

# The Cultural Reception of the Varian Afterlife in Japan: From Literary to Popular Culture

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Since the twentieth century, the avatar of Varius, under the name of Elagabalus or Heliogabalus, has sometimes appeared in Japanese literary culture, although the Roman Empire never came into direct contact with Japan. The typical image of the Varian avatar, as formed in Japan, is one of 'decadence.' This is not exempt from influence from the traditional type of Varian afterlife that is founded mainly in three primary sources: the *Historia Augusta*, Herodian's *History of the Empire*, and *Dio's Roman History*. However, the formation of Heliogabalus' image in Japan takes a unique form. This article will trace the reception and formation of this figure in terms of his extravagant decadence and sexuality, seen through Japanese literary and popular culture.

One of the earliest appearances of Heliogabalus in Japanese literary culture is in an essay entitled 'Fragrances in Ancient Greece and Rome' ('Girisha oyobi Roma to Kōryō' 1942) written by Kinzō Kafuku, a scientist. In this brief text Kafuku introduces an episode involving Heliogabalus:

At that time, Roman citizens loved roses; so much so that they could be over-enthusiasts. It is said that rich and noble Romans paved their dining rooms with roses, built a rosewater fountain indoors, and adorned their head and neck with rose wreathes, pouring rose-perfume on each other's heads. A man called Heliogabalus was such a rose fanatic that he left an amusing anecdote: He drank wine flavoured with roses, bathed in rosewater, and flavoured all his food with roses, as a result of which, he became ill; nevertheless, during his illness, he would never take his medicine without rose flavour.

(Translation mine)

The portrayal of Heliogabalus as a rose fanatic focuses only on his extravagant behaviour, not on his sexuality. Possibly Kafuku had somewhere seen the famous painting *The Roses of Heliogabalus* (1888) by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema.

The next depiction is that of Yukio Mishima, who seems to be the first Japanese novelist to cite Heliogabalus in relation to decadent tyranny. In *Confessions of a Mask* (1949), Mishima refers to Heliogabalus as follows: 'It was not until later that I discovered hopes the same as mine in Heliogabalus, emperor of Rome in its period of decay, that destroyer of Rome's ancient gods, that decadent, bestial monarch' (20). Mishima's view of Heliogabalus is conceptually different from Kafuku's, even if both of them treat his decadence. Kafuku, in his 'Fragrances in Ancient Greece and Rome', never writes about the destructive aspect of Heliogabalus. Those who have read Mishima's writings (or those who know Mishima's personality) can easily recognise this aspect. This makes a significant difference between these two images of Heliogabalus.

The question is where Mishima derived the image of Heliogabalus as a ‘bestial monarch’. The answer could be found in Antonin Artaud’s *Heliogabalus: Or, the Crowned Anarchist (Héliogabale ou l’anarchiste couronné* 1934). Artaud’s presentation of Heliogabalus is not appropriate from the historical viewpoint of Varian studies. However, it is also the case that Artaud proposes an original interpretation of the religious and metaphysical philosophy of Heliogabalus through many sexual and destructive scenes. Such a drive is not to be found in Kafuku’s article, but it is in Mishima’s writings, as if Mishima, like Artaud, identified himself with Heliogabalus. It is highly possible that Kakufu was unaware of or just avoided Artaud’s *Heliogabalus*; on the contrary, Mishima wrote under its influence. The presence or absence of Artaud’s *Heliogabalus* seems to differentiate Mishima’s from Kafuku’s characterisation.

It was not until 1977 that Chimako Tada, a woman poet and essayist, beautifully translated Artaud’s *Heliogabalus* into Japanese. In her short essay on Heliogabalus’s life ‘The Syrian Princesses’ (‘Shiria no Ōjotachi’ 1977), Tada says that her image of Heliogabalus is based not on the latest and solid historical studies but on doubtful ancient historians (Tada 181). Nonetheless, her artistic achievement of this translation newly introduced the Artaudian Heliogabalus to Japanese readers—decadent, tyrannical, androgynous or bisexual. Tada was also famous for her translations of Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memoirs of Hadrian (Mémoires d’Hadrien: Carnets de notes de mémoires d’Hadrien* 1951), *Oriental Tales (Nouvelles orientales* 1938) and also her shorter poems. Yourcenar and Tada, both of whom were great admirers of ancient Greece and Rome, treated homosexuality in their works.<sup>1</sup> This tendency is also related to the formation of Heliogabalus’ figure in Japan.

