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# Sex and Power in Cassius Dio's *Roman History* *The Case of Elagabalus*

*Chrysanthos S. Chrysanthou*

Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Heidelberg, Germany

*chrysanthou@uni-heidelberg.de*

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## Abstract

This article contributes to our understanding of Dio's technique of using sexual discourse as a useful tool of characterisation and ethical and historical interpretation. It also aims to advance our understanding of the role of sexual-moral critique in ancient historiography more generally. In the first part, it argues that comments on sexual matters in Dio's history contribute to the construction of imperial portraits and the evaluation of an emperor. Sexual transgressions regularly coalesce with other bad characteristics of a ruler and his overall tyrannical behaviour. In the second part it is suggested that Dio's representation of Elagabalus is considerably peculiar in terms of both its narrative technique and content, including themes and stories that unfold in significantly different and unexpected ways. Sexual misconduct is not simply associated with other vices, but is also used as a significant stand-alone category in the historian's assessment of Elagabalus' character and reign. This understanding of Dio's technique, it is proposed, makes not only a historiographical point, but also a significant historical one about Elagabalus, his rule, and the state of the Roman Empire at the time.

## Keywords

Cassius Dio – historiography – sexuality – narrative technique – Elagabalus – characterisation

## 1 Introduction

(1) Αὐρήλιος δὲ δὴ Ζωτικὸς, ἀνὴρ Σμυρναῖος, ὃν καὶ Μάγειρον ἀπὸ τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς τέχνης ἀπεκάλουν, καὶ ἐφιλήθη πᾶν ὑπ' αὐτοῦ καὶ ἐμισήθη, καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἐσώθη. (2) οὗτος γὰρ δὴ καλὸν μὲν καὶ τὸ πᾶν σῶμα ὥστε καὶ ἐν ἀθλήσει ἔχων, πολὺ δὲ δὴ πάντας τῶ τῶν αἰδοίων μεγέθει ὑπεραίρων, ἐμνηύθη τε αὐτῶ ὑπὸ τῶν ταῦτα ἐξεταζόντων, καὶ ἐξαίφνης ἐκ τῶν ἀγῶνων ἀναρπασθεὶς ἀνήχθη τε ἐς τὴν Ῥώμην ὑπὸ πομπῆς ἀπλέτου καὶ ὄσσην οὔτε Αὐγαρος ἐπὶ τοῦ Σεουήρου οὔτε Τιριδάτης ἐπὶ τοῦ Νέρωνος ἔσχε, (3) πρόκοιτός τε καὶ πρὶν ὀφθῆναι οἱ ἀποδειχθεὶς, καὶ τῶ τοῦ Ἀουίτου τοῦ πάππου αὐτοῦ ὄνόματι τιμηθεὶς, καὶ στεφανώμασιν ὥσπερ ἐν πανηγύρει ἡσκημένος, ἐς τὸ παλάτιον λυχνοκαῖα πολλῆ λαμπόμενος ἐσήλθε. (4) καὶ ὅς ἰδὼν αὐτὸν ἀνέθορέ τε ἐρρυθμισμένως, καὶ προσειπόντα, οἷα εἰκὸς ἦν, “κύριε αὐτοκράτωρ χαίρει,” θαυμαστῶς τὸν τε αὐχένα γυναικίσας καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐπεγκλάσας ἡμείψατο, καὶ ἔφη οὐδὲν διστάσας “μή με λέγε κύριον· ἐγὼ γὰρ κυρία εἰμί.” (5) καὶ ὁ μὲν συλλουσάμενός τε αὐτῶ παραχρήμα, καὶ ἐπὶ πλεῖον ἐκ τῆς γυμνώσεως, ἅτε καὶ ἰσόρροπον τῇ φήμῃ εὐρῶν αὐτὸν ὄντα, πασχητιάσας ἐν τε τοῖς στέρνοις αὐτοῦ κατεκλήθη, κὰν τοῖς κόλποις ὥσπερ τις ἐρωμένη δεῖπνον εἴλετο· (6) ὁ δὲ Ἱεροκλῆς φοβηθεὶς μὴ καὶ μᾶλλον αὐτὸν ἑαυτοῦ δουλώσῃται, καὶ τι δι' αὐτοῦ δεινόν, οἷα ἐν ἀντερασταίς εἴωθε γίγνεσθαι, πάθη, φαρμάκῳ τινὶ αὐτὸν διὰ τῶν οἰνοχόων, προσφιλῶν που ἑαυτῶ ὄντων, ἐξεθήλυνε. καὶ οὕτως ἐκεῖνος ἀστυσία παρὰ πάσαν τὴν νύκτα συσχεθεὶς ἀφῆρέθη τε πάντων ὧν ἐτετυχήκει, καὶ ἐξηλάθη ἔκ τε τοῦ παλατίου καὶ ἐκ τῆς Ῥώμης καὶ μετὰ ταῦτα καὶ ἐκ τῆς λοιπῆς Ἰταλίας· ὃ καὶ ἔσωσεν αὐτόν.<sup>1</sup>

(1) Aurelius Zoticus, a native of Smyrna, whom they also called ‘Cook’, after his father’s job, incurred the emperor’s thorough love and thorough hatred, and for the latter reason his life was saved. (2) This Aurelius not only had a body that was beautiful all over, seeing that he was an athlete, but in particular he greatly surpassed all others in the size of his private

1 D.C. 80[79].16.1-6. References to Cassius Dio are from the edition of Boissevain 1895-1931, with the ‘reformed’ numeration of Boissevain, which Cary’s Loeb edition also uses, followed by the ‘traditional’ numeration in brackets. For the translation of Dio’s text I use that of Cary’s 1914-1927 edition, slightly adapted at some points, together with that of Scott 2018. For translations of other texts, I use that of the Loeb editions. This is not the place to discuss the vast theme of the state of Dio’s text, but it might be useful to mention that the chief mss. of the *Roman History* cover books 36-60 (with some *lacunae*). There is also a manuscript, BAV *Vat. Gr.* 1288 (5th or 6th century AD), which contains a portion of Dio’s later narrative (79[78].2-80[79].8.3). The rest of Dio’s text has to be reconstructed from epitomes and *excerpta* (for the text of Elagabalus’ reign chiefly the epitome of Xiphilinus, the *Excerpta Valesiana*, and the *Excerpta Vaticana*). See further Scott 2018, 2-3. On Xiphilinus’ working method and reliability, see Mallan 2013; Berbessou-Broustet 2016; and on Dio’s mss. see Mazzucchi 1979.

parts. This fact was reported to the emperor by those who were on the look-out for such things, and the man was suddenly taken up from the games and brought to Rome, accompanied by an immense escort, larger than Abgarus had had in the reign of Severus or Tiridates in that of Nero. (3) He was appointed *cubicularius*, even before he was seen by the emperor, was honoured by the name of the latter's grandfather, Avitus, was adorned with garlands as at a festival, and entered the palace lighted by the glare of many torches. (4) When he [i.e. the emperor] saw him, he sprang up with rhythmic movements, and then, when Aurelius addressed him with the usual salutation, "My Lord Emperor, Hail!", he moved his neck in a wonderfully feminine way, and turning his eyes upon him seductively, answered without any hesitation: "Call me not Lord, for I am a Lady". (5) Then he [i.e. the emperor] immediately joined him in the bath, and finding him when stripped to be equal to his reputation, burned with even greater lust, reclined on his breast, and took dinner, like some loved mistress, in his bosom. (6) But Hierocles fearing that Zoticus would enslave the emperor more completely than he himself could, and that he might therefore suffer some terrible fate at his hands, as often happens in the case of rival lovers, caused the cup-bearers, who were well disposed toward him, to administer a drug that abated the other's manly prowess. And so Zoticus, after a whole night of embarrassment, being unable to secure an erection, was deprived of all the honours he had received, and was driven out of the palace, out of Rome, and later out of the rest of Italy; and this saved his life.

The aforementioned anecdote, which occurs in the abridged version of Cassius Dio's *Roman History*, is astonishing for its sensational and provocative depiction of the emperor's transgressive sexual activity. It can serve as a useful preamble to our discussion in this article, for it allows us to consider a cluster of themes that are repeatedly associated with Elagabalus throughout Dio's narrative, characterising him as unmanned and sexually deprived.<sup>2</sup>

2 The other two main sources about Elagabalus' reign vary in their themes and emphases, with Herodian offering much less information about the emperor's sexual conduct and gender self-presentation (cf. 5.5-5; 5.6.2; 5.6.10; 5.8.1), while the *Vita Heliogabali* abounds with such details (e.g. 2.1-2; 5; 6.1-5; 8.6-7; 10.2-3; 10.5-7; 12.1-2; 23.5; 24.2-3; 25.4-7; 26.3-5; 27.7; 29.1-2; 31; 32.5-9). On the depiction of Elagabalus in the three sources, see Timonen 2000, 114-123, 182-190; Sommer 2004, 105-110; Icks 2008; Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 30-46; Icks 2011, 79-115; Rowan 2012, 172-175; Kemezis 2014, 246-247; Kemezis 2016, 353-369; Osgood 2016, 178; Scott 2018, 17-21, 104-105. Elagabalus' sexual life was a recurrent topic in antiquity. In Philostratus (*VS* 2.31) there is a reference to Aelian's *κατηγορία τοῦ Γύννιδος* ('indictment of Gynnis', i.e. of

Remarkably, Elagabalus falls in love with Aurelius Zoticus, *the son of a cook*, and he takes care that Zoticus is brought to Rome under an immense escort, which (as is explicitly mentioned) is larger than that of Abgarus in the time of Severus or that of Tiridates in the time of Nero. Though it is difficult to understand the reference to Abgarus here, for there is no evidence of him being brought to Rome under an escort,<sup>3</sup> earlier in his narrative, Dio offers a detailed description of the brilliant and costly coming of Tiridates to Rome in order to be crowned king of Armenia by Nero (62[63].1-7).

