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# Notes

Tom Rutter

## Marlowe, the 'Mad Priest of the Sun', and Heliogabalus

In his preface to *Perimedes the Blacke-Smith: A Golden Methode, How to Vse the Minde in Pleasant and Profitable Exercise* (1588), 'To the Gentlemen readers, Health', Robert Greene responds to what seem to have been derisive criticisms of his recent work:

> I keepe my old course, to palter vp some thing in Prose, vsing mine old poesie still, *Omne tulit punctum,* although latelye two Gentlemen Poets, made two mad men of Rome beate it out of their paper bucklers: & had it in derision, for that I could not make my verses iet vpon the stage in tragicall buskins, euerie worde filling the mouth like the faburden of Bo-Bell, daring God out of heauen with that Atheist *Tamburlan,* or blaspheming with the mad preest of the sonne: but let me rather openly pocket vp the Asse at *Diogenes* hand: then wantonlye set out such impious instances of intollerable poetrie, such mad and scoffing poets, that haue propheticall spirits as bred of *Merlins* race, if there be anye in England that set the end of scollarisme in an English blanck verse.[1]

The reference to the 'two Gentlemen Poets' and the 'two mad men of Rome' appears to indicate that Greene had been satirized in a lost collaborative play, set in Rome, that took issue with his Horatian motto 'Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci' and mocked his abilities as a dramatic poet.[2] The allusions to Tamburlaine and to Merlin strongly suggest, furthermore, that

Greene's complaint about dramatists who (unlike him) give their characters bombastic and atheistic speeches is directed towards his fellow writer Christopher Marlowe, whose *Tamburlaine the Great* was one of the most successful and notorious plays of the late 1580s and whose name was sometimes given in the form 'Marlen', as in the buttery records at Corpus Christi College Cambridge.[3] Charles Nicholl noted in 1992, however, that 'the biographers have chosen to remain silent on a puzzling aspect' of Greene's diatribe, namely the reference to the 'mad preest of the sonne': 'As far as I know, no-one has found anything in *Tamburlaine,* or in any other play current in 1588, to explain this allusion'.[4] The current essay concerns this part of Greene's preface.

Nicholl identifies the mad priest as the Italian philosopher Giordano Bruno, who resided in England between 1583 and 1585 and whose advocacy of a heliocentric model of the cosmos met with some derision. He draws parallels between Bruno and Marlowe's Doctor Faustus, and suggests that Greene's preface 'adds strength to the view that *Faustus* was an early work'.[5] David Farley-Hills has since pointed out that Bruno was not, strictly speaking, a heliocentrist, but he accepts that he was widely thought to be, and he goes on to interpret Tamburlaine's famous speech about 'aspiring minds' in the first part of the play (2.7.12–29) as a Machiavellian distortion of Bruno's beliefs about the divine potential of humankind.[6] Subsequent biographers have tended to accept the identification of the priest as Bruno: while Constance Brown Kuriyama's discussion of the passage does not make reference to the 'mad preest' section, David Riggs invokes 'Marlowe's kindred spirit Giordano Bruno, the frenzied sun-worshipper', while Park Honan and Lisa Hopkins concur.[7]

Nicholl was incorrect, however, in his assertion that he was the first to provide an explanation of Greene's reference to the 'mad preest of the sonne'. In 1923, E.K. Chambers noted in *The Elizabethan Stage* that the phrase 'suggests the play of "the lyfe and deathe of Heliogabilus," entered on S[tationers'] R[egister] to John Danter on 19 June 1594, but now lost', and he cited earlier work by E. Köppel and W. Bang to the same effect.[8] In 1931, Mario Praz accepted that Heliogabalus was the object of the allusion but noted that 'Greene speaks of two gentlemen poets, so that, while the *Tamburlan* of the quotation must surely be Marlowe's, I am afraid the other play on Heliogabalus (?) is likely to be by another hand'.[9] Stanley Wells, in his 1961 edition of *Perymedes the Blacksmith* (*sic*), retained the assumption that Greene is referring to a play on the mad priest of the sun, listed (and discounted) several plays put forward as candidates (interpreting Praz's remarks

as a rejection of the claims of the *Heliogabalus* referred to in the Stationers' Register), and concluded that 'Short of the discovery of material at present unknown, the problem seems insoluble'.[10] Most recently, Kirk Melnikoff and Edward Gieskes have speculated that a play called *The Mad Priest of the Sun* was in existence by 1587, and that 'Greene shows an awareness of the current popular repertory' in alluding to it along with *Tamburlaine,* although they do not refer directly to Heliogabalus (or to any play of that name).[11]

In the present article I revisit the case for Heliogabalus, rather than Bruno, as the object of Greene's reference. I argue that one can make sense of his words without having either to date the lost *Heliogabalus* to 1588 or to posit another play on a similar topic from the same date, and furthermore that it is indeed Marlowe, not some other dramatist or dramatists, that Greene imagines 'blaspheming with the mad preest of the sonne'. I shall begin by outlining what we can reasonably suppose Greene and his contemporaries knew of the Roman emperor Heliogabalus (or, more properly, Elagabalus) before setting out the case for Heliogabalus as the mad priest of the sun and finally suggesting what Greene might have meant by the allusion.

