

University of Victoria

Receptions of the Roman Emperor Elagabalus as a Queer Figure

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Thesis

With all information about his reign destroyed after his assassination, the child emperor Elagabalus was not one whom history was intended to treat kindly. The biographies later written by the Roman senator Dio Cassius and the anonymously authored *Historia Augusta* purposely sought to other and slander him through emphasis and exaggeration of his Syrian upbringing, his effeminate behaviour, and his scandalous relationships with both men and women. Fiction authors in the 20th and 21st centuries, however, have reinterpreted these aspects of identity in the new light of modern social opinions, gradually creating a new tradition built on the old: rather than being reasons to vilify Elagabalus, the very rumors that were meant to slander him have become the very things he is now most known and celebrated for. In one way or another, all of the reception pieces examined here empathize with Elagabalus—not in spite of his queerness, but because of it.

218-222

A Defamed Reign

Raised in the Syrian town of Emesa as a priest to the sun god Elagabal, Elagabalus ascended the throne at the young age of 14 through a conspiracy that alleged him to be the illegitimate son of the previous emperor Caracalla. Only four years later, the very people that conspiracy had him assassinated and replaced by his more traditionally educated younger cousin Alexander.

Following his death, all records of Elagabalus' reign were destroyed for the sake of his successor's public image. The earliest of only three biographical records that survive from antiquity was written by the senator Dio Cassius in c.229. Looking to earn Alexander's favour, Dio's narrative emphasized Elagabalus as a hypersexual foreign zealot, with stories of human sacrifice, effeminate behaviour, and sexually submissive relationships. Included was the most famous quote attributed to Elagabalus: "Call me not Lord, for I am a Lady." (*Hist.* 80[79].16.5)

Despite Dio Cassius' propagandistic motives, the lack of comparative sources and the later further exaggeration in the *Historia Augusta* (c.380)—a text now considered largely fictitious—has led this characterization of Elagabalus to become historical canon, labeling him as one of Rome's most deplorable rulers.

"The life of [Elagabalus] I should never have committed to writing – in order that no one might know that he had been princes of the Romans." (H.A. 1.1)