Another important populariser of Heliogabalus is Tada’s friend, Tatsuhiko Shibusawa, a scholar of French literature, and essayist. Shibusawa, as one of Mishima’s close friends<sup>2</sup>, translated *Mishima: A Vision of the Void (Mishima, ou, la vision du vide* 1980) by Yourcenar. In the commentary of this translation, Shibusawa remembers talking with Mishima about *The Memoirs of Hadrian (Mishima* 176). These facts display a particular tendency among these authors. Somehow, there is a similarity among their literary interests: antiquity, homosexuality, and sensuality. The characterisation of Heliogabalus serves to bring out such shared ideas or atmosphere among Mishima’s circle.

This mutual understanding of Heliogabalus is especially portrayed by Shibusawa. Before Tada’s translation of Artaud’s *Heliogabalus*, Shibusawa had already provided a unique exposition of the myth of Heliogabalus as a sexual and aesthetic anarchist, based on Artaud’s fiction. In 1962, Shibusawa writes ‘The Mad Emperor Heliogabalus: Or A Study of Decadence’ (‘Kyō-tei Heliogabalus: Arui-ha Decadansu-no Ichi-kōsatsu’). Citing as primary sources Lampridius, Cassius Dio, and Herodian, and furthermore referring to Petronius’ *Satyricon* and French novelists such as Huysmans (*Against the Grain, À Rebours*), Shibusawa analyses Heliogabalus in terms of his anarchist, libertine, hermaphrodite and masochist tendencies:

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<sup>1</sup> Tada likewise translated *I, Claudius* by Robert Graves (together with Toshio Akai).

<sup>2</sup> Imanishi, the decadent scholar of French literature in Mishima’s novel *The Temple of Dawn* (the 3rd vol. of *The Sea of Fertility*) is modelled on **Shibusawa**.

Heliogabalus, as well as this ancient monarch [Sardanapalus, the last king of Assyria], undoubtedly believed that the supreme pleasure dwells in a hermaphrodite body as negation of sexual difference and absolutism of both sexes simultaneously. What was the most fascinating thing for him, was sexual subjection, as is shown by masochistic pain in pleasure.

(‘The Mad Emperor Heliogabalus’ 54; Translation mine)

In addition to that, Shibusawa, probably drawing on Georges Bataille’s idea from *Eroticism* (L’Érotisme, 1957), which he later translated into Japanese (1973), identifies Heliogabalus’ sexual excess with his religious excess:

We can recognise that Heliogabalus had no sense of morality or abstinence, which would be the characteristics of so-called deviates. His homosexual personality is strongly emphasised by his taste for abnormality and horror, insatiable thirst for intellectual pursuits, and extraordinary drive. The deviant’s megalomania—there is only a very fine line between a genius and a deviate—led him to plant a banner of his intellectual pursuit on that untrodden field—of religion and sex.

(‘The Mad Emperor Heliogabalus’ 59; Translation mine)

In other words, for Heliogabalus, sexual and religious ecstasies are the same thing:

His oriental sensualism saved the world from the imposition of one monotheistic theory. His ambiguous Cabalistic philosophy, which never negates the presence of divinities and simultaneously prohibits any forms of their rule over the world, was more like an aesthetic pursuit rather than a doctrinal one. Elagabalus, who lacked the logical and rational mind, was absolutely a fanatic, and ‘the Crowned Anarchist,’ as says Artaud.

(‘The Mad Emperor Heliogabalus’ 64; Translation mine)

Here Shibusawa’s Heliogabalus, derived from Artaud and possibly Bataille, establishes a certain direction in the Japanese representation of Heliogabalus, a deviant of decadence and aestheticism.

In the dawn and high noon of the reception of the Varian myth in Japanese literary culture, the myth was nourished by Mishima, Tada, Shibusawa and some other literary people such as Mutsuo Takahashi. Shibusawa was, particularly, in the avant-garde of literary culture. He was actually prosecuted for translating *Juliette* (*Histoire de Juliette ou les Prosperités du Vice*) by the Marquis de Sade (1959), which was regarded as pornography at the time.<sup>3</sup> Shibusawa never distinguished ‘high culture’ from ‘subculture.’ Shibusawa published the magazine *Le Sang et la Rose* in 1968. Its theme is comprehensive studies in eroticism and cruelty: Mishima, who also vindicated ‘subculture,’ and the surrealist painter Paul Delvaux contributed to the first issue. These literary and critical texts in the Showa period (1926-89) formed the foundation of some peculiar decadent and aesthetic image of Heliogabalus. This foundation has given rise to a new kind of Varian myth in Japanese popular culture after the Showa period, in terms of sexuality.

