

Varian Studies: a Definition of the Subject

Opening address to the Varian Symposium

Leonardo de Arrizabalaga y Prado

My lords, ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the Varian Symposium, the first, I trust, of many. In launching it, I believe that my principal task must be to define the subject which brings us together here today: Varian studies.

This must be done for two reasons. One is that till now, Varian studies have not been clearly defined as a discrete zone of enquiry. Another is that most of what might be included under their rubric has, with certain rare exceptions, been vitiated by a fundamental misconception, regarding the nature of its subject.

This may be called the Varian misconception. It consists in confusing a physical individual, once living on Earth, with a notional one, a protagonist of legend or myth, whose habitat lies in the realm of information, misinformation, and disinformation. In the Varian misconception, statements concerning the latter purport to concern the former.

The former, the physical individual, Varius, is an object of historical investigation. He may be studied through a sceptical examination of ancient artefacts, such as coins and inscriptions, together with an even more sceptical reading of ancient historiography.

The latter, the notional individual, is a product of the former. He is also far more complex in nature. Under diverse names, he appears in ancient coins and inscriptions, and in historiography, both ancient and modern, as well as in more avowedly creative works of literature and art, and even in popular culture. He may also be studied. But his proper investigation requires special methods of enquiry, specifically adapted to his complex nature.

Both these individuals, and the relationship between them, constitute the proper subject of Varian studies. In order for Varian studies to progress, the Varian misconception, which confuses them with one another, must be dispelled. Varian studies must, therefore, be an amphibian discipline, encompassing both the rigorous practice of history, and the equally rigorous, but also supple and imaginative, study of artistic and literary works, as well as that of the difference and relationship between and among these diverse entities.

The initial task of Varian studies is, I would therefore submit, to tell apart the two individuals who form their composite subject, and to develop methods of enquiry suited to investigating both. Thus, definition of terms, and delineation of parameters, are necessary first steps in launching, not only this symposium, but the subject which gives it its name.

Varian studies can most simply, indeed tautologically, be defined as the study of Varius, and of his notional counterpart. But this begs two fundamental questions: “Who is Varius?” and “What sort of being is his notional counterpart?” This address will seek to answer both these questions, beginning with “Who is Varius?”

Varius, in the present context, is the proper, original, paternal family name of an adolescent boy, who lived in Syria and Rome, in the tenth Roman, or third Christian century. He reigned as Roman emperor, under the official nomenclature of Marcus Aurelius Antoninus,

for nearly four years, from 971 to 975 by the Roman calendar, corresponding to 218 to 222 by the Christian. He is commonly, but erroneously, called Elagabalus, or Heliogabalus. Both these names derive from that of a Syrian sun god, Elagabal, or Elaiagabal, whose high priest Varius was, at the same time as emperor.

Defining who he is involves deciding how to call him. How do we know that Varius is this emperor's proper, original name? Why should we prefer to call him thus, rather than by his official nomenclature: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus? Why, indeed, should we not, like almost everyone else, simply call him Elagabalus or Heliogabalus? What difference does a little nomenclatorial error make?

I shall take these questions back to front, since the last is both easiest to answer, and, in a sense, most important: Why should we not call him Elagabalus or Heliogabalus?

To call Varius Elagabalus or Heliogabalus is a malapropism, tantamount to calling the Roman Catholic Pope Jehovah, the Japanese Emperor Amateratsu, or the Dalai Lama Buddha. It is, moreover, an anachronism, since the earliest record of this name's use for Varius dates from well over a century after his death. In the context of Varian studies, where frequent reference must necessarily be made to the Syrian sun god Elagabal or Elaiagabal, Latinised as Elagabalus, and Helleno-Romanised as Heliogabalus, to refer to Varius by either of these names is confusing.

This confusion is more than a mere nomenclatorial error. It is both a token and a vehicle of the Varian misconception. For it confuses a physical with a notional individual, a character of history with one of legend or myth. That misconception is precisely what Varian studies, as I would submit they should here be defined, must set out to dispel.

To use the name Elagabalus or Heliogabalus for the physical Varius perpetuates that misconception. It militates against what should, I believe, be the first goal of Varian studies: clearly to distinguish the historical from the mythical or legendary character, and to lay foundations for the proper study of both. The first step in beginning to tell them apart is to use a nomenclature proper to each.