A backward glance at Dio's description there brings all the more sharply into relief the splendour of Zoticus' entourage here. The gist of the two accounts is the same: both men receive high honours and great gifts from Roman emperors. But the differences are as important as the similarities: while Tiridates' (as well as Abgarus') visit to Rome with a retinue is connected with the political or military conduct of the respective emperor(s), Aurelius Zoticus receives an immense escort as well as power and honours because of some erotic passion. Moreover, whereas Tiridates is depicted as a man 'at the height of his reputation by reason of his age, beauty, family and intelligence' (62[63].2.1), Aurelius Zoticus is especially known for his physical beauty and the extremely large size of his penis—the two things that attract Elagabalus' attention (80[79].16.2). In addition, while the relationship between Nero and Tiridates is constructed in terms of ordered social and political hierarchy—Nero is the emperor and clearly prevails over Tiridates (cf. 62[63].2.4; 62[63].5.1-3), even if Tiridates is disgusted with him and despises him as a man of stage at the end (62[63].6.3-5)—in the case of Elagabalus and Aurelius Zoticus gender and (accordingly) social boundaries are disturbingly transgressed and subverted: Elagabalus plays the role of the seductive woman and appears womanish in his bodily movements (cf. ἐρρυθμισμένως ... γυναικίσας) and manner of talking as well as his display of unbridled lust (cf. πασχητιάσας). Indeed, Elagabalus breaks the rule of Roman masculinity by acting like a loved mistress (ὥσπερ τις ἐρωμένη), while at the same time he brings about the lowering of himself

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the Womanish Man), which has been understood as a reference to Elagabalus. There are also some references to Elagabalus in papyri that mention him as κορύφος, a word denoting the sexually passive man: *P.Oxy.* XLVI 3298 (Horoscopes and Magic Spell; later 3rd century AD): Ἀντωνίου τοῦ κορύφου. Cf. *P.Warren* 21.51 with Rea 1978, 62 *ad loc.* See also *P.Oxy.* XLVI 3299 (Planetary Tables for AD 217-225; later 3rd century AD): ἀνοσίου Ἀντωνίου μικροῦ. See further Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 130; Rowan 2012, 171; Kemezis 2016, 360 n. 40.

- 3 See Scott 2018, 136-137 *ad loc.*, who additionally cites Magie 1950, 1542 suggesting that the reference to Abgarus plausibly concerns Abgarus VIII, King of Osroene, who submitted to Severus during his first Mesopotamian campaign (cf. *Hdn.* 3.9.2, *HA Sev.* 18.1). See also Gowing 1997, 2576-2577.

from the status of a lord and emperor (cf. *κύριε αὐτοκράτορ*) to that of lady (cf. *μή με λέγε κύριον· ἐγὼ γὰρ κυρία εἰμί*). Remarkably, the term *κύριος/κυρία*, as Scott aptly notices, “is prevalent in the reign of Commodus”, and, subsequently, recalls here “the tyrannical Commodus and highlights Elagabalus’ sexual perversion”.<sup>4</sup>

All of these features of Elagabalus, which clearly show him as a disrupter of gender and the socio-political order, and therefore a serious threat to the stability of the Roman Empire and its moral standards, illustrate well the dynamics of gendered invective in ancient Greco-Roman historiography. My aim in this article is to take Cassius Dio’s representation of Elagabalus’ disgraceful sexual attitude as a test case of the ways in which sexual-moral critique is used in ancient historiography. How are notions of masculinity, effeminacy, and transgender activities used in Cassius Dio’s history to (re)construct imperial portraits and discourses of imperial power? And how do such reconstructions fit into his overall depiction of the unstable social and political climate of the Principate? To tackle these questions, I will look first at the extent, content, and functioning of the pronouncements about sexual matters in Dio’s history of the Roman Empire. Second, I will closely examine Dio’s narrative of Elagabalus’ sexual activity, which constitutes the most extended treatment of an individual’s sexuality in Dio’s history.<sup>5</sup> I will argue that, whatever its authenticity,<sup>6</sup> Dio’s representation of Elagabalus’ sexual and gender identity is distinctive within his overall large-scale work in terms of both its content and narrative technique, thus allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the importance of absurd and outlandish sexual behaviour in defining the flavour of Elagabalus’ reign and his ultimate fall.

## 2 Sex-Life in Dio’s History of the Principate

Stories of sexual (mis)conduct in Dio’s history are not limited to his portrait of Elagabalus. Throughout his work, Dio uses sexual material to reveal important aspects of the moral character of the emperors and to assess their adequacy to

4 Scott 2018, 137 *ad loc.*

5 Schulz 2019, 248 characterises Dio’s depiction of the reign of Elagabalus as “the most satirical and invective part of Dio’s *Roman History*”. On Dio’s account of Elagabalus as a ‘satire’, see Osgood 2016.

6 On the question of historicity of Dio’s account of Elagabalus’ reign, see Icks 2011, 117 (“It is clear that he was not attempting an accurate portrayal of the emperor”); Rowan 2012, 169; Kemezis 2016, 353–360; Osgood 2016, 179 (“As in any good political satire or cartoon, in a ‘secret history’ literal truth is often beside the point”).

rule the Roman Empire. On the positive side, Titus, as we are told, after his accession to the throne, 'committed no act of murder or of amatory passion, but showed himself upright, though plotted against, and self-controlled, though Berenice came to Rome' (66.18.1). With regard to Trajan, Dio does not eschew the fact that the emperor was devoted to boys and wine (68.7.4), and that he took delight in gladiatorial contests and was enamoured of a dancer called Pylades (68.10.2). However, he scrupulously emphasises that despite all of this the emperor remained sober, did not harm any boy (68.7.4), and 'as might have been expected of a warlike man, paid no less attention to the civil administration' or justice (68.10.2). Much the same point is made, though less explicitly, about Augustus, whose intimacy with many women (54.16.3) and great passion for Terentia, the wife of Maecenas (54.19.3; cf. 55.7.5), are given brief mention, but they never question his credentials as a competent emperor or let his virtue become ambiguous.<sup>7</sup> These examples clearly show that Dio chooses to excuse or downplay the grim sexual details about emperors, of whom he basically approves, because their sexual conduct tarnishes neither their character nor their moral standing, nor even their political or military career.

What is most striking, however, is the frequent inclusion or association of sexual transgressions with other vices and negative traits (such as lawlessness, cruelty, greed, impiety, arbitrariness, and insolence) that are regularly connected with tyrants in Dio's depiction of bad emperors.<sup>8</sup> Dio combines the tyrannical vices of violence, arrogance, and sexual lust in his description of Caligula's acts of abducting women from their husbands or betrothed (59.3.3; 59.8.7; 59.12.1) and giving himself airs over his adulteries (59.25.5a). He also represents Caligula as a gender transgressor and a defiler of religion: the emperor claims that he had intercourse with the Moon and seduced many women, mainly his sisters, by pretending to be Jupiter (59.26.5). Caligula, so Dio explains, impersonated several male and female divinities, often taking on the appearance (by means such as smooth chin, dress, accessories, and wigs) of a goddess or a maiden, or even a married woman (59.26.5-8), being 'eager to appear to be anything rather than a human being and an emperor' (59.26.8). Moreover, Caligula's establishment of a brothel in the palace, staffed by the children of aristocratic families and the wives of the foremost men, involves insolence, licentiousness, and greed (59.28.9-11).

7 Cf. Augustus' support of marriage and the begetting of children (54.16.1-7; 56.2-10); his severe punishment of his daughter's dissolute conduct (55.10.12-16; 56.32.4). Even when Augustus shows some tolerance towards such bad behaviour, his stance is explained by his democratic and kind nature (55.10.16; 56.40.6-7).

