Elagabalus and the Carnivalesque: Examining the *Historia Augusta* through the Lens of Bakhtin

The collection of imperial biographies preserved as the *Historia Augusta* raises numerous questions for the scholar; however, a startling number focus on debates *surrounding* the work—its dating, its authorship, its manuscript tradition—to the neglect of the work itself. Several interesting studies have been published on various aspects of the *HA*’s contents, but one element has been thus far ignored. A motif of the exotic appears in several of the lives, none moreso than the *Life of Elagabalus* in relation to the extravagant foods the emperor served and ate. This passage interrupts the flow of the narrative with a lengthy, often redundant list of various seafood and delicacies. Its peculiarity raises the reader’s interest; its recurrence demands the scholar’s attention.

Several potential explanations for this passage present themselves. Most obviously, the author of the *Historia Augusta* follows a Suetonian model of imperial biography, which includes such elaboration, but never to this extent. The book, roughly contemporary with Ammianus Marcellinus (to trust Syme’s dating) may react to the earlier historian’s fondness of Julian (who is said to have lived as though under sumptuary laws) casting the “bad” emperors as anti-Julians. Given the ambiguity of the text, few answers can be reached.

Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque provides the most intriguing tools with which to analyze this passage. He states that depictions of the grotesque reflect society constantly rejuvenating itself, a tendency he finds in medieval festivals and the work of Rabelais. Although the *HA* does not fit the theory exactly, given the grotesquery of the passage and Syme’s interpretation of the work as a sort of historical novel, examining the *Life of Elagabalus* through the lens of Bakhtin may shed light on the meaning of the passage, the life, and possibly the entire work.

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