It is obviously just as wrong, for much the same reasons, to call Varius' imaginary counterpart Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, unless one does so with proper qualification, indicating the status of these names, as it is to call the historical Varius so. I shall soon address the second fundamental question that confronts us here today: "What sort of being is Varius' notional counterpart?" At that point I shall propose a proper way of referring to him, in the context of Varian studies.

But first let me finish answering the question "Who is Varius?" from an historical point of view. This involves addressing another question concerning his nomenclature. Why do we not call him by his regnal name: Marcus Aurelius Antoninus?

To call Varius thus is correct, in one sense, since this is his official nomenclature, appearing on his coins and inscriptions; but it is misleading and confusing in another. It is also insufficient, since it only correctly applies to Varius as emperor, ignoring his earlier life. Thus it applies to an assumed imperial persona; not to the boy who assumes it.

It is misleading because it means to be so: it means to convey the highly unlikely proposition that Varius is the son of the emperor known as Caracalla, who also bore this name. That claim, implicit in the name itself, as used on Varius' coins, is made explicit in his inscriptions, where the dubious genealogy is spelled out in full. There is, of course, no record dating from Caracalla's lifetime, linking him to Varius in any way whatever.

This nomenclature is also deliberately misleading, as borne by Caracalla, since it is intended to convey the patently false impression that he is the grandson of the philosophic emperor, the author of the book we call *The Meditations*. It is, moreover, potentially confusing. Since numbering imperial names is anachronistic for this period, there is no easy way of distinguishing the three different bearers of this nomenclature.

Posterity, wisely, has usually refrained from using it for any other than its original bearer. It has preferred, also wisely, to call Caracalla by a nickname current during his lifetime. But, under the influence of the Varian misconception, it has chosen, alas! unwisely, to call Varius by alternative versions of the name of his god.

Both the name of his god, and his official nomenclature, as applied to Varius, designate notional beings. The former belongs to legend or myth; the latter to dynastic propaganda. Neither properly designates Varius, the once live boy, as such. Granted that neither of these names will do, how do we know that we should call him Varius?

This we know because a certain Roman emperor, officially called Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, corresponding to the aforementioned dates, epigraphically and numismatically acknowledges a woman called Soaemias to be his mother. He likewise acknowledges one Maesa, Soaemias' mother, to be his grandmother. Maesa is the sister of the empress Domna. Domna is the consort of Severus, and the mother of Caracalla.

Soaemias is known, from inscriptions related to Severus' *Ludi Saeculares* of 957 = 204, to have been married, since before the earliest possible date of this boy's birth, to a certain Sextus Varius Marcellus. She remains married to this man until his death, which is epigraphically recorded during this boy's later childhood. This boy's *nomen* must, therefore, also be Varius, irrespective of his true biological paternity.

Having thus resolved the matter of his name, we return to the question "Who is Varius?" in another sense. Not, for now, in the deepest sense, that of his inner experience, but merely in that of his outer, alleged or known behaviour.

Much, indeed is alleged about him, but little is known, on the basis of evidence. One of the principal tasks of Varian studies, in their ancient historical dimension, is to distinguish between allegation and evidence, and, so, between conjecture and knowledge.

Since I have been conducting investigation of Varius for some time, I have arrived at a number of findings. These are set out in a series of articles, which you may consult at your leisure. My method of enquiry is based on the principle that no allegation made by ancient historiography concerning Varius may be taken at face value, and that even his imperial artefacts must be considered with methodical doubt.

I have, nevertheless, managed to develop a calculus of certainty, likelihood, and possibility. It based on analysis of propositions made or implied by ancient historiography, and

by imperial and private artefacts, such as coins and inscriptions. That analysis considers three main questions: whether a given proposition is, of its nature, verifiable or not; whether it was, in antiquity, potentially subject to random public verification; and, what would be the consequences, for whom, of its negative verification.

There are other criteria, but I shall spare you their citation. Rather, I shall summarise for you the results of my investigation, based on this method of enquiry. These may be considered Varius' *res gestae*, so far as they can certainly be known.

At some stage in his boyhood, young Varius assumes the role of high priest of Elagabal. In 971 = 218, he is about 14. His mother's husband is dead. Claiming to be the son of Caracalla, his mother's recently murdered maternal first cousin, Varius assumes the role of Roman emperor, replacing Caracalla's immediate successor, Macrinus.

