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Pronouns for Elagabalus

Right-wing media reject attempts to celebrate the queerness in stories about an ancient Roman emperor who presented as a woman.

by Evan Urquhart

In the year 218 a teenager became the emperor of Rome and ruled for four years with little success and even less popularity. Elagabalus' rise was precipitated by the assassination of a cousin, the emperor Caracalla, and ended in another assassination. Knowledge of this period comes primarily from the work of the Roman historian Cassius Dio, a contemporary who vehemently despised the young emperor. Among Dio's tales of Elagabalus' blasphemy and depraved sexual habits are suggestions that the young emperor dressed and identified as a woman and publicly consorted with male lovers. There was even an attempt made, if the historical record is accurate, to find someone to perform genital surgery on the young emperor.

For one museum, this has prompted them to refer to Elagabalus as a trans woman and use she/her pronouns, either to gain publicity, or in deference to what they believe the young emperor would have wanted, or perhaps for a bit of both reasons.

Whether or not publicity was the primary goal, the North Hertfordshire Museum in England has certainly garnered a lot of attention for their decision to gender Elagabalus as a woman, as well as to the single coin from Elagabalus' reign in their collection, and of course to the backstory of this historical figure. Right-wing media have decried the museum as "woke" in some stories, and "sinister" in others.

screenshot from the New York Post

On one level, the controversy feels incredibly silly and inconsequential: Elagabalus has been dead for over 1800 years. If the stories about the emperor's behavior are accurate, they would seem to point to a transfemme identity according to our current understanding, but the records all come from sources who were using descriptions of this behavior to smear the deceased as a pervert. Even if we could verify the tales, there's no way to know how this historical figure felt inside, much less how the teenage Roman emperor Elagabalus would want people in 2023 to use pronouns.

On another level, however, there's something very interesting going on in the hysterical conservative denunciations of re-pronouncing Elagabalus. This young emperor's femininity and bisexuality was made central to the stories that have come down through history *because the Roman historians wanted to discredit and dishonour Elagabalus' memory*. The conservative backlash is about how we respond to that. It's asking: How DARE modern people, LGBTQ+ people, read these stories and see something to be respected and honored?

screenshot from a non-paywalled MSN republishing of a story from the Telegraph

The underlying argument here, of course, isn't about who Elagabalus was or what Elagabalus would have wanted. Even the name "Elagabalus" is one the teen never used in life, having been Sextus Varius Avitus Bassianus as a child, and Marcus Aurelius Antoninus as emperor. Elagabalus is a reference to the Syrian god the emperor was a high priest of, and religious and cultural clashes with the Romans, as well as family politics, likely played a greater role in why the young emperor was so hated than issues of gender or sexuality. Instead, the real dispute is over whether we should accept these ancient stories as the moral parable they were intended as, or whether readers who don't share the values of Cassius Dio can playfully reinterpret his smears, defiantly celebrating the behavior his history denigrates.

Whether or not Elagabalus sought a surgeon to construct a vagina, transfeminine people today seek surgery for that purpose, and doing so is healthy and affirming. Whether or not Elagabalus was assigned male and used she/her pronouns, trans people today throw off their birth assignment and come to be known and affirmed with the pronouns of whatever gender they feel best represents them. Whether or not Elagabalus was bisexual and submissive, submissiveness and bisexuality today can be celebrated by a culture that doesn't feel beholden to ancient Roman hangups. A figure who was once derided by historians as a degenerate and a reprobate is now reimagined as a queer icon primarily because those markers of queerness were used to denigrate and attack Elagabalus' memory.

Conservative writers want the story of Elagabalus to continue to serve as a morality play and parable about the

evils of gender nonconformity, the same role it has served for more than a thousand years. Using she/her pronouns for Elagabalus doesn't actually matter, except as a symbol that we can chose to reject those moldy, moribund morality plays and celebrate self-expression, authenticity, and non-conformity if we want to.

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apply that logic to cis people they hate. In short, they put trans people under disproportionate scrutiny.



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