In the field of novels, Haruaki Utsukibara published a historical novel, *Nobunaga: Or, the*

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<sup>3</sup> Later, Mishima adopted Shibusawa’s *Marquis de Sade: A Life* for the drama *Madame de Sade* (1965).

*Crowned Androgyny* (*Nobunaga, Arui-ha Taikan-seru Andorogyunos* 1999), which won the ‘Japan Fantasy Novel Grand Prix’ award in 1999. This novel pays homage to Artaud’s novel, as its title indicates. The plot is double and parallel: it takes place in the age of Nobunaga Oda (1534-82), the most powerful daimyo (samurai Duke) in Japan until his death, and the other plot is in Artaud’s period (1930-36). There appear two androgynies: Nobunaga and a mysterious secret-agent of the Japanese government, Tatsuhiko Sōkenji, whose model is obviously Shibusawa. Both of them are depicted as a beautiful boy (or girl). Nobunaga is the protagonist in the novel and Sōkenji, his commentator, is an offspring of Nobunaga’s master or guru, Gyōshō, who confers the spiritual or divine stone on Nobunaga.

The key idea of this novel is unification. Sōkenji’s enigmatic note in the first chapter illuminates this idea:

Heliogabalus, who is both male and female.

Faith in the sun is a male religion; but in vain without a female, the imitative figure of the male, who reflects him.

The religion of the One, who is divided into two, in order to act.

In order to exist.

The religion, which initially divided the One.

The One and the two are joined together through Androgyny.

Androgyny is male;

And female.

Simultaneously.

[They are] Unified into the One. (Utsukibara 13-14; Translation mine)

In accordance with these enigmatic lines, Nobunaga gradually unifies his province and invades other provinces around him ruled by other daimyos, with the ambition of conquering and unifying the whole of Japan. These conquest wars, furthermore, have another aspect— religious wars to unify many sects of Buddhism, Shinto and Christianity (first introduced by Roman Catholic Jesuit missionaries around the time of Nobunaga) into the cult of a divine black stone, in the same manner as did Heliogabalus. In this novel the divine stone of Nobunaga/Heliogabalus, who was identified with Baal, is syncretised especially with Gozu-Tennō, an ox-head god from India, who was also historically conflated with Susanoo-no-Mikoto in Japanese religious syncretism (Illustration 1). This Susanoo is the younger brother of Amateratsu, the Sun goddess; they are to be fused into the One in Nobunaga’s mysticism. Nobunaga attempts to unify all provinces into one monotheistic state and, like Heliogabalus, dies prematurely in the end. This novel is of course a historical fantasy, based on the radical and violent policy of Nobunaga and Heliogabalus. It, however, reflects certain characteristics of Heliogabalus derived from the Japanese literary reception of the Varian myth through Shibusawa (as Sōkenji): decadent, extravagant, sensual, self-destructive, and androgynous.

The image of Heliogabalus appears even in the field of popular musical drama by the Takarazuka Revue, which is a famous women-only troupe. The name of Heliogabalus is used in *Revue Fantastique, Les Collages: An Arabesque of Sounds* (2003) played by the Snow Troupe, one of five Takarazuka troupes. In the fourth Act, *A Collage of Time* (illustration 2), Heliogabalus comes

to light as follows:

#### Scene 8: Wanderings

Heliogabalus wears a gorgeous coat, showing that he was once an emperor. He recollects all his friends who sacrificed their lives to make him emperor.

#### Scene 9 A: Hallucination—Banquets—

In the ruins consisting of a fountain and columns, the ancient white imperial palace clearly stands out against the blue sky. Led by a girl, the emperor strays into the palace. As soon as he hears water running, the fountain turns deep blue and runs over. Everything is coming back. Beautiful women, quivering lights, favourite banquets, and finally his beloved friends appear. Delight fills his heart.

#### Scene 9 B: The Setting Sun

When the girl appears again, everything disappears and the ruins reappear. With dried flowers in his hands, the emperor goes mad, elegantly trailing his coat in the ruins against the crimson setting sun.

