

Bedfellows But Not Favourites? The Social Status of the Male Sexual Partners of Roman Emperors

(abstract)

The favourite, as he usually and often somewhat euphemistically called, is a not uncommon figure at the royal courts of medieval and early modern Europe. The word is often applied to a male who enjoys special and (at least seemingly) undue favours from his king, on whom he is thought to exercise a conspicuous hold, and this fact may very well stem, thus runs the suspicion, from the monarch's erotic attraction to his favourite. Royal favours included bestowal of wealth, appointment to high position, and even elevation to the nobility. A large number of Roman emperors from Nero to Elagabalus had homoerotic inclinations from which openly displayed sexual relationships ensued. Yet, with the exception of Elagabalus—who in other respects, too, is an anomaly—these emperors did not choose to elevate their male sexual partners to the high standing they might have enjoyed at a European court many centuries later. This paper will attempt to explain this holding back on the basis of Roman custom and law, which reprobated sexual relationship between citizen males and thus, inevitably, steered many Roman men, including emperors, to satisfy their erotic and sexual inclinations with the many readily available males, almost invariably adolescents and young adults of foreign or servile status, in relationships free from any legal or customary impediments. However, social prejudice was still strong enough to deter almost any emperor from raising these 'favoured' persons to the standing of true favourites.

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Atlantic Classical Association at Acadia University (Wolfville, Nova Scotia, Canada) in October 2013.

Beert C. Verstraete
Professor Emeritus of Classics, Acadia University

beert.verstraete@acadiau.ca

This paper has its origins in a thought that occurred to me while I was reading David M. Bergeron's book, *King James and Letters of Homoerotic Desire*, a well-documented study focused on the relationships of James I of England with Esmé Stuart d' Aubigny, Robert Carr, and George Villiers, who were conspicuous favourites of this king. (1) As is well known, historians use the euphemistic word "favourite" to designate someone who is treated with special or undue favour by a monarch or any individual of high authority, with the not uncommon implication that the favour was motivated by an erotic interest in or an even outright infatuation with the favoured person. James I's relationships with the aforementioned three clearly fit this pattern, starting with James' falling in love while he was already the teenaged king

of Scotland with Esmé Stuart, whom he elevated to the rank of Duke of Lennox, and then later after he had succeeded Elizabeth I as king of England in 1604, with Robert Carr, later Earl of Somerset, and finally, and most spectacularly and lastingly, with George Villiers, whom he created Duke of Buckingham, and who remained his favourite until his death. Three centuries before James, Edward II of England had brought notoriety upon himself, both with his contemporaries and with later generations, with his homoerotically coloured relationship with Piers Gaveston, whom he elevated to the rank of Earl of Cornwall, a relationship which, together with other relationships perceived as too close and erotic, contributed more than anything else to his brutal murder in 1327, although some historians have argued that Edward's relationship with Gaveston was not sexual but simply an exceptionally close friendship, perhaps a compact of ideal brotherhood modelled on that of the biblical David and Jonathan—but then, as you are well aware, perception in the assessment of any such close relationships(is everything. (2)

The role of friend, confidant and advisor, played by the Netherlanders Hans Willem Bentinck and Arnold Joost van Keppel, to be created Earl of Portland and Earl of Albemarle respectively, in the life and reign of king William III is well known. (3) Hostile Jacobite propaganda and even the not unsympathetic observations of the Duchess of Orléans, the sister-in-law of Louis XIV, labelled these relationships, especially the one with Bentinck, which had already existed for many years at the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1688, as outright homosexual. Together with other historians, I doubt whether these relationships were ever sexually consummated, but there is no reason to doubt the homoeroticism in William's attachment to these men.

In the history of the French monarchy, the reign of Henry III (reigned 1574-1589) stands out for the flamboyant prominence of his *mignons* at his court. In this constellation of royal favourites, too, the relationships had their political aspects: as Gary Ferguson puts in his study focused on gender, homoeroticism, and homosexuality in 16th century Europe: "Historians now generally agree that the

mignons served a number of political functions, acting first and foremost as a screen between the king and the rest of the court.” (4)