8 On the stereotype of the tyrant in Greek and Roman literature, see Dunkle 1967 and 1971; Tzounakas 2015, 58-67.

Caligula, of course, is not the only emperor notorious for his cruel, insolent, and sexual attitudes. Nero, as we are told, ‘carried on nocturnal revels throughout the entire city, insulting women, practising lewdness on boys, stripping the people whom he encountered, beating, wounding and murdering’ (61.9.2). He also caused a son of a freedmen, Sporus, to be castrated and used him in every manner like a wife (62.28.2), while at the same time he had Pythagoras ‘play the role of husband to him’ (62[63].13.2).<sup>9</sup> Dio stresses the continuous attention on Nero’s brutality and indecency alongside his sexual voracity: ‘Why should one wonder at this, seeing that Nero would fasten naked boys and girls to stakes, and then putting on the hide of a wild beast would attack them and satisfy his brutal lust under the appearance of devouring parts of their bodies?’ (62[63].13.2). It is worth stressing that Dio also includes a reference to the alleged incestuous relations of Nero with Agrippina in order to designate the licentiousness and unholiness in which mother and son indulged at the very time (62[61].11.3-4).

Domitian is similarly painted in tyrannical colours: his sexual misconduct, particularly manifested in his adulteries (65[66].3.4; 67.12.1), his passion for a eunuch (67.2.3), and his lewdness towards women and boys (67.6.3) are found among his most conspicuous vices, which include, *inter alia*, cruelty and violence,<sup>10</sup> impiety (67.3.3<sup>2</sup>; 67.4.7), susceptibility to flattery (67.4.2) and suspiciousness (67.15.3-6). In a similar way, we are told that Geta and Caracalla, as soon as they got rid of their pedagogue Plautianus, ‘outraged women and abused boys, embezzled money, and made gladiators and charioteers their boon companions, emulating each other in the similarity of their deeds, but full of strife in their rivalries’ (77[76].7.1). Caracalla, in particular, displays cruelty and impiety in his murder of ‘four of the Vestal Virgins, one of whom he had himself outraged’ (78[77].16.1; cf. 78[77].16.2<sup>2</sup>-3). Dio is outspoken about Caracalla’s sexual perversion—‘later all his sexual power had disappeared ... He satisfied his lewd desires, as was reported, in a different manner’ (78[77].16.1-2<sup>1</sup>)—and charges the emperor with adulteries which illustrate his acts of violence and other illegalities (78[77].16.4).<sup>11</sup>

9 See D.Chr. Or. 21.6, where Nero’s act of castrating Sporus and changing his name for that of Poppaea is mentioned as an example of unlimited power and lawlessness. I owe this reference to Schulz 2019, 190 n. 8. In Suet. *Nero* 28.1-2 this story reflects Nero’s *libido*. See Schulz 2019, 289-290.

10 See e.g. 67.1.1-2; 67.2.1-3; 67.4.5; 67.9.1-6; 67.11.2-3; 67.12.1-5; 67.13.2-3; 67.14.1-3.

11 On different historical traditions about the sexual habits of the emperor Caracalla, see most recently Davenport 2017, esp. 90-96 on Dio’s history.

Apart from revealing an emperor's tyrannical character,<sup>12</sup> however, details about one's sexual life play a central role in Dio's history, because sexual behaviour may have a direct, often devastating, effect on the public career of an individual and his overall administration of the empire. This intertwining of sexuality and politics may manifest itself in three modes of action. First is the outrage and offence caused to the Roman elite through the emperor's sexual transgressions. For instance, we are told that Tiberius got a bad press (cf. διεβάλλετο) for his 'sensual orgies', 'which he carried on shamelessly with persons of the highest rank, both male and female' (58.22.1); and that Nero entered brothels together with his fellow-banqueters and had intercourse with women, 'among whom were the most beautiful and notable in the city, both slaves and free, courtesans and virgins and married women' (62.15.3-6).

Second, sexuality and politics interrelate in an interesting way in an emperor's practice of bestowal of offices and honours upon his favourites. Thus, Caenis, the concubine of Vespasian, 'was given the greatest influence, and she amassed untold wealth, so that it was even thought that Vespasian made money through Caenis herself as his intermediary' (65[66].14.1-5). Plautianus, moreover, was granted the highest power by Septimius Severus because of the latter's extreme love for him (76[75].15.1-2, 5-7). Herodian mentions Plautianus as Severus' boy-lover (3.10.6). Dio, in addition, does not conceal that Caligula had the husband of his sister Drusilla as a 'lover' and 'beloved' and politically favoured him so much that he wished to appoint him as successor to the throne (59.22.6-7).

Finally, an emperor's amours or sexual habits might be closely linked with his imperial policy and career. Hadrian, for instance, rebuilds Antinoöpolis in honour of his favourite Antinous (69.11.2-3); and he becomes emperor, as Dio relates, because Plotina, 'who was in love with him (ἔξ ἔρωτικῆς φιλίας)', together with Attianus 'secured him the appointment' (69.1.2; cf. 69.10.3). Most significantly, an emperor's sex-life might be associated with his neglect or misconduct of imperial duties. Dio mentions Claudius' slavelike submission to freedmen and women and thus his powerlessness, particularly in moments of drinking and sexual intercourse, for which (as we learn) the emperor had an insatiable

12 On Dio's interest in the emperors' character, see 65[66].9.4 ('Unworthy as this incident is of the dignity of history, yet, because it shows his character so well and particularly because he still continued the practice after he became emperor, I have felt obliged to record it'); 66.26.4 ('And he [i.e. Titus] had surrendered the empire of the Romans to a man like Domitian, whose character will be made clear in the continuation of my narrative'). On such explicit interventions of Dio's narrator, see Hidber 2004, 190-195.



appetite (60.2.4-6; cf. 60.18.3-4).<sup>13</sup> As a result, freedmen and Messalina, herself considerably influenced by her sexual indecencies, played a prominent role in the exercise of imperial power.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, Domitian, as Dio relates, did not actively participate in the Dacian war, but preferred to stay in one of the cities of Moesia and pass his time in sensual indulgence. 'For he was not only indolent of body and timorous of spirit', Dio explains, 'but also most profligate and lewd towards women and boys alike' (67.6.3).<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, accusations of effeminate pursuits or practices might be used to undermine an emperor's qualification to rule and fight—consider, for instance, the sharp thrusts made by Boudicca (62.6.3; 62.6.5) or Vindex (63.22.5-6) at Nero.

As a consequence of this analysis, Dio's comments on sexual matters in his history contribute forcefully to his construction of imperial portraits and his evaluation of each emperor and his suitability for rule. Sexual self-control might be highlighted to enhance the moral stature and positive characterisation of an emperor (cf. Titus), while sexual misbehaviour might be counterbalanced, de-emphasised, or even excused by other positive traits of an emperor and his overall praiseworthy public business (cf. Augustus and Trajan). Dio, in his discussion of Trajan's sex-life, makes explicit that sexual misconduct is censurable if it leads one to execute or endure a based or wicked deed (68.7.4), or if it causes an emperor to neglect any of the duties pertaining to his office (68.10.2). Indeed, a key point that emerges from our foregoing discussion is that sexual transgressions regularly coalesce with other bad characteristics of a ruler and his overall tyrannical behaviour; it helps show the type of vicious actions he tends to perform and explain why (in most cases) in the end he must fail. On this understanding, sexual material also offers an enriching glance into the nature of imperial power and the conditions of the Principate at the time: as we saw earlier, an emperor's sexual conduct may have considerable bearing on his public career and his social and military role.

With these observations in mind, in the following section I will examine Dio's narrative of Elagabalus' reign. Crucially, Dio's section on Elagabalus' sexual misconduct is not only longer than all the other sections on Elagabalus' life and career, but also the most extended treatment of a subject's sexuality in Dio's *History*. This, in turn, flags the importance that Dio attaches to sexuality as a significant component of an individual's nature. But, at the same time, it

13 See also Schulz 2019, 189-190 who comments on Antony's dependence on and guidance by Cleopatra (cf. 48.24.2; 50.5.1-4; 50.28.3; 50.28.5).

14 For the sexual life and atrocities of Messalina and their effect on the politics of the time see esp. 60.18.1-3; 60.22.3-5; 60.28.2-5; 61[60].30.6b; 61[60].31.1-5. On the domineering role of women in imperial palace, see Icks 2017, 71-77.

15 On Domitian's military inactivity and cowardliness in Dio, see Schulz 2019, 234-235.

raises important questions about how the strong emphasis on sex and gender deviance in Elagabalus' narrative makes him uniquely different from other bad emperors. It is worth noticing that the extraordinary character of Elagabalus' outrageous behaviour is placed in the foreground at the very beginning of Dio's narrative of the emperor's reign: 'He [i.e. Elagabalus] drifted into all the most shameful, lawless, and cruel practices, with the result that some of them, *never before known* in Rome, came to have the authority of tradition, while others, that had been attempted by various men at different times, *flourished merely* for the three years, nine months and four days during which he ruled' (80[79].3.3).<sup>16</sup>

### 3 Elagabalus' Transgressive Sexuality

As far as can be gleaned from the epitomized account of Dio's *Roman History*, the historian, in a quasi-biographical manner, narrates the emperor's life and career thematically,<sup>17</sup> his primary intention being to reveal Elagabalus' shameful character and actions rather than to preserve chronology.<sup>18</sup> Thus, the first section of Elagabalus' narrative is mainly concerned with the murders that the emperor committed (80[79].1-7); the next five chapters deal with his violations of constitutional and religious precedent (80[79].8-12); the rest of the account elaborates Elagabalus' sexual perversion (80[79].13-17), and proceeds to relate his overthrow (80[79].17-21).