(English synopsis)

Here are typical Varian attributes: e.g. extravagance, hedonism, decadence, the vicissitude of life or transiency and madness. One peculiar and unique trait of this Heliogabalus is, however, that an actress plays a role of the emperor, and also his male friends are played by women. In this context, what interests us is that male/male relationship is utterly reversed by the female/female relationship. This can be further considered from the viewpoint of transsexual, transvestite, or rather hermaphrodite aspects in the figure of Heliogabalus.

Finally, we come to the field of manga, or Japanese cartoons. There are two mangas employing the word 'Heliogabalus' or 'Elagabalus.' The first is *Elagabalus* (1996-97) by Ataru Cagiva, which is mainly aimed at teenagers.<sup>4</sup> 'Elagabalus' here designates the black stone, which corresponds to the philosopher's stone in alchemy. Good and evil forces battle for this stone, which has great power to influence the world. No Varian avatar appears in this manga, but just alone the spiritual stone under the name of Elagabalus. In this respect, this manga seems to have borrowed one attribute found in Varian myth.

The other manga, *Vassalord* by Nanae Chrono, exhibits a more complex structure than Cagiva's *Elagabalus*. This manga's subtitle is *Heliogabalus in the Recondite Labyrinth* [*Yūkyū no Heliogabalus*] (from 2004 to date).<sup>5</sup> This is the story of a vampire and an exorcist. The exorcist Charles Chrishunds (called Cherry) was once bitten by a gay-vampire Jonny Rayflo. Since then, Charles's life depends on Rayflo's blood; even if he does not wish to do so, Charles cannot stop his

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<sup>4</sup> < <http://www3.ocn.ne.jp/~damedame/gallaly/eraga03.html> >

<sup>5</sup> <<http://www.fwinc.co.jp/vassalord/index2.php>>

craving for Rayflo's blood. Rayflo is an original vampire, not one bitten by other vampires; 'Heliogabalus in the Recondite Labyrinth' is an epithet of one antagonist-vampire. The two gay vampires play a detective role (as buddy partners) in every story. Their particular personality traits—their platonic-homosexual relationship through blood-eating, decadent mood, and brutal murders—seems to have affinities with the Varian myth. Although the characters of this manga have nothing to do with the real character of Varius, the sound of 'Heliogabalus' resonates with vampire stories. This manga is highly influenced by what is called 'queer horror', especially by 'queer' vampires, one of its subgenre.<sup>6</sup> The fact that the cartoonist Chrono places the name of 'Heliogabalus' into the subtitle of the first volume also shows that the image of Heliogabalus as received in the Showa period still works and grows more and more, combined with new images such as queer vampires.

It is also important to point out that girls are the assumed readers of *Vassalord*, drawn by the woman cartoonist Chrono. Such a kind of genre can be part of what is called 'Boys' Love' (BL) among Japanese girls. Interestingly, both readers and authors are typical hetero-sexual (The spectators of Takarazuka likewise have the same tendency). This complicated relationship between the contents and their providers/receivers is suitable for Heliogabalus as the 'anarchist' in Artaud's sense.

This article has shown how the Varian avatar in the form of Heliogabalus has been deployed in the field of literature, musical theatre and manga in Japan, after his particular image was formed among Mishima's literary circle in the middle of twentieth century. Although my article only introduces some examples of this reception without detailed analysis, it has, at least, found that its decadent, but radical and progressive characteristics of the Varian myth—deviated or aberrated from his original history—fit into depictions of new ideas about sexuality in the current media. In this sense, the icon of Heliogabalus contributes to help Japanese popular culture describe various new styles of sexuality. The Varian afterlife in today's Japanese culture still has been growing and expanding, as his name 'Varius' implies.

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<sup>6</sup> To find out more information about queer horror, see <<http://www.queerhorror.com/>>.

## Illustrations



Illustration 1.

An Old Painting of Gion-Shin: of Susano-no-Mikoto (Kozu-Tennō), Kushinadahime-no-Mikoto (Toshitokujin), who is Susanoo's wife and Hachiōji (Hachishōshin) from Yasaka-Shrine Kyoto Japan (2007).



Illustration 2.

A Picture of Heliogabalus played by the Snow Troupe of Takarazuka Revue (2003).

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