Varius' elevation to the principate takes place in Syria. He travels overland from Syria to Rome, possibly together with the principal cult object of Elagabal, a large black meteorite, known as a baetyl. He reaches Rome late in 972 = 219.

During his reign, he endeavours to perform both his priestly and imperial duties simultaneously. He worships Elagabal, but also honours other Roman gods and goddesses. He holds court as judge of last appeal, issuing rescripts. He grants diplomas to retiring veterans. He distributes money to soldiers, and food to the people of Rome.

He grants his mother and grandmother the title of Augustae. In quick succession, he marries and divorces a series of three women, returning finally to the second. In 974 = 221 he adopts his maternal first cousin, Alexander, as his son and heir apparent.

Early in 975 = 222, probably before his eighteenth birthday, his reign, and most likely his life, come to an end. He is succeeded by his cousin, under the regnal name of Severus Alexander.

This is Varius, the character of history, so far as he can be known for certain. You may notice that most of what is generally assumed about him is missing.

We do not know for certain that his elevation to the principate took place as the result of a *coup d'état*, though this is highly likely. We know nothing sure about the motivations of the Roman soldiers stationed in Syria; nor about those of the women in Varius' family; nor about their interaction, in the period just before his proclamation.

We do not know exactly where in Syria his proclamation took place, though the legionary fort at Raphanea, near Emesa, Varius' home town, is a likely venue. Nor do we know where the decisive battle against Macrinus was fought, if indeed it was. But it is clear that the venues so far considered by earlier historians are unlikely.

We do not know for sure that Varius' first imperial residence was Antioch, although, given his earliest coinage, this is most plausible. Nor do we know the route of his progress from Syria to Rome. It may have included Anatolian cities which minted coins, apparently recording the passage of the baetyl of Elagabal; or other places with inscriptions dated to the first and second year of Varius' reign. If, however, it included all these, his journey must have involved many digressions from the straightest route.

Coinage from the imperial mint in Nicomedia suggests, but does not prove, his residence there during the winter of 971 to 972 = 218 to 219. Likewise, his passage through the Balkans may or may not coincide with inscriptions recording the repair of bridges, undertaken in his name; or with milestones on Roman roads, dated to the second year of his reign. A relief sculpture from Aquileia may or may not record his entry into Italy. Only his arrival in Rome is explicitly recorded, by an official inscription.

As for his activities in Rome, we do not know much more, generically speaking, than what is said in the summary, just given, of his *res gestae*. We can, however, provide some further detail. We can date the donatives, and some of the acts of worship, to within a certain time frame, as well as determine the approximate span of his marriages to diverse women. We can ascertain the names of all his wives. We know who shared the consulship with him, and who occupied it during one year that he did not. We may well believe the report, but do not know for certain, that he met a sudden and violent end.

We also know that the life and business of Rome and its empire continued apace, during his reign. Watercourses are built and apportioned in North Africa. Roads are repaired throughout Europe, Asia Minor, Syria and Palestine. Disputes of all sorts are resolved by local officials in Egypt. Occasional skirmishes occur with barbarians in Germany, but no major military campaign is undertaken. Soldiers continue to retire to Roman colonies, and sometimes marry barbarian women, conferring Roman citizenship upon their offspring. Gods and goddesses of all sorts continue to receive sacrifice and praise in supplication and thanks for favours asked and granted.

But of the crimes and misdemeanours attributed to Varius by his ancient historians, none, save one, that of sometimes wearing non-Roman dress, is corroborated by the evidence of artefacts. We cannot even prove the existence of several of the men he is alleged to have murdered. For those whose existence is established, we cannot prove that they were murdered, let alone by his command. While there is ample evidence that he worshipped Elagabal, there is none whatever that he sought to make him overthrow Jupiter, nor that he committed any of the acts of sacrilege imputed to him. We know that he married Aquilia Severa, twice, but we cannot demonstrate that she was a Vestal. No evidence exists of his alleged sexual versatility, of his averred convivial extravagance, of his famed aurigal or saltatory prowess, or of his reportedly wicked sense of humour.

This does not mean that these events did not occur, nor these characteristics exist in Varius; merely that we cannot *know* that they did so. This is a crucial distinction, for on it hangs the historian's claim to intellectual honesty.