Scholars have not overlooked the considerable force of Elagabalus' introduction in Dio's narrative, which conveys salient characteristics of the emperor that turn out to be important at various points in the action of the narrative. Dio refers to four derogatory nicknames of Elagabalus: the 'False Antoninus', the Assyrian, Sardanapalus, and Tiberinus (80[79].1.1; cf. *HA Heliogab.* 17.5-6).<sup>19</sup> The last, as Dio himself explains, was given to Elagabalus after he was killed and his body had been thrown into the Tiber (80[79].1.1). As far as the rest of the appellations are concerned, the first denotes Elagabalus' fictional lineage

16 Cf. 80[79].13.1: 'But this Sardanapalus, who saw fit to make even the gods cohabit under due form of marriage, lived most licentiously himself from first to last.'

17 Scott 2018, 102.

18 On the biographical structuring of emperor-narratives in Dio's history, see Questa 1957; Pelling 1997; Coltelloni-Trannoy 2016, 354-362. On Dio's use of rubrics on different topics, see Schulz 2019, 224-225.

19 On Dio's use of nicknames, see Osgood 2016, 180-183.

as son of Caracalla (cf. 80[79].2.2; 80[79].19.4);<sup>20</sup> the second refers to his foreign origins (cf. 80[79].11.2); and the third, closely connected with the second, arouses disturbing associations of Elagabalus with the Eastern king and triggers a range of corresponding expectations in Dio's readers about his effeminacy and licentiousness.<sup>21</sup> Both Diodorus and Athenaeus—the two extant accounts of Sardanapalus<sup>22</sup>—put the spotlight on Sardanapalus' outrageous and effeminate lifestyle (D.S. 2.23; Ath. 12.528e-530c): he consorts with concubines, spins purple garments and works with wool (D.S. 2.23.1; Ath. 529a). He also wears female clothing and takes excessive care over grooming (made-up face and body, painted eyes, shaved beard, and smoothed chin, cf. D.S. 2.23.1; Ath.12.529a). He makes his voice like a woman and is fond of intercourse with both men and women (D.S. 2.23.2). Diodorus explicitly highlights that because of this character Sardanapalus caused his own disgraceful death and the total destruction of the Assyrian Empire (D.S. 2.23.4).

So, Elagabalus' connection with Sardanapalus' name may have especially powerful effects. Besides reflecting the possibility that Dio's portrait of the Roman emperor might have been inspired and informed by that of the Assyrian king, which could serve as a useful backdrop,<sup>23</sup> it activates a range of expectations in the audience about Elagabalus' love of effeminate pursuits and practices—which will gradually be revealed and extended in the remainder of the history. Thus it offers the reader an advance, sinister cue of the wicked reign that is to come.

At several points in his narrative of Elagabalus' murders and wrongdoings in matters of law and religion, Dio explicitly comments on the emperor's effeminacy and sexual misconduct. This is a pointed signal of the connection between Elagabalus' sexuality and other tyrannical vices, which not only illuminates Elagabalus' overall maladministration, but also makes him resemble earlier bad emperors, who were painted in similar (tyrannical) colours (see the previous section).<sup>24</sup> So, while recounting Elagabalus' murder of Pomponius

20 Cf. the uncertainty about the paternity issue in Hdn. 5.3.10, *HA Heliogab.* 1.4-6; 8.4, 17.4-6; 33.8, *Macr.* 6.7.

21 See Timonen 2000, 115-116 n. 210. On the characteristics of Eastern, female-kings, see Gambato 2000. Cf. Icks 2017, 67-70.

22 Other sources include Hellenic. *FGrH* 4F 63, Hdt. 2.150, Ctes. *FGrH* 688F 1.23-28. Further references to Sardanapalus occur in Ar. *Av.* 1021, D.Chr. *Or.* 62.5, Just. *Epit.* 1.3, Clem.Al. *Strom.* 1.24.159.1-2; 2.20.118.6. Cf. Schneider 2000; Lenfant 2001; Rowan 2012, 170-171 with n. 44 on p. 171.

23 Cf. Lenfant 2001, 52-55; Gualerzi 2005, 42 n. 171, 46 n. 196; Icks 2011, 99; Bittarello 2011, 111; Rowan 2012, 170; Icks 2017, 74; Scott 2018, 111-112.

24 On the connection of Elagabalus with the tradition of *malus princeps* in general, see *HA Heliogab.* 1.1; 33.1; 34.1. Cf. Sommer 2004, 98-101; Gualerzi 2005, 39 n. 155, 41 n. 164, 42 n. 171,

Bassus, Dio makes clear that 'the real motive [sc. behind the murder] lay in the fact that Bassus had a wife both fair to look upon and of noble rank', whom the emperor married, 'not allowing her even to mourn her loss' (80[79].5.4). We may recall Caligula's quite similar misdeeds, analysed above. Moreover, we learn that Elagabalus violated the law by divorcing Paula and cohabiting with Aquilia Severa, a Vestal Virgin whom he impiously defiled (80[79].9.3). This is an act, as Dio powerfully comments, 'for which he ought to have been scourged in the Forum, thrown into prison, and then put to death' (80[79].9.4). Caracalla's similar act of cruelty and impiety might reverberate in our minds (78[77].16.1).<sup>25</sup> In addition, though Dio links the emperor's practice of circumcision with the cult of Elagabal, he ascribes Elagabalus' plan to cut off his genitals altogether to his *μαλακία* (literally, 'softness') (80[79].11.2). This is a value-laden term with moral significance for Greek and Roman authors, since *μαλακία* or *mollitia* in Latin undermined one's masculinity, and thus denoted an effeminate man who lacked political authority and military prowess, power and endurance.<sup>26</sup> In Greco-Roman thought, as Williams beautifully describes it, "the oppositional pair masculine/effeminate" was "aligned with various other binarisms: moderation/excess; hardness/softness; courage/timidity; strength/weakness; activity/passivity; sexual penetration/being sexually penetrated; and, encompassing all of these, domination/submission".<sup>27</sup> These binarisms (as we shall see) recur throughout the succeeding chapters about Elagabalus' sexual misbehaviour and play a major role in the representation of Elagabalus' character and regime in Cassius Dio's *History*.

Indeed, Cassius Dio openly states that Elagabalus played the receptive 'woman's role' in his sexual tastes and submitted to sexual penetration. He was hardly the *ἔραστῆς* in his sexual experiences, but rather had intercourse with many women illegally because (as we are told) 'he wanted to imitate

44 n. 180, 45 nn. 188 and 191, 61 n. 258, 68; Varner 2008, 200-201; Icks 2008; Icks 2011, 94; Bittarello 2011; Rowan 2012, 168; Osgood 2016, 188-189; Scott 2018, 105 and 133 commenting on 80[79].13.2-3; Schulz 2019, 249-253.

25 Bering-Staschewski 1981, 109; Timonen 2000, 117 n. 216; Gualerzi 2005, 68.

26 On the signs of *mollitia*, see Edwards 1993, 68-70, 77. Cf. Maecenas' speech to Augustus on the ideal emperor: 'And this title [sc. of the best ruler] can be yours not if you allow them to do whatever they please and then censure those who err, but if, before any mistakes are made, you give them instruction in everything the practice of which will render them more useful both to themselves and to you, and if you afford nobody any excuse whatever, either wealth or nobility of birth or any other attribute of excellence, for affecting indolence or effeminacy (*ῥαθυμίαν ἢ μαλακίαν*) or any other behaviour that is counterfeit' (52.26.2-4). On the programmatic function of the Agrippa-Maecenas debate, see Kemezis 2014, 102-103; Scott 2018, 9.

27 Williams 1999, 142.

their actions when he should lie with his lovers (μετὰ τῶν ἐραστῶν) and get accomplices in his wantonness (τῆς ὑβρεως) by associating with them indiscriminately' (80[79].13.1). 'He used his body', as is emphatically stressed, 'both for doing and enduring (καὶ ἔδρασε τῷ σώματι καὶ ἔπαθε) many strange things, which no one could have the strength to tell or hear of' (80[79].13.2). This nugget of information is unique to Elagabalus. In the earlier narrative, we have been told that Tiberius 'carried on sensual orgies shamelessly with persons of the highest rank, both male and female' (58.22.1), that Caligula had the husband of his sister Drusilla as a 'lover' and 'beloved' (τὸν ἐραστήν τὸν ἐρώμενον, 59.22.6), that Nero had Pythagoras as a bedfellow 'playing the role of husband to him' (62[63].13.2), and that Caracalla, after he lost his sexual power, 'satisfied his lewd desires in a different manner' (78[77].16.2<sup>1</sup>).<sup>28</sup> Though in all of these cases Dio charges the emperors with improper sexual activity, he does not lay as much emphasis on their effeminacy and homosexual excess or passivity as he does in his depiction of Elagabalus. Here, the aorist ἔπαθε, together with the earlier term ἐραστής (referring to his 'lovers'), clearly points to Elagabalus' passive and subordinate role in his sexual relationships, which infringed upon his masculinity and degraded his high social status.<sup>29</sup> To be the passive partner in Roman culture was equally effeminising and subversive of social hierarchies.<sup>30</sup>

This inversion of the social order is also manifest in Cassius Dio's subsequent reference to Elagabalus' nocturnal visits to taverns (καπηλεία) and brothels (πορνεία), and most importantly his assumption of the role of prostitute (80[79].13.2). 'Taverns' and 'brothels' were hardly decent places for a Roman emperor<sup>31</sup>—we should remember Columella's association of slaves with 'idling, the Campus, the Circus, the theatres, the gambling, the taverns, and the brothels' (Col. 1.8.2)<sup>32</sup>—while "prostitutes in ancient Rome were

28 See Davenport 2017, 92, who mentions that "it may well be that he [i.e. Dio] is insinuating, given Caracalla's own impotence, that the emperor was the passive partner in homosexual acts". On Caracalla's sexual habits, cf. 78[77].24.2, with Davenport 2017, 92-93, who aptly suggests that "Dio was determined to undermine Caracalla's self-presentation as a sexually continent individual, which formed part of his larger strategy of denigrating the emperor in the *Roman History*" (93).