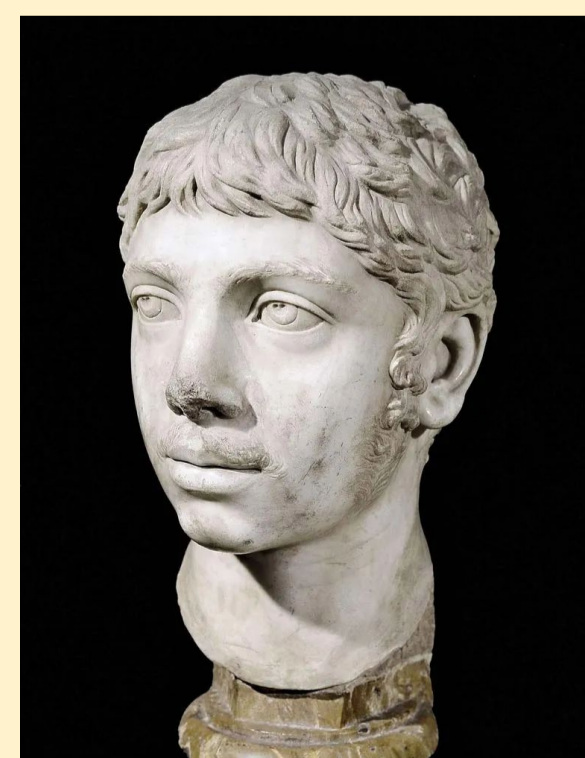


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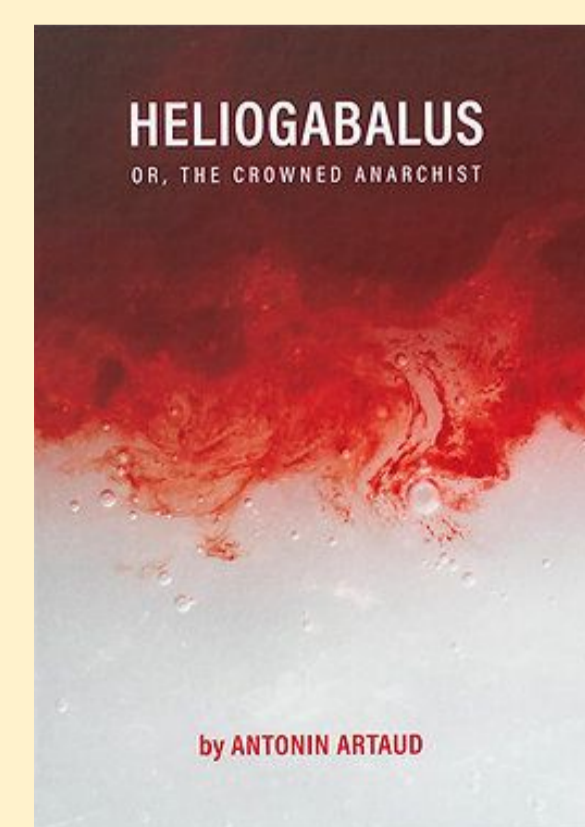
1933

Heliogabalus; Or, The Crowned Anarchist, Antonin Artaud

Shortly after a stay in a mental institution and only a few years before his magnum opus *The Theatre of Cruelty*, French playwright and surrealist Antonin Artaud set about writing his own narrative of the life of Elagabalus. Based only partially on the ancient sources, *Heliogabalus* was written as part biography, part autobiography, and with the intention of "correcting" historians with information Artaud claimed to have received divinely.

Psychosexual and steeped in Orientalism, *Heliogabalus* presents Elagabalus as the priest of a sex cult and a martyr to anarchism, who had sought to destroy Rome by openly mocking and rebelling against social conventions. Here, Elagabalus is an incestuous sadomasochistic puppet, controlled by his female relatives who had taught him to rule through sex.

While Artaud heightened the negative characteristics written of by Dio Cassius and the *Historia Augusta* to an almost farcical level, this behaviour was given political intention. Rather than a deplorable mistake of an emperor, Elagabalus was made into a perverse hero for those who rejected conformist society.



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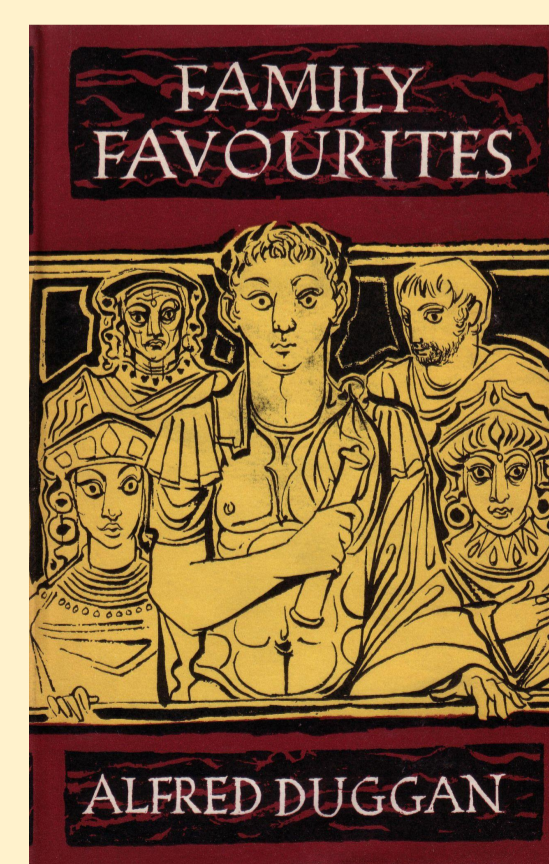
1960

Family Favourites, Alfred Duggan

Written by British historian Alfred Duggan during a period of moral panic over homosexuality, *Family Favourites* attempted to present Elagabalus in a way as to be faithful to the ancient sources, but palatable for a conservative modern audience.