Two generalizations can be made about all these royal favourites which do not hold for the male bedfellows of Roman emperors. Most importantly, they were all drawn from the gentry or the lower nobility. Secondly, while some of the relationships were intergenerational, with the monarch many years, perhaps even a generation older than his favourite, they never involved, as far as we know, adolescent boys as the more or less passive object of an adult man’s desire—as I noted earlier, it was the young king James who fell in love with Esmé Stuart and thus initiated the relationship. On the first count already, the relationship between the Roman emperor and his male bedmate was radically different. To the extent that we know the names of these sexual partners, they are, almost without exception, Greek, typical of slaves or former slaves or the names we might expect of persons of non-Roman extraction from Greek-speaking parts of the empire. Into this category fall the names of Sporus, Pythagoras, and Doryphorus, with the first of whom Nero, according to our historiographical sources, Suetonius, and Dio Cassius, entered upon a mock-marriage in which he played the role of the bridegroom and husband and even had Sporus castrated—according to Dio Cassius (62.13), Nero’s eye had fallen on Sporus because the latter resembled his late wife Poppaea; with the other two, Pythagoras and Doryphorus)---who may be the same person-- he played the role of the bride and wife (Tacitus, *Annals* 15.37), even imitating the cries of pain of a bride losing her virginity on her wedding night (Suetonius, *Life of Nero* 29). Then there is Earinus, the boy and eunuch from Pergamum beloved of Domitian; he is mentioned by Dio Cassius (67.2), and the emperor’s relationship with him is eulogized in a lengthy poem (3.4) in Statius’ *Silvae* and in six short poems in book nine of Martial’s *Epigrams* (9.11, 12, 13, 16, 17, and 36). We must also place Hadrian’s Antinous in this category, but, as will be discussed shortly, his position is anomalous. We are told by Herodian (1.17.3) that one of Commodus’ toyboys was given the hybrid Greco-Roman name of Philocommodus by the emperor, and we must finally note

the names of the emperor Elagabalus' two most notorious lovers, Hierocles and Zoticus. Only two recognizably Roman names, and moreover, of upper-class men, come up in the long array of the bedfellows of Roman emperors, Valerius Catullus, with whom Caligula enjoyed a sexual escapade according to Suetonius (*Life of Caligula* 36), and Aemilius Lepidus, husband of the same emperor's sister Drusilla and eventually put to death (Dio Cassius 59.11 and 22).

What about age? While we must speak of a spectrum of ages, the overwhelming majority of preferred sexual partners were adolescents or young adults. When Dio Cassius (58.7) says that Trajan was fond of both wine and boys, but never harmed any boy, we are right to assume that boys in question were indeed adolescent boys, most probably slaves or former slaves since paederasty and epebophilia were the normative forms of male homosexuality in Roman society as they could be safely directed, without legal penalty or social opprobrium, to slaves and even former slaves. Statius says in *Silvae* 3.4 that Earinus' exceptional beauty had been brought to Domitian's attention while the boy was still very young—probably still pre-adolescent, I would guess. I also assume that the castration of the boy, which Statius brings into focus in order to praise the emperor's ban on castration, took place at a very tender age, perhaps before he was presented to Domitian. (5) Such was the hold of youthful male physical attractiveness on some Roman men, as Seneca writes with outright condemnation in one (47) of his *Epistulae Morales* that adult slaves were forced to prolong it artificially through their dress and grooming, even though by this time they were also simultaneously expected to assume the active role in their sexual intercourse with their masters. I suspect this was the role forced upon Nero's Pythagoras and Doryphorus.

Only two emperors exclusively preferred adult men as sex partners: Galba, as we are told by Suetonius, *Life of Galba* 22, who notes it as a conspicuous anomaly, and Elagabalus, according to Dio Cassius, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*. Suetonius does not mention any names and there is no suggestion that his sex partners had any hold on Galba outside the bedroom.