29 Cf. 80[79].5.5 on Elagabalus' marriages (καὶ γὰρ ἠνδρίζετο καὶ ἐθιγλύνετο καὶ ἔπραττεν καὶ ἔπασχεν ἐκάτερα ἀσελγέστατα). See Osgood (2016) 183 n. 19.

30 On this aspect of Roman sexual ideology, see Edwards 1993, 64-65, 72-73; Walters 1997; Williams 1999, 18, 125-218; Skinner 2005, 199-200, 212-213; Masterson 2014, 24; Hubbard 2014, 146; Glazebrook 2014, 434; Icks 2017, 66, 79 n. 6 with further bibliography.

31 Williams 1999, 46.

32 Cf. Hor. *Ep.* 1.14.14-52 for the low pleasures of a slave. See also Sen. *Dial.* 7.7.3 (*voluptas humile servile, inbecillum caducum, cuius statio ac domicilium fornices et popinae sunt*). On theatre as a problematic place in Roman life, see also Edwards 1993, 99 ("Moralists

symbols of the shameful".<sup>33</sup> It is no coincidence that accusations of hanging around with prostitutes or behaving like a prostitute figure heavily in Greek and Roman oratory.<sup>34</sup> Closely relevant to this is that some of the most disreputable emperors, such as Caligula (59.28.8-9), Nero (61.8.1; 62.15.3-6), and Vitellius (64[65].2.1-3) are associated with 'taverns' and/or 'brothels' in the preceding books of Dio's *History*.<sup>35</sup> But, whereas these stories primarily serve to exemplify tyrannical vices of the emperors, such as lewdness, cruelty, greed, and luxury, in the case of Elagabalus it is his role as a 'female huckster' and 'prostitute' that is brought to the fore. The detail about Elagabalus wearing a 'wig' tends in the same direction. We may remember again that, according to Dio, both Caligula (59.26.6-10) and Nero (61.9.2) wore 'wigs' as part of their shameful masquerades.<sup>36</sup> However, Caligula's 'wigs' illuminate his characteristic impiety in impersonating several male and female divinities, while those of Nero are part of his attempt to conceal his recklessness and outrageous actions rather than assuming any kind of degrading womanish role.

Dio goes on to stress that Elagabalus did not simply visit taverns and brothels, but even set up his own brothel in the palace. Elagabalus' practice of prostitution is described with great vividness, and deserves a closer look:

(3) καὶ τέλος ἐν τῷ παλατίῳ οἴκημά τι ἀποδείξας ἐνταῦθα ἡσέλγαινε, γυμνός τ' αἶε ἐπὶ τῆς θύρας αὐτοῦ ἐστῶς ὡσπερ αἱ πόρνοι, καὶ τὸ σινδόνιον χρυσοῖς κρίκοις ἐξηρητημένον διασειῶν, τοὺς τε παρίοντας ἀβρᾶ τε καὶ κεκλασμένη τῇ φωνῇ προσεταιριζόμενος. ἦσαν γὰρ οἷς ἐξεπίτηδες τοῦτο ποιεῖν προστετέτακτο. (4) ὡσπερ γὰρ καὶ ἐς τᾶλλα, καὶ ἐς ἐκεῖνο διερευνητὰς συχνοὺς εἶχε, δι' ὧν ἐπολυπραγμόνει τοὺς μάλιστα αὐτὸν ἀρέσαι τῇ ἀκαθαρσίᾳ δυναμένους. χρήματά τε παρ' αὐτῶν συνέλεγε, καὶ ἐγαυροῦτο ταῖς ἐμπολαῖς πρὸς τε τοὺς συνασχημονοῦντάς οἱ διεφέρετο, πλείους τε ἐραστάς αὐτῶν ἔχειν καὶ πλεῖον ἀργυρίζεσθαι λέγων.<sup>37</sup>

characterised the theatre as a storehouse of obscenity, a place where lust, laughter and political subversion were incited in almost equal measures"), 103. Cf. Edwards 1997 on infamous professions and places in ancient Rome more generally.

33 Edwards 1997, 66. Cf. Williams 1999, 41-43. More generally, on prostitution, see McGinn 2014.

34 E.g. Aeschin. 1.19-20; 1.41-42; 1.136-151; Cic. *Phil.* 2.18.44-45, *Ver.* 2.1.39.101; 2.1.46.120; 2.53.139-140. Cf. Icks 2017, 436-437. On Cicero's evocation of 'sexual virtue' as part of his rhetorical invective, see Langlands 2006, 281-318. Cf. Dunkle 1971, 15-16.

35 Cf. Icks 2011, 101.

36 Cf. Gowing 1997, 2570-2571 with n. 49 on 2571.

37 D.C. 80[79].13.3-4.

(3) Finally, he set aside a room in the palace and there committed his indecencies, always standing nude at the door of the room, as the harlots do, and shaking the curtain which hung from gold rings, while in a soft and melting voice he solicited the passers-by. There were, of course, men who had been specially instructed to play their part. (4) For, as in other matters, so in this business, too, he had numerous scouts, through whom he made inquiries of those most able to please with depravity. He collected money from them and gave himself airs over his gains; he would also dispute with his associates in this shameful occupation, claiming that he had more lovers than they and took in more money.

There are three points at stake here: first, Dio constructs an identity for Elagabalus as a female prostitute who provides sexual services and receives financial rewards in exchange. His unmanly gestures and voice are utterly fitting to his shameful profession and gender-ambiguous self-representation.<sup>38</sup> Besides, the term *διερευνητάς* generally denotes a spy or a scout in a military exploit. Thus Dio's usage of the word in the present context might usefully underline "Elagabalus' inversion of normal usage",<sup>39</sup> and subsequently his perversion of the ideal of the Roman emperor, who should be the embodiment of a triumphant military commander (cf. 53.7.1-2). Closely relevant to this is Elagabalus' degradation of the palace, the symbol of imperial rule *par excellence*,<sup>40</sup> by creating a brothel in it. We may recall here Caligula's similar establishment of a brothel in the palace (59.28.9), but we may additionally notice some telling differences between the two stories: whereas Elagabalus establishes a brothel in the palace in order to be a prostitute *himself* with no apparent political or material agenda, Caligula makes members of the nobility behave as prostitutes in order to humiliate them and enrich himself.<sup>41</sup> Elagabalus' action constitutes another instance of sexual transgression, while that of Caligula results from

38 On unmanly voice, see [Arist.] *Phgn.* 813a (ὄσοι δὲ ταῖς φωναῖς ὀξείαις μαλακαῖς κεκλασμέναις διαλέγονται, κίναϊδοι· ἀναφέρεται ἐπὶ τὰς γυναῖκας καὶ ἐπὶ τὴν ἐπιπρέπειαν). Cf. Sen. *Con.* 1. *pr.* 8-9, Mart. *Ep.* 10.65, Gell. 3.5.2, Clem. Al. *Paed.* 3.11.68.1-2. Cf. Gualerzi 2005, 41 n. 164.

39 Scott 2018, 133 *ad loc.*

40 Cf. 53.16.5-6: 'The royal residence is called Palatium, not because it was ever decreed that this should be its name, but because Caesar dwelt on the Palatine and had his military headquarters there, though his residence gained a certain degree of fame from the mount as a whole also, because Romulus had once lived there. Hence, even if the emperor resides somewhere else, his dwelling retains the name of Palatium'.

41 Cf. 59.28.8: 'One might, indeed, pass over in silence the wares and the taverns, the prostitutes and the courts, the artisans and the wage-earning slaves, and other such sources, from which he [i.e. Caligula] collected every conceivable tribute'.

other vices of him, especially cruelty and greed.<sup>42</sup> Elagabalus' practice, in fact, might seem to be closer to that of Messalina, who (according to Dio) 'in addition to her shameless behaviour in general at times sat as a prostitute in the palace herself and compelled the other women of the highest rank to do the same' (61[60].31.1).

