexualities somewhat confusing because while it is tempting to apply modern terminology to ancient practices, there are often few direct analogues between ancient and modern concepts, as is the case in regards to Roman homosexuality, and particularly male-male sexual relationships. In the ancient world, it appears that “the idea of a lifelong sexual identity was apparently absent,” and as a result of this the ancients did not subscribe to the same rigid distinctions of sexuality which are present in the modern world.¹ The Romans themselves used various terms to discuss homosexuality, and many of the finer distinctions of the terms are lost to modern historians; the term most used by Latin writers, *cinaedus*, is untranslatable.² Primarily, the Roman ideology surrounding sexuality was that the Roman citizen, who typified the masculine man, would always be in the penetrating role, while those who were not Roman citizens, and who were associated with the feminine, would always be in the receptive role. Therefore, it was acceptable that women and slaves were to be in the receptive role, but “adult men who display[ed] a desire to be penetrated” were depicted in writing as “effeminate anomalies.”³ Same-sex relations on their own were not seen as any cause for concern; the concern was the possibility that a freeborn Roman citizen would be in the passive role. Roman attitudes towards male-male relationships were founded on an “inequality of power” which was “a more permanent and deeper feature of the sexual

¹ Martha C. Nussbaum, forward to *Roman Homosexuality* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), xi.

² Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, 6.

³ *Ibid.*, 8.

bond.”⁴ This was opposed to, for example, Greek pederasty, which was founded upon an educational bond with the improvement of society as a philosophical underpinning. Therefore, power was equated with masculinity, while being subservient was equated with femininity or effeminacy.

In almost every aspect of his life, Elagabalus not only disregarded convention but actively did away with it. Inversion was, to Roman writers, the defining characteristic not only of Elagabalus’s person, but of his reign as well. By far, however, Elagabalus’s most flagrant violations had to do with sex and sexuality. One of his most glaring breaches of the established paradigm was his practice of taking on the passive role in his same-sex sexual encounters. As emperor, Elagabalus was the epitome of Roman political power. The *Historia Augusta* presents Elagabalus as “tak[ing] the role of Venus” in his private re-enacting of the story of the Judgment of Paris,⁵ even going so far as to “model the expression on his face on that with which Venus is usually painted.”⁶ Cassius Dio adds that although he married and had intercourse with many women, it was not for his own pleasure, but rather so that he could learn to “imitate their actions when he should lie with his [male] lovers.”⁷ His lovers were procured by agents specifically tasked with finding particularly well-endowed men to be brought back to the palace for his pleasure. He would also use the public baths as a means to find sexual partners, even going so far as to have the palace baths turned into a public bath for that express purpose. In his sexual life, he sought to “recreate female characteristics within the male.”⁸

Elagabalus eventually married a slave and charioteer named Hierocles whom he referred to as his husband. Although it is uncertain whether the marriage was legally binding or not, it was not without historical precedent.⁹ This relationship appears to have been the longest-lasting of his life. Elagabalus, in fact, had such an “ardent and firmly fixed passion” for Hierocles that he wished to name him Caesar, presumably so that he could undertake the role, not only the assumed title, of empress.¹⁰ The “unnatural vice” described in the *Historia Augusta* was not that he was engaging in homosexual acts, but rather that while doing so, he was taking the receptive role. This was out of line not only

⁴ Nussbaum, xiv.

⁵ *Historia Augusta* 5.4.

⁶ *Historia Augusta* 5.5.

⁷ Cassius Dio, 80.13

⁸ Jeremy Reed, “Heliogabalus: Black Sun Rising” in *Caligula: Divine Carnage: Atrocities of the Roman Emperors* (London: Creation, 2001), 141.

⁹ The emperor Nero had also participated as a bride in a same-sex marriage and had similarly been attacked for it. There are also mentions of same-sex marriages in Juvenal’s satires. The *Historia Augusta* reports that some of Elagabalus’s male courtiers boasted of their husbands in an attempt to flatter and imitate the emperor. There is, as Williams says, “no compelling argument” to doubt the reported marriages of Nero and Elagabalus (280).

¹⁰ Cassius Dio, 80.15.4.

because of his role as a Roman citizen, but also because his role as Roman emperor prohibited that he should be anything but the dominant partner.

Elagabalus disrupted not only the sexual hierarchy, but also the gender roles under which Rome operated. As if taking the passive role was not enough, he decided to “have his whole body depilated,” attempting to look more feminine to “arouse the lusts of the greatest number.”¹¹ Depilation was the ultimate hallmark of effeminacy in the textual tradition of the Romans. Contrasted with the traditional Roman male, who was to pay very little attention to his appearance outside of looking clean and tidy, Elagabalus spent a great deal of time crafting his outward appearance, another defining characteristic of the effeminate man. He was reportedly the first emperor to wear clothing entirely made out of silk.¹² He would often go about dressed as a woman in the city of Rome, oftentimes going to taverns or brothels wearing a wig and playing the part of a female prostitute.¹³ This practice was continued within the palace as well. Dio reports that he established a special room within his palace where he would stand “nude at the door of the room, as the harlots do,” and solicit specially procured passers-by.¹⁴ He also paid a good deal of attention to the use of makeup and jewellery. He wore a “Persian tiara,” lined his eyes with kohl, penciled in his eyebrows, used foundation, and wore gold rings, necklaces, bracelets.¹⁵