With Elagabalus' Hierocles, a charioteer, and Zoticus, the son of a cook, according to Dio Cassius (80.15 and 16) it was very different. These two men, of low-class status and non-Roman extraction (although, thanks to Caracalla's citizenship edict of 212, they would have held Roman citizenship) became the emperor's favourites in the fullest sense of the word, lavished as they were with wealth and high office. Moreover, if we are to believe Dio Cassius (80.14 and 15, Elagabalus, assuming the female role even married Hierocles, becoming his 'wife'; the *Historia Augusta (Life of Heliogabalus 10)* makes Zoticus the emperor's 'husband'. Interestingly, Herodian, whose account of the life and reign of Elagabalus is the most restrained in its purveyance of scandalous detail, makes no mention of any such marriage, although he is even more emphatic (10. 7) than Dio Cassius that Elagabalus "took men from the stage and the public theatres and put them in charge of the most important parts of the imperial administration...[and] appointed his slaves and freedmen, each of whom happened to excel in some foul activity, as governors of consular provinces." (Note that no specifics are provided as to which consular provinces were given to which individuals.) These alleged same-sex marriages remind us of Nero's escapades, but Elagabalus, unlike Nero, was a teenaged emperor throughout his reign, ascending the imperial throne at the age of 14 and reigning four years before he and his mother were brutally murdered by the Praetorian Guard in 222, while Nero's worst sexual excesses took place after he left his teenage years behind. Falling in love with adult men, Elagabalus reminds us somewhat of the teenaged King James of Scotland, but the latter fell in love with and bestowed his favours on an aristocrat.

In his recent study of the reign and the posthumous legacy of Elagabalus, Martijn Icks cautions against accepting the lurid accounts of the boy-emperor's "excessive favouritism," as he calls it; "these stories...seem little more than negative rhetoric, meant further to discredit an emperor of whom the ancient authors did not think much in the first place"; and he goes on to say, basing himself on his earlier analyses of the evidence, that "both the structure of the senate that the structure of the senate and the appointment of government officials in 218-22 show much continuity with the reigns of

Caracalla and Severus.” (6) This caution is salutary, but I am not prepared to discount the stories of Elagabalus’ extravagant and often erotically motivated favouritism as having no basis whatsoever in actual fact. With his fanatical promotion of the cult of Elagabal, the Syrian sun-god to the near-exclusion of the traditional Roman pantheon and with his transgendered personality and deportment which also coloured his sexual tastes and behaviour, Elagabalus was most certainly the most un-Roman emperor ever; his alleged reckless favouritism of low-class men of foreign extraction on whom, at least in a few cases, he was also erotically fixated inevitably added to the lengthy bill of scandalous, un-Roman, even criminal behaviour which eventually led to his ignominious death at the hands of his own soldiers..

This admittedly much abbreviated survey of Roman emperors who had male sexual partners leaves us only with Hadrian and his beloved Antinous of unique posthumous fame. (7) This fame should not blind us to the fact that until his death of 19, Antinous was, in nearly every respect, an emperor’s conventional *puer delicatus*, unconventional only in that, for several years, he appears to have accompanied the emperor, who was obviously deeply in love with him, on his travels throughout the empire. He was of Greek extraction, but almost certainly not of servile or ex-servile status, for it is hard to believe that Hadrian would have chosen a slave or former slave to accompany him on his extensive travels. However, there is no indication that Antinous was a favourite after the much later West European model, namely one entrusted with or groomed for high office or honoured with anything like a Roman equivalent to elevation to the high nobility. We can only speculate, of course, of what Hadrian might have done for Antinous had the latter lived well into adulthood. Thus, as far as we can tell from the evidence we possess, it is only in the reign of the very un-Roman Elagabalus that we can clearly discern favourites who owed their favoured position completely, or at least largely, to the emperor’s erotic infatuation with them, the crucial difference from the much later model being, however, that Elagabalus showered his love and favours on men of low-class status. Much better known notorious favourites who rose high at the imperial court and in the imperial government such as Tiberius’ Sejanus

and Nero's Tigellinus enjoyed the favours of an emperor who, we might say, was their supreme benefactor and *patronus* but most certainly not their lover or sexual partner.

The typical choice made by a Roman emperor as to the male person who was to be the object of his desire and his sexual partner is understandable, as I have already suggested, in the context of the *mos maiorum* as crystallized eventually in the law, notably the *Lex Scantinia*. Unfortunately, this law, which probably dates from the second and third centuries BCE, is not well documented in our sources, and therefore there has been much scholarly debate about it, and even the hypothesis that the law did not deal with homosexuality has been brought forward. (8) The few references made to it in the literature of the Late Republic certainly provide no clue whatsoever, but, fortunately, the literature of the early imperial period is more helpful. In the recent second edition of his study of Roman homosexuality, Craig Williams offers the attractive hypothesis that the *Lex* codified what was originally a praetorian edict against all forms of sexual immorality, or *stuprum*, both hetero- and homosexual, but that eventually, especially after the enactment of Augustus' *Lex Julia de coercendis adulteriis*, which, of course, was directly against man-woman adultery, it came to be applied only to male homosexuality. (9) This is confirmed by the second of Juvenal's *Satires*, which makes it incontrovertibly clear that this law penalized sexual acts between citizen males. Very significantly, I believe, this satire mocks and excoriates sexual relationships between adult male citizens and the same-sex marriages—with all the traditional ceremonial paraphernalia included—such men might enter upon, all of these men being outwardly respectable individuals, whom you might even find sitting on the judicial bench, and doing their best to exhibit the austere, hyper-masculine look of the would-be stereotypical Stoic philosopher. Same-sex marriages in which adult citizen males tie the knot are also ridiculed by Martial in two of his *Epigrams*. (1.24 and 12.42)