The following narrative offers further illustration of the ways in which Elagabalus' transgressive sexuality has a disturbing bearing on his political behaviour and public life: he has a 'husband' whom he wishes to make Caesar (80[79].14.1);<sup>43</sup> and he participates in chariot-racing—a bad and shameful pursuit for an emperor<sup>44</sup>—having among his spectators men of high social status (80[79].14.2). The involvement of noble Romans in shameful and abominable activities has already stigmatised inadequate and inappropriate emperors in the preceding narrative, such as Caligula (59.5; 59.7; 59.28.9), Nero (62[61].17.3-5; 62[61].19.1-4; 63.26.4-5), and Commodus (73[72].20.1-3).<sup>45</sup> Particularly illuminating is that Elagabalus, as we are told next, goes as far as to lower his own social position by 'begging gold coins like any ordinary contestant and saluting the presidents of the games and the members of his faction' (80[79].14.2). This might recall in the reader's mind Caracalla, who (as Dio mentions earlier) 'would salute the spectators with his whip from the arena below and beg for gold pieces like a performer of the lowest class' (78[77].10.2).<sup>46</sup> Except for the court, where Elagabalus had more or less the 'appearance of a man' (ἀνὴρ πῶς εἶναι ἐδόκει), everywhere else, so the narrative proceeds, 'he showed affectation (ὠραϊζέτο) in his actions and in the quality of his voice' and he danced 'not only in the orchestra, but also, in a way, even while walking, performing sacrifices,

42 Icks 2008, 485 follows a similar line of thought about Elagabalus and Caligula: "Not even Caligula, who had forced aristocratic women and children to prostitute themselves in the palace, had been so shameless as to lower himself to playing the whore". Cf. Icks 2011, 101.

43 Elagabalus and his husband clearly recall Nero and Pythagoras (62[63].13.2). In addition, Osgood 2016, 183-184 rightly stresses here that the story about Elagabalus' marriage to Hierocles and the plan to make him Caesar, aside from ridiculing Elagabalus, "is a send-up of how members of the Severan dynasty including its women, as well as their hangers-on, propagated their power by creating new Caesars". As examples, Osgood cites Maesa's elevation to power of Severus Alexander (80[79].19.4) and Septimius' naming his own young sons 'Caesars' and his hope to make Plautianus 'Caesar' (76[75].15.1-2).

44 On this and other activities that the Roman elite frowned upon, see Edwards 1993, 98-136, 190, 194; Skinner 2005, 208-210. Cf. Edwards 1997.

45 The connection with Nero in particular may be fostered by the fact that both Elagabalus and Nero are mentioned to drive a chariot in the costume of the Greens (62[63].6.3; 80[79].14.2). See also Commodus at 73[72].17.1. On the links between Dio's Elagabalus and Nero, see also Gowing 1997, 2568-2583, 2587-2588; Osgood 2016, 189.

46 On further connections between Dio's Elagabalus and Caracalla, see 80[79].3.3 with Scott 2018, 117-118 *ad loc.*



receiving salutations, or delivering a speech' (80[79].14.3).<sup>47</sup> The reference to dance, in particular, adds further weight to Elagabalus' soft, unmanly ways and inflicted social status. Dancers were especially susceptible to slurs of effeminacy; dancing thus left a very dark shadow on a member of the Roman elite.<sup>48</sup>

Equally important are the details offered next about Elagabalus' marriage and excessive concern for his appearance:

καὶ ἐγήματο, γυνή τε καὶ δέσποινα βασιλῆς τε ὠνομάζετο, καὶ ἠριούργει, κεκρῦφαλόν τε ἔστιν ὅτε ἐφόρει, καὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς ἐνηλείφειτο, ψιμυθίῳ τε καὶ ἐγχοῦση ἐχρίετο. ἅπαξ μὲν γάρ ποτε ἀπεκείρατο τὸ γένειον, καὶ ἐπ' αὐτῷ ἐορτὴν ἤγαγε· μετὰ δὲ τοῦτ' ἐψιλίζετο, ὥστε καὶ ἐκ τούτου γυναικίζειν. καὶ πολλάκις καὶ κατακαίμενος τοὺς βουλευτὰς ἠσπάζετο.<sup>49</sup>

He [i.e. Elagabalus] was bestowed in marriage and was termed wife, mistress, and queen. He worked with wool, sometimes wore a hairnet, and painted his eyes, daubing them with white lead and rouge. Once, indeed, he shaved his beard and held a festival to mark the event; but after that he had his cheeks clean-shaven, so as to look more like a woman. And he often reclined while receiving the salutations of the senators.

This passage suggests some extraordinary transgendered behaviour: first, wool-working was part of the image of the 'ideal woman' from the higher classes in Roman (and Greek) society and thus a symbol of the sexually virtuous and good wife.<sup>50</sup> Though it is true that behaving like an idealised woman seems to be morally more 'acceptable' than behaving like a prostitute, still Elagabalus' deeds suggest a transgression of gender, and accordingly of social and cultural boundaries, which is wholly inappropriate to a male member of the Roman elite. Again Elagabalus is equated to a woman,<sup>51</sup> and involves himself in a feminine activity instead of governing the Principate.<sup>52</sup> Second, extreme grooming (such as putting on a hairnet and having made-up eyes, a depilated beard and hairless cheeks) is not in accordance with traditional Roman images of

47 On Elagabalus' dancing, see also Hdn. 5.3.8; 5.5.4; 5.5.9, *HA Heliogab.* 32.7-8.

48 Williams 1999, 139. For the gendering of dancing, see also Macr. *Sat.* 2.3.16, Sen. *Con.* 1. *pr.* 8-9, D.C. 78[77].21.4. Cf. Icks 2017, 137 n. 62. On dance as a reprehensible and disgraceful activity for an emperor in Dio's history, see also 59.5.5; 59.29.6 on Caligula.

49 D.C. 80[79].14.4.

50 Larsson Lovén 1998; Gualerzi 2005, 46 with n. 196, 61 n. 258; Icks 2011, 99; Glazebrook and Olson 2014, 69.

51 Bittarello 2011, 100.

52 Icks 2011, 99.

proper masculinity.<sup>53</sup> Rather it is an apt signifier of a lack of virility and inverted sexuality. In fact, Hierocles, Elagabalus' husband, is likewise described as 'beardless' at the time when he attracted the attention of the emperor (80[79].15.1).<sup>54</sup> It is also tempting to recall that Sardanapalus too (as noticed above) was linked with wool-working and excessive body care (cf. D.S. 2.23.1-2; Ath.12.529a). Finally, the fact that Elagabalus reclined while receiving salutations from the senatorial elite is a characteristic sign of a decadent lifestyle, pointing to his overall lack of respect for social and political standards.<sup>55</sup>

The passage quoted above, moreover, has some interesting associations with Dio's earlier account of Nero's reign: not only did Nero celebrate a festival in honour of the first shaving of his beard (62[61].19.1-4), just as Elagabalus does, but also his 'wife' Sporus was, just like Elagabalus, termed 'lady', 'queen', and 'mistress' (κυρία και βασιλῆς και δέσποινα ὠνομάζετο, 62[63].13.2). If we trust the epitomized version of Dio's text, then such a startling accumulation of echoes might be purposefully used to connect in the reader's mind Elagabalus with Nero and Sporus; a particularly uncomplimentary and humiliating connection indeed.

Elagabalus' husband, Hierocles, is treated in considerable detail in the following lines of Dio's account. Remarkably, Dio uses the feminine pronoun to refer to Elagabalus with respect to Hierocles (cf. 80[79].15.1: ὁ δὲ δὴ ἀνήρ αὐτῆς Ἱεροκλῆς ἦν),<sup>56</sup> who (as we are told) 'captivated' (ἐλῶν) the emperor to such a degree that he became exceedingly powerful and had greater influence than

53 Cf. Liv. 34.7.9, Sen. *Ep.* 114.4; 114.14; Mart. *Ep.* 2.36. See Edwards 1993, 68, 70; Williams 1999, 129; Gualerzi 2005, 46-47; Carlà-Uhink 2017, 10; Campanile 2017, 53. More generally, on physiognomy and gender in antiquity, see Gleason 1990.

54 A detail that might also suggest his young age, see Scott 2018, 135 *ad loc.* On emperor's smooth chin, see also Caligula at 59.26.7 and Nero at 62[63].9.2, though what is at stake there is Caligula's impiety and Nero's participation in theatre performances rather than any concern with one's sexuality *stricto sensu*. See also 78[77].20.1 on Caracalla and the link between bare chin and luxurious mode of life. In Artemidorus' *Oneirocritica* (1.30), lack of beard is concurrent with one's youth, while a beard that falls out or is shaved signals harm and dishonour. On the semiotics of beard and hair, see further Gleason 1990, 400-402; Williams 1999, 26, 129; Gualerzi 2005, 47-48.

