

My paper examines representations of Elagabalus in a selection of texts from the 1960s and early 1970s—including Alfred Duggan’s *Family Favourites* (1960), Kyle Onstott and Lance Horner’s *Child of the Sun* (1966), and Martin Duberman’s *Elagabalus* (1973; published in *Male Armor* [1975])—with the aim of delineating the ways in which these representations are informed by and contribute to competing discourses of sexuality in this period. In their differing treatments of Elagabalus and his sexual proclivities, my paper proposes, these texts reveal the kinds of ideological roles that historical figures played during this formative period in the construction of modern homosexual identities.

The politics of sexuality in Alfred Duggan’s *Family Favourites* are suggestive of the vigorous debate over the social impact of homosexuality that followed the release of the Wolfenden Report (1957) in the author’s Britain. This novel represents Elagabalus as possessed of a sexual identity both aberrant and immutable; thus, for instance, Julia Maesa observes: “He has never loved a woman. I don’t know what went wrong with him, but we must admit that he will always prefer boys” (195). At the same time, the novel also advances a plea for tolerance of the emperor’s sexual peculiarities. The narrator Duratius remarks: “The Emperor’s private life was his own affair, and it seems to me ridiculous to hold that it is more wicked to love boys than girls. But my own tastes lie in a different direction, and I could never understand the intensity of his feelings” (186). Elagabalus is, Duratius concludes, “harmless enough,” given that “he hurt nobody, and frightened nobody, and did not throw away the taxpayers’ money” (206). *Family Favourites*, in other words, contains an argument—newly resonant in the United Kingdom of the early 1960s—that sexual preference is a personal matter, without detrimental impact on society at large.

The marketing of Kyle Onstott and Lance Horner’s *Child of the Sun* aims to capitalize on the developing sexual liberation of the late 1960s, even as it draws upon homophobic discourses of sexuality. (I have been able to obtain, at this stage, only an image of the cover from the novel’s 1972 reprinting.) The front cover contains an image of a charioteer, clad scantily in a red thong, posing before Elagabalus; the synopsis on the back cover promises tales of “perverted passions” from which “even the voluptuaries of Rome recoiled in horror.” Together, the imagery and the synopsis—in tone, both salacious and censorious—seek to rouse the reader’s interest through the activation of different sexual ideologies.

The ideologies and intellectual struggles of the nascent gay liberation movement are evident in Martin Duberman’s *Elagabalus*, a play concerned with a gay socialite, Adrian, whose refusal to act out the traditional scripts of heterosexuality and masculinity jeopardizes his family’s political ambitions. Adrian attempts to liberate himself from the strictures of gender and sexuality by fashioning himself as a modern-day Elagabalus, adopting the persona of the emperor and emulating his public sexual transgressions. Yet, as Adrian strives to articulate novel codes of masculinity, he ends up “press[ing] too hard against the boundaries of form” (287), thereby exposing himself to the very modes of homophobic oppression that he seeks to escape. The play explores tensions between the free—and, in Adrian’s case, often ludic—expression of personal sexual identity and the expectations of (high) society; it dramatizes, moreover, the difficulties and dangers of articulating resistance to heterosexual masculinity, of moving beyond what Duberman calls “male armor” (xii). Within the play, the historical Elagabalus stands as a paradigm for action and as a cautionary example; as such, *Elagabalus* represents a meditation on the peril and promise in appropriating historical figures as sites of resistance to dominant sexual forms.