There is no evidence that the *Lex Scantinia* was rigorously enforced. First, the policing and surveillance apparatus that would have been needed to enforce on the general population was primitive even

during the imperial period, and like just about all moral legislation already implicit in the *mos maiorum* it was intended primarily to regulate the behaviour and deportment of the upper classes. As such, however, it could not be ignored with complete impunity by members of the senatorial, equestrian, and curial classes. Thus, Suetonius mentions (*Life of Domitian* 8) that Domitian punished a number of senators and *equites* for their transgression of the *Lex* with fines of 10,000 sesterces—a very large sum in keeping with the offenders’ high social status and thus their ability to pay. The deep suspicion harboured in the *mos maiorum* against male homosexuality, in which both parties are Roman citizens, is already signalled in Book Six, chapter one, of Valerius Maximus’ *Memorable Deeds and Sayings*, where five, and possibly one more, of the thirteen cases of *stuprum* (illicit sexual conduct) with which Roman citizens of the not too recent past were charged and for which they were severely punished are homosexual acts. Another manifestation of the same mindset finds expression in the traditional Roman reprobation of nudity sported by citizen males—on this, Cicero (*Tusculan Disputations* 4. 33) approvingly cites a verse by Ennius, in order to bolster his contention that Greek paederasty had its origins in the gymnasium: *principium flagiti est nudare inter civis corpora* (An onset of criminal outrage comes with baring one’s body amongst citizens”) ; here, too, traditional *Romanitas* very self-consciously clashed with Hellenic ethos.

Homoerotic desire was hardly alien to Roman men, but it had to be acted out within socially and legally permitted bounds. Expressions of deep friendship which we find in Roman literature and seem at times homoerotically coloured to us were not problematic by Roman standards as long as they were not linked to acts or desires which the Romans considered flagrantly and indecently sexual. Most conspicuous, however, was the erotic and sexual latitude permitted to Roman males by the institution of slavery; this might cast a net of half-coerced sex even over a freedman still in a state of dependency on his *patronus* and former master. If we are to believe a saying attributed by Seneca the Elder (*Controversiae* 4.10) to the Augustan orator Quintus Haterius: “*impudicitia* (“sexual immorality”) is a

crimen (“crime” or “occasion for bringing a criminal charge”) for a freeborn man, a *necessitas* (“inescapability” or “coercion”) for a slave, and an *officium* (“duty” or “obligation”) for a freedman.” In his major article on Roman homosexuality James Butrica argues convincingly that this saying needs to be placed in its context and that, in this context, the idea of a former slave still owing his *patronus* sexual services is a patent and ironical exaggeration. (10) However, even allowing for the exaggeration and irony, I still detect a glimmer of real-life possibility, especially for male freedmen who remained in their former master’s household.

The historical record demonstrates that Roman emperors, whether labelled good or bad by later generations, almost always felt constrained by the same bounds in custom and law that applied to Roman men in general and acted accordingly: to enter upon an openly homoerotic and homosexual relationship with a citizen, especially an *ingenuus* (freeborn), was unthinkable or would otherwise require an impossible secrecy. On the other hand, they enjoyed the same latitude as did ordinary citizens in the acting out of their homoerotic desires with slaves, foreigners (at least low-class foreigners), and perhaps even former slaves, that latitude, of course, magnified many times over thanks to their wealth and power. Not surprisingly, therefore, they focused their erotic attentions almost exclusively on adolescent boys and young adult males. Given their social status, preferment beyond this stage was unthinkable for these boys and young men. With only one known exception, all emperors complied with this fundamental restriction, which prevented the coming into prominence of true favourites of the much later type that came to flourish at some European royal courts of the middle ages and the early modern period. Elagabalus’ eccentric and flamboyant flouting of this strict code, if our literary sources are to be believed, contributed mightily to his downfall.