55 On this point, cf. 56.28.3 where it is mentioned that Augustus, despite his old age 'continued to transact most of the public business, though he sometimes reclined while doing so'. See also Tiberius (57.11.3: 'He honoured the annual magistrates as if he were living in a democracy, even rising in his seat at the approach of the consuls') and Claudius (60.6.1: 'In all this, then, his course was satisfactory. Furthermore, when in the senate the consuls once came down from their seats to talk with him, he rose in his turn and went to meet them'; 60.12.3: 'In the senate the emperor would rise himself in case the others had been standing a long time; for by reason of his ill health he frequently remained seated').

56 Also noted by Scott 2018, 135 *ad loc.*

Elagabalus himself (80[79].15.2).<sup>57</sup> Boudicca also uses female-gendered forms to charge Nero with effeminacy and military inaptitude (62.6.3-5).<sup>58</sup> Dio proceeds to lavish attention on Elagabalus' practice of offering honours and power to those people with whom he committed adultery (ἐμοίχευον, 80[79].15.3)—another serious form of sexual indulgence (like passivity or insatiability) that was socially and morally disruptive.<sup>59</sup> The theme of irregular promotion of one's infamous favourites to positions of high influence is also given prominence in the story about Elagabalus and Aurelius Zoticus (80[79].15.2-3, see the beginning of this article).<sup>60</sup> It also remains central throughout Dio's history of the Principate,<sup>61</sup> though in most of the cases there is no erotic motive behind such appointments.

Even worse, Elagabalus, so Dio continues, 'wished to have the reputation of committing adultery, so that in this respect, too, he might imitate the most lewd women (τὰς ἀσελγεςτάτας γυναίκας); and he would often allow himself to be caught in the very act, in consequence of which he used to be violently upbraided by his husband and beaten, so that he had black eyes' (80[79].15.3). Elagabalus, as noticed in the first part of this article, is not the only emperor who is faulted for his adulteries—we may remember Caligula, Domitian, or Caracalla—but the details mentioned here describe again a unique, untypical act, an extraordinary response to a familiar misdeed. Indeed, the humiliating act of beating and being beaten was a clear insult to Elagabalus' imperial *dignitas* and *maiestas*, for (to use the words of Walters concerning Roman society) "to allow oneself to be beaten, or sexually penetrated, was to put oneself in the position of the slave, the archetypal passive body".<sup>62</sup> Elagabalus' submission to bodily violability, just as to sexual penetration, thus marks a distinct transgression on his part of the social hierarchies, which results in degradation to a non-respectable, slavelike status.<sup>63</sup> As Osgood cogently notices, "that Elagabalus is beaten by Hierocles, and takes pleasure in it, suggests too the growing power of palace insiders, at the expense even of the emperor himself, a trend initiated

57 Cf. the case of Comazon (80[79].4.1-2; 80[79].21.1), though sexual life does not matter there. Cf. the general comment on Elagabalus' reign at 80[79].7.3: 'As it was the simplest thing in the world for those who wished to rule to undertake a rebellion, being encouraged thereto by the fact that many men had entered upon the supreme rule contrary to expectation and to merit'. See also Hdn. 5.7.6-7; *HA Heliogab.* 6.1-5; 10.1-3; 11; 12.1-2; 15.1-2; 20.3; 28.5-6.

58 Scott 2018, 135 *ad loc.*

59 See Edwards 1993, 34-62; Skinner 2005, 203, 206-207; Glazebrook 2014, 434-435.

60 See Scheithauer 1990, 352-354.

61 See Gualerzi 2005, 11-12 with nn. 16-19; Kemezis 2014, 143-145; Osgood 2016, 184.

62 Walters 1997, 40. Cf. Skinner 2005, 214-216.

63 Cf. Icks 2011, 100.

by Commodus and his chamberlain Cleander".<sup>64</sup> It is not surprising, therefore, to find that Elagabalus' 'firmly fixed passion' (δευσσοποιῶ ἔρωτι), which led to his desire to make his husband Caesar, causes the opposition of his mother and the deterioration of his relationship with his soldiers (80[79].15.4). 'This was one of the things', as the narrator explicitly states, 'that was destined to lead to his destruction' (80[79].16.1).<sup>65</sup>

The section on Elagabalus' degrading sexual acts and uncontrollable sexual aptitude concludes with a reference to the emperor's desire to have a vagina (80[79].16.7)—an act of extreme depravity especially for a Roman emperor.<sup>66</sup> Dio has already associated Elagabalus' plan to cut off his genitals with his *μαλακία* (80[79].11.2). The desire for a vagina is again a very unique situation, peculiar to Elagabalus.<sup>67</sup> It shows him as an outrageous transgressor of gender, biological, social, and natural boundaries, and provides grounds for his overthrow: 'Sardanapalus himself was destined not much later to receive a well-deserved reward for his debauchery. For in consequence of doing and enduring these things (ταῦτα ποιῶν καὶ ταῦτα πάσχων) he became hated by the populace and by the soldiers, to whom he was most attached, and in the end he was slain by them in the very camp' (80[79].17.1).<sup>68</sup> Significantly, the phrase ταῦτα ποιῶν καὶ ταῦτα πάσχων harks back to Elagabalus' transgressive sexual activity, particularly his sexual penetration,<sup>69</sup> but it may also allude to his overall mal-

64 Osgood 2016, 184.

65 The following chapters (80[79].17-21) chart Elagabalus' decline and final overthrow, on which see Scott 2018, 109-110, 138-141, who usefully compares Dio's account with that of Hdn. 5.8 and that of the *HA Heliogab.* 13-17. See also Icks 2011, 37-43; Greco 2012. Cf. Kemezis 2016 for an elaborate discussion of Elagabalus' demise in the political context of the early third century based on both literary and non-literary sources.

66 Gualerzi 2005, 56 with n. 239 for further bibliography.

67 Cf. Gualerzi 2005, 61. See also Nero's similar attempt at modifying the nature of another person, Sporus whom he causes to be castrated, and whom he uses in every manner like a wife (62.28.2-3; cf. Suet. *Nero* 28), with Gualerzi 2005, 62 n. 261. Vout 2007, 152 interestingly stresses that Sporus is "Nero's own grotesque creation. The sources encourage us to view Sporus as the epitome or nadir of the emperor's artistic endeavours, a combination of his obsession with art and theatre". Carlà-Uhink 2017, 22-23 thinks that Elagabalus' desire to alter his biological sex reflects his desire to present himself as a divine figure.

68 This statement might find an echo in Agrippa's reflection at 52.11.2: 'I need not, indeed, tell you that the life of wantonness and evil-doing (τὸ μὲν γὰρ ἀσελγάνειν καὶ κακὸν τι ποιεῖν) is disgraceful or that it is fraught with peril and is hated of both gods and men; for in any event you are not inclined to such things, and you would not be led by these considerations to choose to be sole ruler'. On the negative effects of Elagabalus' sexuality on his relationship with the soldiers, see also Hdn. 5.8.1.

69 Cf. Kemezis 2016, 359. See 80[79].5.5 (καὶ γὰρ ἠνδρίζετο καὶ ἐθιγύνετο καὶ ἐπραττεν καὶ ἐπασχεν ἐκάτερα ἀσελγέστατα); 80[79].13.2 (πολλὰ μὲν γὰρ καὶ ἄτοπα, ἃ μῆτε λέγων μῆτε ἀκούων < ἄν > τις καρτερήσειεν, καὶ ἔδρασε τῷ σώματι καὶ ἐπαθε). The same phrase is also found in the

administration of the empire and eventual destruction of both himself and the Principate through his sexual life. In Dio's eyes, sexual deviance and imperial power is not a happy match. At this point we may be reminded, in particular, of Dio's earlier statement on Trajan's sexuality which (as noted above) was not to be censured, even if it was not completely beyond reproach: 'I know, of course, that he [*sc.* Trajan] was devoted to boys and to wine, but if he had ever *committed* or *suffered* (ἢ ἐδεδράκει ἢ ἐπεπόνθει) any base or wicked deed as the result of this, he would have incurred censure' (68.7.4). Elagabalus' sexual behaviour, on the contrary, is censurable in Dio's eyes because it caused the emperor to *do* and *endure* things that were base and wicked for both himself and the Principate—a point that also brings Elagabalus' association with Sardanapalus full circle indeed.<sup>70</sup>

#### 4 Conclusion

The foregoing discussion has illuminated the multiple ways in which details about an emperor's sexuality are used in Dio's history of the Roman Empire. We noticed, first, that comments on sexual matters contribute suggestively to Dio's construction of imperial portraits and his evaluation of each emperor and his suitability for rule. This practice is paralleled in other Greek and Roman historians and biographers as well, such as Plutarch, Suetonius, and Tacitus.<sup>71</sup> Dio might highlight an emperor's sexual self-control in order to elevate his moral standing and positive characterisation, while at the same time he might choose to excuse or downplay the sexual misbehaviour of an individual because of his overall goodness of character and rule. Most importantly, it has been shown that sexual transgression plays a prominent role in Dio's depiction of bad emperors, where it is often combined or associated with other tyrannical vices, such as impiety, cruelty, greed, and so on. Closely related to this is Dio's interest in exploring the interface between sex and politics, especially the way in which an emperor's sex-life might constitute a licentious affront to the

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description of Nero's abominable behaviour on stage: 62[63].9.6 (καὶ πάντα ὅσα οἱ τυχόντες ὑποκρίνονται, κάκεινος καὶ ἔλεγε καὶ ἔπραττε καὶ ἔπασχε); 63.22.5 (εἶδον αὐτὸν δεδεμένον, εἶδον συρόμενον, κύοντα δὴ, τίκτοντα δὴ, πάντα ὅσα μυθολογείται καὶ λέγοντα καὶ ἀκούοντα καὶ πάσχοντα καὶ δρώντα).