Elagabalus was born Varius Avitus Bassianus in about AD 203, the son of Julia Soaemias and Sextus Varius Marcellus. In his youth he served as a priest of the sun god Elagabalus in his native Syria, and it was because of this that he subsequently acquired the name by which he is usually known; the variant 'Heliogabalus' derives from confusion with the Greek sun-god Helios.[12] He became emperor in AD 218 at the age of fourteen thanks to the machinations of his grandmother Julia Maesa, who inaccurately proclaimed him to be the illegitimate son of her nephew, the recently murdered emperor Caracalla.

His reputation for blasphemy rests in large part on his effective deposition of Jupiter as principal Roman deity and installation of Elagabalus in his place. The sacred stone in the form of which the god was worshipped was brought from Syria to Rome, and a temple built for it on the Palatine; the emperor himself adopted the title 'most mighty priest of the invincible Sungod'. He also staged a ceremony in which the god Elagabalus was married first to the goddess Athena and then to Dea Caelestis. His own marriage (his second of five) to the Vestal Virgin Julia Aquilia Severa might itself be described as sacrilegious. The reign of Elagabalus lasted for less than four years: after trying to have his adoptive heir Severus Alexander murdered, he was killed by the Praetorian guard in 222 and his body dragged through the streets and thrown into the Tiber.[13]

The historiographical tradition surrounding Elagabalus was established by Cassius Dio and Herodian, both of whom lived through his reign; although both wrote in Greek, they influenced subsequent Latin histories such as the *Historia Augusta*. Herodian stresses the emperor's orientalism in dress, religion, and behaviour, describing his marriage to Julia Aquila Severa, the 'ecstatic and orgiastic rites' of his worship of Elagabalus, and his marriage of the god to Pallas. He repeatedly depicts the emperor's comportment as un-Roman in its effeminacy: he made 'no attempt to conceal his vices. He used to go out with painted eyes and rouge on his cheeks, spoiling his natural good looks by using disgusting make-up'. We are also told that he 'assigned positions of the highest responsibility in the empire to charioteers and comedy actors and mimers. His slaves and freedmen, who perhaps excelled in some foul activity, he appointed as governors of consular provinces'.[14]

The sections of Dio's *Roman History* that relate to the reign of Elagabalus are not in Dio's words but are epitomes made in the middle ages. The details from Herodian referred to above are in Dio, although Dio is more lurid in his accounts of Elagabalus's religious practices (which include 'slaying boys') and more explicit in his discussion of his homosexuality. He writes that the emperor 'shaved his chin and held a festival to mark the event; but after that he had the hairs plucked out, so as to look more like a woman. … The husband of this "woman" was Hierocles, a Carian slave, once the favourite of Gordius, from whom he had learned to drive a chariot'. He goes on to describe Elagabalus's relationship with an athlete called Aurelius Zoticus, as well as how he 'besought his physician to employ his skill to make him bisexual by means of an anterior incision'.[15]

The first modern edition of Dio was in 1548, while Herodian was first published in 1503 and went through another dozen editions before 1588 (as well as an English translation by Nicholas Smyth in 1556).[16] Perhaps more importantly when considering the currency of any possible allusion to him, however, 'Heliogabalus' is frequently referred to in a wide range of writings in the vernacular where his name is made to stand as a byword for decadent imperial excess. Thomas Elyot in *The Boke Named the Gouernour* brackets him with Nero and Caligula as an example of favouritism and profligacy:

> Tyberius, Nero, Caligula, Heliogabalus, & other semblable monsters, whiche exhausted and consumed infinite treasures in bordell houses, and places, where abominations were vsed, also in enryching slaues, concubynes, and baudes, were

> nat named lyberall, but suffren therfore perpetual reproche of writars, beinge called deuourers and wasters of treasure.[17]

John Foxe in his *Actes and Monuments* writes that Heliogabalus is 'rather to be called a Monster, then a man, so prodigious was his life in all glotonie, filthines, and ribaudry'.[18] In *The Reward of Wickedness,* a compilation of *Mirror for Magistrates*-style posthumous laments, Richard Robinson includes 'The wofull complaint of the monstrous Emperour *Heliogabalus* for spending of his dayes in abhominable whoredome', in which the emperor recalls how