Given the state of the evidence, no scrupulous historian should affirm as fact most of what is alleged about Varius. Very rarely may sentences of the form "He did this," or "He was so," justly be made without qualification. The constant use of adjectives such as "alleged," "reported," "famed," "averred," "supposed," and the adverbs deriving from them is, perhaps unfortunately for one's prose style, necessary to one's historical integrity. This does not mean that one may not discuss those allegations; merely that one must do so in full awareness of their status as something less than fact: as allegation, supposition, or conjecture.

Questions of truth and falsehood, fact and fiction, thus are central to Varian studies. This, in the present intellectual climate, is a liability. For they may be attacked by two different sorts

of students of discourse: on the one hand those who hold that no such thing as truth or facts exists, and that discourse is all; on the other, those who hold that truth and facts may exist, but that in the case of antiquity, given the state of the evidence, they are unknowable, and are moreover uninteresting, compared to ancient discourse.

Varian studies, in order to progress at all, must confront and answer both these challenges. The answer to the first is philosophical, and, like most philosophical controversy, resolves itself down to definition: what shall we agree to call knowledge in this case? The answer to the second is practical: it may be refuted by contrary example.

Since, therefore, we are at liberty to set the rules of the language game of Varian studies, I propose that we set them, at least in their historical dimension, according to an epistemology based on the calculus of certainty, likelihood, and possibility, outlined just before. This, further developed, answers both these challenges. Whilst acknowledging the ludic and verbal nature of Varian studies, it allows one to distinguish categories within them, corresponding to the state of evidence, and to its relationship with allegation, in each particular case. Using this calculus, I have already shown that there are, indeed, interesting facts to be known about Varius. There are also conjectures to be made.

This leads us to the second of our fundamental questions: “What sort of creature is Varius’ notional counterpart?” For the distinction between fact and fiction, central to the proper historical study of Varius, turns out to involve the distinction between his life and his afterlife. Indeed, it emerges that most of what is commonly assumed to be his life is actually a notion or a fiction, mainly created by others after his death. But some of it, indeed the germ of it, is created during his lifetime, by none other than Varius himself.

The distinction between Varius’ life and his afterlife is thus not merely chronological, but ontological and epistemological. The Varian life and the Varian afterlife are two distinct but closely related objects of study. The basic definition of each requires its clear distinction from the other, but also involves its relationship with the other. Thus, they interact with one another, like Yin and Yang. And, just as in the case of Yin and Yang, there is a little bit of each inside the other.

This is so even at the level of chronology. For Varius’ afterlife does not begin with his death. Rather, the germ of his afterlife, the mythical or legendary persona which becomes its protagonist, already exists during his lifetime, and is indeed his own creation. To understand this, we must consider the ontological distinction between Varius’ life and his afterlife. This differentiates between two distinct sorts of entity.

On the one hand, there is a physical individual, living and dying in limited time and space, within the bounds of his own body and mind. He may be observed and recorded by others, and may even leave material evidence of his passage through life. On these two contingencies rests the epistemological distinction, which is treated elsewhere.

On the other hand, returning to the ontological distinction, there is a purely notional individual, consisting entirely of information (or misinformation or disinformation). He is unbounded by time or space, or by any particular body. He does, however, exist in a mind, or in a series of minds, presumably linked to bodies, but not necessarily to that of his original creator. Thus, as a purely notional entity, existing only in a mental realm, he is limited only by rules of information, which minds receiving, containing and transmitting him, may observe for

themselves, and with their interlocutors. Such an entity is highly prone to evolution and metamorphosis.

Here, the physical entity is a boy, whose name is Varius. The notional one is an avatar of Varius. We may properly call him the Varian avatar, whose forms and names may be many and various. Avatar, defined by the dictionary as “a variant phase or version of a continuing basic entity,” is a term especially useful to Varian studies in their notional dimension. Deriving as it does from Oriental religion, and implying a theory of evolution and serial reincarnation, it is particularly apt for the study of the many metamorphoses undergone by the protagonist of the Varian myth or legend.