70 Lenfant 2001, 53.

71 On Plutarch, see Duff 1999, 94-97; and more generally, Beneker 2012. On Suetonius, see Chong-Gossard 2010; and on Tacitus, see Schulz 2019, 103-107, 150-151. Good discussions of the interaction between sex and imperial power in historiography and biography are those by Langlands 2006, 319-363; Vout 2007; Davenport 2017.

Roman elite or cause the irregular promotion of one's favourites to positions of high influence, or even the misconduct or neglect of duties pertaining to the imperial office.

All of these themes are most apparent in Dio's most extended treatment of sexuality in the *Roman History*, namely his narrative of Elagabalus' reign. It has been shown throughout our discussion that Dio's presentation of Elagabalus' sexual life evokes comparisons and contrasts with earlier bad emperors, which have the effect of placing Elagabalus in the larger framework of Dio's vicious rulers, while at the same time illuminating some noticeable divergences, which have significant ramifications for our understanding of Elagabalus' personality and rule. The general themes and behavioural patterns revealed in Dio's treatment of the sexual misconduct of other bad emperors culminate in his account of Elagabalus. Sexual deviance is associated with other tyrannical vices, particularly cruelty and impiety, and Elagabalus turns out to exhibit traits and behaviours common to the preceding bad emperors, such as Caligula, Nero, Domitian, or Caracalla. At the same time, however, Dio's account of Elagabalus' life is fairly elaborate and shows a number of uncommon features that draw attention to particular characteristics associated with the emperor's transgressive sexuality.<sup>72</sup>

We noticed throughout our discussion that much of the sexual material about Elagabalus is peculiar to him. Wherever sexual themes or stories that are familiar from the preceding account of Dio's *History* occur, these unfold in significantly different and unexpected ways. This technique has the effect of making Elagabalus a more individual character. Cassius Dio highlights the importance of the emperor's absurd and outlandish sexual behaviour for defining the flavour of his reign and eventually his fall. Elagabalus, more than and partly unlike any other emperor in Dio's *History*, appears to forfeit his masculine role and challenge the boundaries between male and female. Throughout Elagabalus emerges as effeminate, unmanned, diminished from being a *vir* and *princeps* to a womanising *kinaidos*, a powerless subordinate who is enslaved to his excessive sexual appetite.<sup>73</sup> In the case of Elagabalus, the balance between

72 Kemezis 2016, 354, 355 is alert to the 'anomalous' character of Elagabalus' narrative within Dio's work: "To be sure, the kind of anecdotal material Dio supplies here can be found elsewhere in his narrative, but nowhere else does it become so dominant, and the change in narrative register is all the more abrupt given the lack of such material during the immediately preceding narrative of Macrinus' reign" (354).

73 On *kinaidos*, see Pl. *Grg.* 494c-495a, Aeschin. 1.131; 181; 2.88; 2.99, Petr. 23-24, Mart. *Ep.* 6.37, Juv. 9.36-41. See also Gleason 1990, 396-399, 411-412; Williams 1999, 130, 172-224; Skinner 2005, 249-252; Kamen and Levin-Richardson 2015, 453-455 with detailed citation of ancient testimonies on 458 n. 25; Masterson 2014, 20-21, 24; Glazebrook 2014, 434.

the sexes and social classes is provocatively challenged and overturned from first to last.

It is perhaps not coincidental that in the account of Elagabalus' reign sexuality turns out to be used as a significant analytical, structural, and conceptual category in Dio's assessment of the emperor. This move makes not only a historiographical point, but also a significantly historical one: while in the case of other bad emperors sexual perversion cannot be easily disentangled from, and often gives way to, other tyrannical traits, thus constituting a means to fulfil their other vices and advertise or enforce their unique autocratic power, in the case of Elagabalus it becomes the emperor's single-minded pursuit and the guiding principle of his whole reign. It mainly appears as an end in itself, having clear hedonistic and voyeuristic implications. Indeed, Elagabalus surpasses the sexual transgressions of his predecessors both in kind and degree. He brings sexual depravity to such a new and unsurpassed height that he causes, through his serious confounding of accepted hierarchies and codes, the political, socio-cultural, and moral uncontrollability of the state.<sup>74</sup>

Such a reading brings Dio's Elagabalus very much in line with the Elagabalus of the *Historia Augusta*,<sup>75</sup> where, as Mader thoughtfully showed, "the *libido* theme acquires an autonomous life and structure", which is quite unique and distinctive within the sequence of Antonine biographies, and where sex becomes a stable criterion in the biographer's "construction of the transcendental *pessimus princeps*".<sup>76</sup> This has the effect, as Mader stresses, that in the biography "imperial politics ... becomes an extension of the tyrant's sexual preferences" and "leaves the reader with a sense, far more pronounced than in either Dio or Herodian, that sexual excesses are the prime reason for the political demise of Elagabalus and his associates".<sup>77</sup> Though I agree that the emperor's sexuality is much less pronounced in Herodian than in the *Historia*

74 On the association between sexual deviancy and political and moral decadence in the eyes of Roman moralists, see Edwards 1993, 20, 26, 65, 91-92; Gowing 1997, 2582; Williams 1999, 141-142, 152; Skinner 2005, 255-256; Gualerzi 2005, 35. More generally, on the relationship between 'sexual virtue' (*puđicitia*) and morality in ancient Rome, see Langlands 2006, esp. 17-29.

75 Cf. Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 43, who notices that the *HA* depicts Elagabalus' "supposed sexuality with a degree of detail similar to *Dio's*". See also Kemezis 2014, 246: "Dio and the *Historia Augusta* author both bring all their imaginative firepower to bear in describing Elagabalus' sexual perversions, which consist mostly of various forms of gender irregularity. He is viewed as a monstrous freak that ought not to exist anywhere. His religious oddities are mentioned, but are distinctly secondary to the sex, or in the case of the *HA*, third after the sex and the gourmandizing".

76 Mader 2005, 137, 138, for both citations respectively.

77 Mader 2005, 145.

*Augusta*,<sup>78</sup> our study has shown that the Elagabalus of Cassius Dio is not “a religious fanatic whose conspicuous ‘otherness’ is indexed primarily by his offensive alien cult and rituals”, as Mader believes, but more (at least in respect of his sexual atrocities) “an eccentric extraordinaire, truly ‘the most extravagant and exquisite hedonist the world has ever seen’”, just as Mader thinks about the Elagabalus of the *Historia Augusta*.<sup>79</sup> This does not mean that the presentation of Elagabalus’ sexual life is the same in Dio’s history and the biography—certainly it would be rewarding to pursue a systematic comparative reading between the distinctive design and emphasis on the theme of sexuality in the two sources.<sup>80</sup> But both authors are shown to be at pains to put a unique focus on the emperor’s transgressive sexuality that offers revealing insights into their individual narrative technique and conception of Elagabalus and his reign.

Arguably, the extraordinary narrative of Elagabalus in Dio reflects the historian’s understanding of the emperor as something “truly out of the ordinary and as a culmination of sorts”,<sup>81</sup> and provides the readers of the *History* with a useful symptom of a special kind of social malaise and decadence, of which Elagabalus becomes the prime exemplar.<sup>82</sup>

78 Cf. Scheithauer 1990, 352-354, who highlights Herodian’s lack of interest in sexuality compared to Cassius Dio. See also Icks 2008, 485-486; Icks 2011, 105-106; Osgood 2016, 177-178; Kemezis 2016, 363.

79 Mader 2005, 136. *Pace* also Mader 2005, 137: “[T]he *HA* makes these sexual excesses the principal reason for political opposition to the emperor, while Dio and Herodian suggest that discontent was much wider than this and resulted not least from Heliogabalus’ perceived impieties (παρανομήματα) and offensive religious policies and practices”. Kemezis 2016, 362 suggests that “the *HA* is more explicit than Dio in giving that role [i.e. of the cause of his unpopularity and subsequent fall] to Elagabalus’ sexual misconduct”. See also Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 41, who connects Elagabalus’ downfall with his sexuality, but he additionally suggests that Dio “uses Varius’ supposed pathic sexuality...to mask a far more complex web, suggested by Herodian, of causes and effect”. This web, according to Arrizabalaga y Prado, includes the praetorians’ inclination towards revolt and their susceptibility to bribery as well as the active role of Mamaea who is ambitious for both herself and her son. See Arrizabalaga y Prado 2010, 42-46, 270-271.

80 I intend to examine this question further in a separate article.

81 See Mader 2005, 134-135 on Elagabalus in the *HA*.

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