Notes

1. David M. Bergeron, *King James and Letters of Homoerotic Desire*, Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1999.
2. Edward II's same-sex erotic relationships are fully discussed in Seymour Phillips's recent biography, *Edward II*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010. However, he, too, concludes (102), while referencing other modern historians, that "[i]t is impossible to be certain of the true nature of the relationship between Edward II and Gaveston...", and that, rather than being sexual, it might have been a formal bond of brotherhood or a close friendship. He rightly underlines in note 146 (102) that "[a]ccusations of sodomy were closely akin to accusations of heresy and were widely used in the fourteenth century as a way of blackening the reputations of individuals or vulnerable groups, while the term 'sodomy' could cover a wide range of sexual practices, not just homosexuality." One will think, in this connection, of the fate of the Knights Templar at about the same time.
3. Louis Crompton's *Homosexuality and Civilization*, Cambridge MA and London: The Belknap Press of the Harvard University Press, 2003, 348 and 402-408, is excellent on this subject, providing ample primary-source documentation.
4. Gary Ferguson, *Queer (Re)Readings in the French Renaissance: Homosexuality, Gender, Culture*, Aldershot (Hampshire) and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2008, 147-148. The quotation comes from ch. 3, "Mourning / Scorning the *Mignons*: Representations of Heroism and Favouritism at the Court of Henry III (1574-1589)."
5. I entertained this assumption already in my article. "Panegyric and Candour in Statius, *Silvae* 3.4," *Studies in Latin Literature and Roman History* V, Brussels: Collection Latomus 1989, 405-413.
6. Martijn Icks, *The Crimes of Elagabalus: The Life and Legacy of Rome's Most Decadent Boy Emperor*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2012, 23. In his recent study, *The Emperor*

Elagabalus: Fact or Fiction?, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010, Leonardo de Arrizabagala y Prado offers an extensive and detailed analysis of the coinage and as well as of the epigraphic documents related to state business dating from Elagabalus' reign in order to demonstrate that the imperial administration, including the appointments made to high office, was conducted in a normal fashion which showed much continuity with previous practice. We must, therefore, allow for a great deal of exaggeration in the lurid accounts of unrestrained favouritism that we find in Dio Cassius, Herodian, and the *Historia Augusta*, but I am not prepared to dismiss them altogether as pure fiction feeding the *damnatio memoriae* that came to cling to the posthumous reputation of Elagabalus. I strongly suspect that the emperor's cliques of lower-class favourites came to be widely perceived as a kind of caricature alternative government which stood outside the official government structures but which responded compliantly to the young emperor's more idiosyncratic inclinations and fancies—and, perhaps, also gave the youth free reign away from a domineering mother and grandmother--while not leaving, and indeed was never meant to leave, its mark in the official records. Elagabalus was, therefore, carrying out a very perilous balancing act in which he ultimately failed and came to a tragic end.

7. On this subject, Royston Lambert's *Beloved and God: The Story of Hadrian and Antinous*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1984, remains the lengthiest English-language study; a more analytical treatment is offered by Caroline Vout in ch. 2, "Romancing the stone: the story of Hadrian and Antinous," of her book, *Power and Eroticism in Imperial Rome*, Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007; ch. 3 and 4 dealing with the Nero-Sporus and the Domitian-Earinus relationships respectively are also highly recommended.

8. Cf. Saara Lilja, *Homosexuality in Republican and Augustan Rome*, Helsinki: Societas Scientiarum Fennica, 1983, 112-121, but she concludes her lengthy discussion by saying, “[t]he Lex Scantinia retains its mystery.”
9. Craig A. Williams, *Roman Homosexuality*, second edition, Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010, 130-136.
10. James Butrica, “Some Myths and Anomalies in Study of Roman Homosexuality,” *Same-Sex Desire and Love in Greco-Roman Antiquity and in the Classical Tradition of the West*, edited by Beert C. Verstraete and Vernon Provençal, Binghamton NY: Harrington Park Press, 2006, 209-269, specifically 209-221; also in a special issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, volume 49, numbers 3 and 4, 2005.