Narrated by a hypermasculine and explicitly heterosexual soldier, Duggan's novel is in some ways remarkably queer given its intended audience. Here, Elagabalus spends most of the novel in a polyamorous relationship with two male lovers, repeatedly saying outrightly that he has no attraction towards women. However, the effeminacy so emphasized by Dio Cassius becomes a symptom of Elagabalus' sexuality, and the mid-century binary understanding of sexuality causes the narrative to fumble when it has to justify Elagabalus' historical marriages to women.

Family Favourites' attempt to sterilize a history that was intentionally written to shock results in a narrative of contradictions: Elagabalus is effeminate but masculine; he is homosexual, but falls in love with a woman; he is immoral and decadent, but only because he is young and burdened with more wealth than he knows what to do with.



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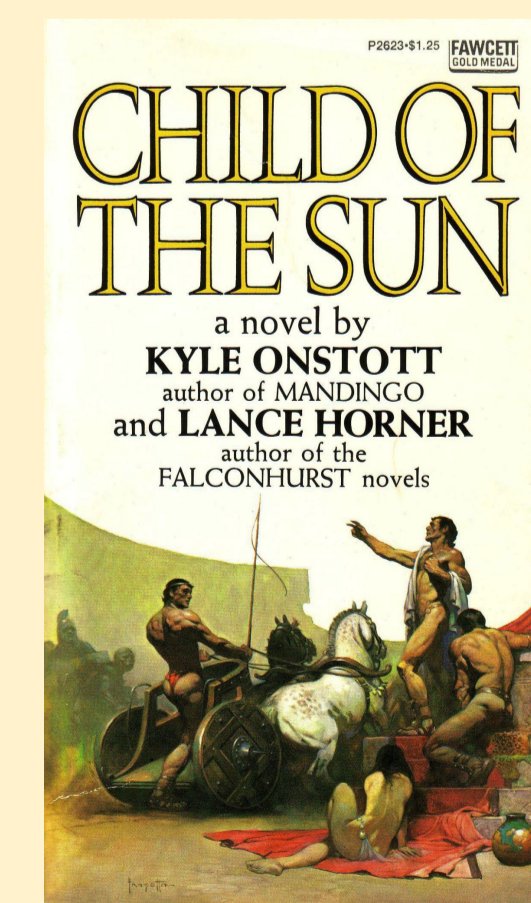
1966

Child of the Sun, Kyle Onstott & Lance Horner

Having no reservations about palatability, Onstott and Horner had built their careers on shocking and disturbing their audiences with gritty novels about the antebellum south. Though published less than a decade after *Family Favourites*, *Child of the Sun* presents a much more openly immoral interpretation of Elagabalus' life.

Taking inspiration from Artaud, *Child of the Sun's* Elagabalus practices sacred prostitution and intentionally breaks social conventions for the sake of spiting the senate. In a move influenced by the authors' own sexual orientations, however, at the heart of the novel is a same-sex romance in which Elagabalus' husband is responsible for him (temporarily) improving himself as a leader—though the fact that this correlates with him becoming more masculine still falls back on homophobic and misogynistic biases.

Though not a positive representation of the emperor, the novel ultimately frames Elagabalus as a tragic gay anti-hero: Elagabalus starts out as hedonistic and cruel, yet just as he is finally coming into his own, he is destroyed by the people who made him who he was because they cannot condone an emperor who submits himself to another.



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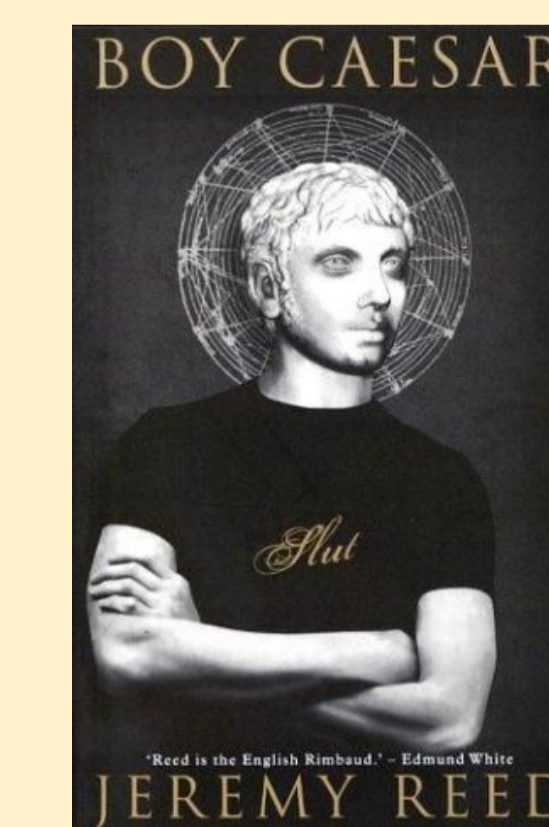
2003