In discussing individual manifestations of the Varian avatar, it may be opportune to use the name associated with a given one, such as Dio’s ‘Pseudantoninus’ or ‘Sardanapalus,’ Herodian’s ‘Antoninus,’ the *Historia Augusta*’s ‘Varius Heliogabalus,’ Mansionario’s ‘Elliogabalo,’ Tillemont’s ‘Héliogabale,’ Gibbon’s ‘Elagabalus,’ Schiller’s ‘Elagabal,’ or Stuart Hay’s ‘Antonine,’ to cite examples only from historiography. But the scrupulous student of the Varian afterlife will indicate, in whichever manner best suits his or her language of composition, the status of any such name as that of a notional, or indeed of a fictional character, depending on the case. He or she will also, where relevant, explain the nature of its bearer’s relationship to Varius.

What might that relationship be? It may be different in each case, but there is an element of unity, “a continuing basic entity,” as in the cited definition of ‘avatar’. For the diverse forms of the Varian avatar all grow out of the germ of the Varian persona. This is Varius’ own creation, forged out of at least two pre-existing personae, fused with his own original self, and with each other. Varius assumes the role of high priest of Elagabal; then that of Roman emperor. Both these roles have specific personae, conforming to their own traditional scripts, which must be studied, rehearsed, and learned. But in performing each, and in merging them into one, Varius puts his own stamp on the resulting drama.

A tragic drama it turns out to be for Varius, for these personae are irreconcilable. One requires of him ecstatic dancing (to be discussed later today), the ability to go into a trance, and a certain elegant charisma, which, together with alleged physical beauty, leads Herodian to compare him to the young Dionysus. The other demands a military bearing, the clear definition and ruthless pursuit of self-interest, and a certain humourless majesty: qualities closer to Ares, Hermes, or Apollo. Varius is thus caught in a tragic dilemma.

He seeks to perform both these roles simultaneously. But they oppose one another, leading, not to resolution in a higher synthesis, but to ever starker contradiction, with reportedly disastrous results for Varius. Thus, his performance of these conflicting roles not only constitutes the central drama of his reign, and holds the key to unlocking its mysteries, but also provides the nucleus of the Varian avatar. How is this so? Let us see how his fusion of these two roles relates to his life, and to his afterlife.

He soon decides, as emperor, to emphasise his priestly persona. This choice most plausibly derives, not from mad fanaticism, as proposed by some, but from a perfectly rational wish, within the terms of his own logic. He tries to shift the source of his legitimacy, in tenure of the principate, from a sordid tale of adultery and bastardy, which is not, in any case, universally believed, to the manifest favour of the god Elagabal. This god has chosen, for whatever reasons, and by whatever means, to make his undisputedly legitimate hereditary high

priest Roman emperor. Because, headstrong adolescent that he is, Varius overlooks or underestimates the contradiction between these two roles, his strategy fails, dragging him down in its ruin. Yet this is not madness, but miscalculation.

Doubtless contributing to his downfall, perhaps even plotting it from the very start of his reign, is his mother's sister, Mammaea, who wishes to place her son, Alexander, on the throne. Taking advantage of Varius' miscalculation, she succeeds in her ambition, eliminating her rival sister, together with her nephew. Early in Alexander's reign, while Mammaea completely controls him, she deems it opportune to denigrate Varius' memory, in order to justify his elimination, which is reported to have been particularly grisly. Alexander duly favours with high office two Roman historians: one Latin, one Greek.

The text of the Latin historian, Marius Maximus, does not survive, save in citation. The text of the Greek historian, Dio, does survive, partly in a Byzantine epitome, but partly also in a codex which may reflect Dio's original text. (The Byzantine treatment of the Varian avatar will be discussed here later today.) Dio's text on Varius constitutes a posthumous indictment, designed to gain its readership's assent to its subject's murder, which it reports in gory detail. It does so using all the standard ploys of Graeco-Roman invective, accusing Varius of numerous crimes and misdemeanours, in which sumptuary, ludic, and sexual charges play a significant part. These last provide an opportunity for Dio to titillate his audience with prurient anecdotes, under the cover of obloquy.

It has been argued, by one of the cleverest of the students of discourse, for similar, earlier cases of such denigration, that it is not of interest to Classical scholars such as herself whether such charges are true or false. Rather, their interest for such scholars resides in determining how such charges conform to a certain rhetorical pattern, and reflect a certain set of values.