His affinity with the feminine did not only exist at the surface level. He referred to himself as wife, mistress, and queen, even going so far as to correct those who referred to him as a ‘lord’. Beyond simply referring to himself as a wife, he apparently took delight in the idea of being viewed as an adulteress, allowing himself to be caught being unfaithful so that he would be “violently upbraided by his “husband” and beaten.”¹⁶ He even went so far as to promise large sums to any physician who could successfully equip him with female genitalia, an anecdote which Dio reports to show the extremity of his sexual perversions but to which modern biographers have reacted more sympathetically.¹⁷ Jeremy Reed speculates that Elagabalus’s “sexual identification seems to have been with the hermaphroditic.”¹⁸ If nothing else, in Reed’s opinion Elagabalus apparently wanted to “know himself as a man used as a woman by another man,” but other modern biographers have read Elagabalus as falling somewhere between transvestite and transsexual.¹⁹ Elagabalus embodied not only the effeminate but came to embody the feminine as well. He

¹¹ *Historia Augusta* 5.5

¹² *Ibid.*, 26.1.

¹³ Cassius Dio, 80.13.2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.3.

¹⁵ Reed, 113.

¹⁶ Cassius Dio, 80.15.3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.16.7.

¹⁸ Reed, 118.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 124.

actively participated in “perfectly acceptable” behaviour for a Roman woman, including working with wool, a task that men were not supposed to engage in.²⁰ Because of the numerous feminine characteristics Elagabalus expressed, Dio often refers to him in his work as Sardanapalus, a mythical Assyrian king who represented not only Greco-Roman stereotypes about eastern rulers but also was portrayed as a “female-king” who combined the “‘manly’ position of a king with behaviour and characteristics normally attributed to women.”²¹ Problematically for the Romans, he simultaneously embodied the dominant and masculine in his position as emperor and the subservient and feminine in his personal and sexual lifestyle.

The anecdotes described by his biographers were perhaps aggravated by the fact that Elagabalus lived a life which was extremely public in nature and often involved remarkable levels of decadence and luxury. In addition to his role as emperor, Elagabalus still held his position as high priest of Elagabal when he moved the black conical stone which represented his god to Rome. He reportedly wore the “barbaric dress which the Syrian priests use” in public when conducting rituals for his god.²² Immediately upon his arrival in Rome, he set about building an eastern-style temple to Elagabal on the Palatine hill and even went so far as to transferred other sacred objects from the other Roman gods to that temple. In a move which scandalized traditional Romans, he took one of the Vestal virgins for his second wife, not only to show the supremacy of his chosen god but also, as Dio reports, to produce “godlike children” from the union of a high priest and high priestess.²³ Dio also reports of the peculiarities of Elagabalus’s religious practices, which include circumcision and a prohibition on eating swine, “barbaric chant[ing]” and the sacrifice of numerous animals and young children.²⁴

Despite his public actions, however, it is almost impossible to judge what the public reaction to Elagabalus would have been. Because of his practice of establishing festivals and handing out gifts to the populace, it is possible that they would have had a favourable view of Elagabalus.²⁵ On the other hand, the Roman elite universally despised Elagabalus. Cassius Dio, as a traditional Roman senator, would understandably have been shocked and disgusted by what Elagabalus did to the traditional order of Roman society. Although Dio was working for Severus Alexander, who ordered Elagabalus’s memory to be condemned, there is no reason to suspect that his own opinion of Elagabalus were any different from what he wrote. The *Historia Augusta*, written by an unknown author or authors beginning in the reign of Constantine in the 4th century, is also problematic as a

²⁰ Martin Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome’s Decadent Boy Emperor* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 99.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²² Cassius Dio, 80.11.2.

²³ *Ibid.*, 80.9.3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.11. Historians, however, are doubtful that human sacrifice was an actual aspect of his religion.

²⁵ Icks, 82.

source. It is unknown whether the source is factual or more along the lines of a parody text and to what extent the anecdotes presented have been exaggerated, if at all. Even if the source is exaggerated, it clearly shows just how damning Elagabalus's actions were in the eyes of his contemporaries.

Elagabalus thus became something of a paradox to his contemporaries. He embodied both the position of ultimate power in terms of society, but in regards to his sexuality he adopted the role of passivity to the point of servility. His disinterest in things traditionally masculine, such as gladiatorial games and military campaigning, lost him the favor of the soldiers who were responsible for placing him on the throne who came to view him as a "woman in a man's body," a view of himself which it seems that Elagabalus would welcome.²⁶ Although it is risky to assign modern terminology to the ancient past, especially in light of the vastly different sexual and gender ideologies of both the modern and ancient period, it would not be too far a stretch to suggest that his actions expressed transvestite, transgender, or transsexual tendencies, which were evidenced in his desire to acquire female genitalia, his dressing in feminine clothing, and adoption of female titles. The implication of being feminine in the Roman world was seen in terms of negation: effeminate men were what real men were not. Cassius Dio certainly stressed that he was not a real man, but at the same time imply that he is not a real woman. Elagabalus's sexual tendencies and practices, and his tendencies to dress and act in a traditionally feminine manner, were ultimately incompatible with his role as the emperor because of the established gender and sexuality paradigms under which the Romans operated.

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²⁶ Barber 148.