Boy Caesar, Jeremy Reed

Influenced by the British underground gay scene, poet and novelist Jeremy Reed's *Boy Caesar* brings Elagabalus and his Rome into the modern era, mapping turn of the millennium London onto the ancient capital.

Appalled by the conservatism he encounters after arriving in Rome, Reed's Elagabalus leaves the running of the state to his mother while he becomes Patron Saint of the Rent Boys. The novel reduces the historical figure to a mouthpiece for modern queer concerns, attributing the senate's distaste for him to homophobia and his assassination to "the actions of vindictive gay-bashers." (p.70) Elagabalus' friends die of AIDs, his husband blames him for making him gay, and Elagabalus himself struts around drag shows.

Intentionally or not, *Boy Caesar* ends up as a reflection less of history, and more of the way marginalized people tend to map our own identities onto historical figures whom we believe we can relate to. When the novel culminates with Elagabalus being reborn in the present day, it is no wonder that this boy created through a modern lens fits more neatly into modern society than his own.



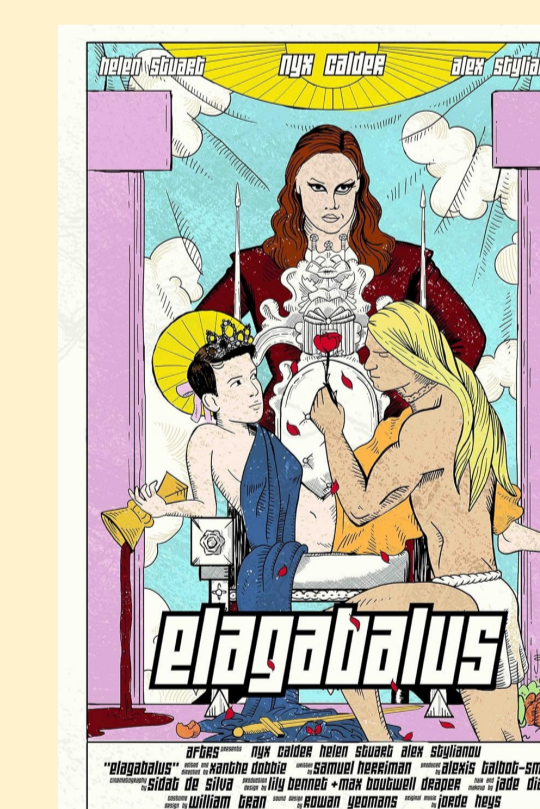
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2020

"Elagabalus", dir. Xanthe Dobbie

Created as a student project, the short film "Elagabalus" plays fast and loose with the historical sources in favour of a neon and camp glorification of Elagabalus as a genderqueer ruler.

The film explicitly uses they/them pronouns for Elagabalus, reflecting a trend in recent years of interpreting Dio Cassius' claims of effeminacy as signs of a transgender identity, and narrows the plot down to a soap opera-style love quadrangle, where Elagabalus' infidelity is the cause of his death. The simplified and largely ahistorical representation of Elagabalus ends up falling back on negative assumptions present in the older texts, such as attributing the emperor's behaviour to youth and an excess of wealth, including an incestuous relationship with his mother, and repeating Orientalist details that have been so removed from their context that they are naively understood as only quirky.



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The overall result is an example of a wider trend with how Elagabalus is often interpreted by present audiences, where the apparent queerness in the ancient sources becomes the focus without deeper investigation into the motives behind those claims.

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