In the present case, however, what interests me, as an historian, and should, I think, be of value and interest to students of the Varian afterlife, is that in Dio's treatment of the Varian persona, we can not only observe his conformity to a certain rhetorical pattern, and his reflection thereby of a certain set of values. We can also see precisely where his indictment is contradicted by evidence. In his indictment, Dio seizes on the Varian persona, whose memory is presumably still present in his intended audience's mind, and turns it, using rhetorical devices of exposition, characterisation, and invention, to his underlying purpose: to gain his audience's assent to Varius' murder.

Now it may well be that Varius, an adolescent boy suddenly presented with the mastery of the known world, with all its temptations, did not behave entirely according to the strictures of Cato and other Roman moralists, who preach austerity, modesty, restraint, and indifference to the senses. We cannot know. But we can be sure that whatever hint of sumptuary, ludic or sexual indulgence, whether factual or not, present in his audience's notion of Varius, is seized upon by Dio, and used to maximum effect: indeed to clinch his argument. For it is with anecdotes relating to Varius' alleged sexual depravity that Dio culminates his exposition, and justifies Varius' murder by the praetorians. This conforms to the standard rhetorical pattern described by students of discourse, not only regarding the salacious nature of the charges, but in that they are, by and large, unverifiable.

Where Dio's indictment is verifiable, as well as in questions of dress, is in his treatment of Varius' religion. For here he takes another topic of invective – not such a common one, at least in an imperial context, as sumptuary, ludic, and sexual indulgence – and deploys it in

agreement with some of the evidence, but in contradiction with the rest. Several series of Varius' coins, to be discussed in this symposium, show him wearing the dress of a Syrian high priest, sacrificing to Elagabal. Thus he will have been seen by the senators and knights invited to witness the rite, and partake in the subsequent feast. His dress is part of his persona, together with his bearing, his speech, and his movement in performance of the ritual, all studied, rehearsed, and learned. Also part of his persona is the authority with which, as emperor, he commands his guests' presence at the ritual.

Dio, who was not invited, perhaps because he was absent from Rome at the time, plays upon the recollection of those in his audience who were, gaining their assent to a fact – that Varius wore barbarian dress, at least in performance of these rites. He does so in order thus, by a false analogy, to gain their assent to a falsehood: that Varius sought to overthrow Jupiter, and put Elagabal in his place. Not only is there no evidence whatever to support this proposition; there is evidence against it: Varian issues of coins in honour of Jupiter, as well as of several of the other Roman gods and goddesses. There are also coins showing Varius in traditional Roman sacrificial garb, his toga draped over his head.

Anyone familiar, as Dio himself must surely have been, with the theory and practice of syncretism in the Roman empire, must have known that Varius' promotion of Elagabal takes place within a context where the identification of one god with another, rather than the overthrow of one by another, is the operative dynamic. Dio's attempt to persuade his audience otherwise is evidence of his manipulation of the Varian persona. It also marks the beginning of that persona's transformation into the Varian avatar.

The character created by Dio bears the rhetorical insult-names of Pseudantoninus and Sardanapalus. This amounts to an unwitting acknowledgement of his semi-fictional nature. He is processed soon after through Herodian's less hostile, more fanciful imagination, under his official name of Antoninus. Here the element of eros, as a source of motivation for the soldiers who put Varius on the throne, is introduced; though sex plays a lesser role in Varius' reign, and in his downfall, according to Herodian, than it does in Dio's version.

The next sustained appearance, as opposed to brief mention, of the Varian avatar, occurs in the *Historia Augusta*, which will also be discussed here today. This introduces the use of the name of his god for Varius, possibly reflecting an oral, rather than a literary tradition. For it is hard to believe that a Latin senatorial author such as Marius Maximus, whose text may otherwise contribute to that of the *Vita Heliogabali* in the *Historia Augusta*, would commit a malapropism of which both Dio and Herodian are innocent.

The character of 'Varius Heliogabalus' in the *Historia Augusta* has been argued to serve as a mask for its pagan author to attack Christian emperors from Constantine onwards. If so it has broken quite free from the original motives for Dio's treatment of Varius, though it may owe much to Dio's characterisation of his avatar. However that may be, this is the character transmitted to Western mediaeval posterity, resurfacing in Mansionario's imperial histories, also to be discussed here today. Mansionario, like his predecessors and his followers, uses the Varian avatar as an excuse to write about subjects normally banned from serious history: a sort of respectable pornography.

Leonardo Aretino, who will also be discussed today, whilst not eschewing titillation, exploits the Varian avatar for satire. For political theorists, from Macchiavelli onward, the Varian avatar is a useful example, to be deployed whenever in need of an especially bad prince.

This is also the use to which he is put by many historians, such as Tillemont, Gibbon, and Schiller, each using the Varian avatar to advance his own particular agenda. This is a subject which will be discussed by one of tomorrow's contributions to this symposium.

Somewhere in this process of evolution, two curious novelties are introduced. In one, three of Varius' principal courtiers, his grandmother's butler, his mother's lover, and his own partner in the consulship, are posthumously castrated, becoming eunuchs in his *harem*. Not only that, but they are conflated with each other, creating a puzzle for later historians to solve. In another novelty, Christianity, never content to leave bad enough alone, intrudes into the story, turning Varius, of whom the early Christian chroniclers have nothing whatever to say in this respect, into an implacable persecutor of Christians. This is a character his avatar bears in much of its dramatic and fictional representation, though not in all, as we shall see today.

It is not till the later nineteenth century that the valence of the Varian avatar begins radically to change. From about the time that Oscar Wilde says that "wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others," the Varian avatar is gradually transformed from a monster of cruelty, depravity, and sacrilege, into a misunderstood and sensitive youth, a hero of aestheticism, elegance, and sensual liberation, a crowned anarchist, a saint and martyr of the sexual revolution.

This is the most recent metamorphosis of the Varian avatar, the character of legend or myth, whom it is, together with Varius, his historical counterpart, the task of Varian studies to investigate.

Several of the works contributing to this latest metamorphosis will be discussed here today and tomorrow, including the oil painting of *The Roses of Heliogabalus*, by Alma Tadema, the watercolour *Lui*, by Mossa, and two novels, by Bertrand and Couperus respectively. None of our symposiasts has chosen directly to tackle the best known literary work in this latest Varian metamorphosis, Artaud's *Héliogabale ou l'Anarchiste Couronné*, though it is referred to indirectly in tomorrow's presentation of the Japanese reception of the Varian myth or legend. This work, presented as "*une oeuvre d'érudition*," actually subtracts from the sum of human knowledge. It will have to wait till the next Varian Symposium for its comeuppance.

Between now and then, a number of matters need to be discussed, and, perhaps, to be settled. One is the question of whether to call the Varian avatar a creature of myth or of legend, or something else altogether. This question arises out of Professor Kirk's distinction, in his study of *The Nature of Greek Myths*, between myth and legend. Myths, by his definition, are stories about "definitely non-historical personages like Apollo, Perseus, or Medea;" not about legendary heroes such as Achilles, Hector and Diomedes. Nor, therefore, about villains (or heroes) such as Varius.

One may argue against Professor Kirk's restrictive use of 'myth'. Certainly no Greek would have drawn his distinction. Tales about the heroes of the Trojan war, and tales about the gods, were both, in classical Greek, μυθολογίαι. Even tales about more recent fictional, hypothetical, or imaginary characters could also fall into that category, as does Socrates' metaphor of the charioteer and two horses in the *Phaedrus*, or that of the cave, in the *Republic*. Another objection is that if one goes back far enough, one may find that Kirk's underlying distinction is false: that Apollo, Perseus, and Medea spring originally from physical beings, whose traces are lost in prehistory. But, like the names 'Elagabalus' and 'Heliogabalus', Kirk's distinction has become fairly widespread.

In scholarship, as in war, one must try to choose one's battles. That of calling Varius by his proper name is central to the progress of Varian studies. That of correcting Professor Kirk's distinction between myth and legend is not. For a better alternative exists, higher up the categorical scale, encompassing both, and sidestepping Kirk's distinction. I propose that the Varian avatar be classified as a notional, as opposed to a physical entity, just as it has been throughout this address. Varius himself is physical, though he, and his persona, are also notional, both in his own mind and in those of others. His avatar, however, is only notional, though it, or its predecessor, the Varian persona, may have undergone physical performance by its creator, or by others.

As for the rest of the matters that need to be discussed and settled, including questions of editorial policy for *Metamorphoses Varianae*, and other details of that collective work's publication, I shall leave them for the next Varian Symposium, by which time matters will, with luck, have progressed to the point of having to confront them. Thank you for your kind attention. Let the first Varian Symposium begin. *Floreat Studia Variana!*