> Wisdome nor vertue I neuer might abide,
> In brute and beastlie toyes alwayes I dwelde.
> All such as sinne correcte I did deride,
> to filthie liuing a thousande I compelde.[19]

Germanely to the current discussion, Robert Greene himself in *Menaphon,* published the year after *Perimedes,* would write that the Arcadian king Democles 'spent his time Epicure-like in all kinde of pleasures that either art or expence might affoord; so that for his dissolute life he seemed another *Heliogabalus*'.[20]

Early modern accounts of Heliogabalus's life frequently remark on the fact that Heliogabalus was a priest of the sun-god. Elyot in *The Image of Gouernance* writes that 'bicause he was prelate in the temple of the sunne, whome the Phenices do calle Heliogabalus, he was semblablye called by that name'.[21] In *A Chronicle of All the Noble Emperours of the Romaines from Iulius Caesar,* Richard Rainolde mentions '*Heliogabalus* beinge a priest: *In honorem solis,* made to the honour of the Sunne, for amongest the *Phaenitians* [(]as you haue hearde) the Sunne was compted a God'.[22] Antonio de Guevara in *A Chronicle, Conteyning the Liues of Tenne Emperours of Rome* (published in Edward Hellowes's translation in 1577) makes several references to Heliogabalus's priesthood, including a recollection by his aunt Julia Maesa of how 'I did offer thee vnto the God Heliogabalus, and made thee a priest in his sacred temple'.[23]

Guevara also writes of Heliogabalus's 'greate madnesse' in marrying his god to the goddess Pallas, whose sacred image — 'the thing which the *Romanes* held vnder greatest guarde, reuerence, and veneration' — he carried to the imperial palace.[24] Rainolde recounts the same blasphemy and further relates how the emperor commanded that his own picture 'shoulde be set on highe, where the assemble of the Senate should be gathered, and that euerye

one of them to him as a God, shoulde burne incence, and that the Romaynes before all goddes, should entitle him the greate God *Heliogabalus'*.[25] Both Guevara and Rainolde mention his marriage to Aquilia Severa in defiance of her status as a Vestal Virgin.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, early modern historians tended to be less explicit than Dio when recounting the details of the emperor's homosexuality. Elyot writes that 'He had in speciall fauor one named Zoticus, who for familarite vsed betwene them, was taken of all the chiefe officers for the emperours husbande. This Zoticus vnder the colour of the sayd familiaritie, solde all the sayinges and doinges of the emperour'.[26] Guevara is more eliptical: '*Heliogabalus* had in his chamber a young man named *Zotipus* [*sic*], of bodye, face, and gesture, verie faire and gracious: but of maners and conditions no lesse corrupted'.[27] The more colourful details of the emperor's behaviour as described by Dio and in the *Augustan History* (e.g. 'he set aside a room in the palace and there committed his indecencies, always standing nude at the door of the room, as the harlots do, and shaking the curtain which hung from gold rings, while in a soft and melting voice he solicited the passers-by') are omitted, writers instead saying that they are too indecent to be mentioned.[28] Elyot writes,

> I holde it not conuenient to be wrytten in any vulgare tunge, howe he transformed and abused his proper kynde, in such wyse, as I suppose the mooste vicious man nowe lyuynge wolde be ashamed, not onely to beholde it, but also to here it, and that dyd he not onely secretely or in his house, but also openly, all men that wolde, beholdyng and lokinge on hym. I omitte the residue, whiche in myne opynion oughte neuer to haue ben wrytten for abomination therof, moch more neuer to haue ben of any man knowen.[29]

Guevara similarly says that 'To reporte at large all the vices of *Heliogabalus,* were to emptie and drawe drie droppe by droppe the riuer *Nilus,* or to wade the great riuer of *Danubie:* because they are so manie, so vile, and so scandalous, that it shoulde be shame to write them, and loste time to read them'.[30] Robinson has his Heliogabalus lament,

> to tell thee all my beastly actes,
> an hundreth Clarkes were not able to pen them:
> And againe whosoeuer should heare of like factes,
> so detestable they are, it would but offend them.[31]

By so ostentatiously casting a veil of secrecy over Heliogabalus's unmentionable deeds, early modern writers made his name available as a kind of code for sexual irregularity. In *The Discouerie of a Gaping Gulf VVhereinto England Is Like to Be Swallovved by Another French Mariage,* John Stubbes uses it as a way of insinuating sexual misdemeanours committed by Elizabeth's suitor:

> And though they speake in all laguages [*sic*], of a merueilous licentious & dissolute youth, passed by this brotherhoode: and of as strange incredible partes of intemperancie played by them, as those worst of Heliogabalus: yet will I not rest vp on coniecturalls. Onely this I touch lightly and cannot passe vtterly in so high a matter as is the mariage of my Queen, that it is vvorth thinquiry after. For if but the fourth part of that misrule bruted should be true, it must needes dravv such punishment fro*m* God, vvho for most part punisheth these vile sins of the body, euen in the very body and bones of the offenders, besides other plagues to thyrd and fourth generation: as I vvould my poore lyfe might redeeme the ioyning of Queene ELIZABETH to such one in that neer knot vvich must needes make hir halfe in the punishments of those his sinnes.[32]

The Duc d'Anjou's sins are, for Stubbes, literally unspeakable: unspecified 'strange incredible partes of intemperancie', 'vile sins of the body'. The allusion to Heliogabalus gives them a local habitation and a name.

What Greene does in the preface to *Perimedes* is more elliptical than this in that he does not explicitly state that there is a sexual dimension to the crimes he is accusing Marlowe of: the only overt accusation has to do with blasphemy. Where the preface does resemble Stubbes, however, not to mention other early modern writers on Heliogabalus, is in its coded nature. Just as some of the emperor's crimes cannot be mentioned, and just as Stubbes coyly declines to 'rest vpon coniecturalls', so Greene does not mention the name of the priest of the sun. This lacuna makes possible the identification of the priest with Bruno recently favoured by Greene's biographers; indeed, Greene may conceivably have intended such identifications to be plausible readings of his preface, giving him room to deny the charge that he was calling his fellow writer a sodomite. His combination of omission and innuendo anticipates the words of Henry Chettle in his preface to *Kind-harts Dreame* (1593), where Chettle exonerates himself from responsibility for the criticisms of Marlowe published the previous year in *Greenes Groats-vvorth of Witte.* Chettle tells how 'at the perusing of *Greenes* Booke' he 'stroke out what then

in conscience I thought he in some displeasure writ: or had it beene true, yet to publish it, was intollerable'.[33] Chettle is not, it seems, talking about any allusion to Marlowe's atheism, as Greene's recollection of having 'said with thee (like the foole in his heart) There is no God' was allowed to stand.[34] Instead he is referring to something so terrible as to be unnameable in print. To identify what (if anything) this horror was, of course, remains impossible, but the topos of the unnameable accusation strikingly recalls other writers' obfuscations of Heliogabalus's sexuality.

At this point it may be as well to summarize the evidence in support of the identification of the mad priest of the sun as Heliogabalus. Early modern accounts of Heliogabalus's reign made reference to the fact that he had been a priest of the sun, and indeed his very name (whether as Elagabalus or as Heliogabalus) was derived from that god. He was known for his blasphemy in placing his god above Jupiter, in marrying his god to Pallas, and in marrying himself to a vestal virgin. He was however also notorious for his sexual appetites and for sins so vile as to be unspeakable 'in any vulgare tunge' (to use Elyot's formulation). An early modern reader could have gleaned this information from humanist histories like Elyot's or Guevara's, Foxe's widely read Protestant martyrology, more populist treatments such as Robinson's poems, or indeed Nicholas Smyth's 1556 translation of Herodian. Greene himself would use Heliogabalus as a byword for dissolute living in *Menaphon* in 1589. A year earlier, in the preface to *Perimedes,* he makes a coded reference to Heliogabalus that aligned Marlowe explicitly with his blasphemy, and implicitly with his homosexuality.

Chambers's suggestion that Greene is actually referring to a play about Heliogabalus cannot, of course, be discounted, and the current essay does not specifically attempt to refute it. The Stationers' Register indicates that by 1594 such a play was in existence, so it may have been to this, rather than simply to the historical emperor Heliogabalus, that Greene alluded six years earlier. Praz's reason for discounting Marlowe as the author of this hypothetical work — Greene refers to 'two Gentlemen Poets', and since the author of *Tamburlaine* is Marlowe the author of *Heliogabalus* must be someone else — is not in itself conclusive, as it rests on two assumptions that are not necessarily correct: first, that the two poets Greene mentions are the authors of those two plays, and second, that Marlowe could not have written collaboratively. Indeed, the fact that the lost anti-Greene play featured 'two mad men of Rome' may indicate that this play was, itself, *Heliogabalus,* as the latter would presumably have been set in Rome. The possibility that Marlowe

may, with another dramatist, have written a play on the life of Heliogabalus that included satirical jibes against Greene is, to say the least, intriguing: what might a writer like Marlowe have done with such material?

We need not date the lost *Heliogabalus* to 1588 or identify Marlowe as its author to make sense of Greene's comments, however. In *Perimedes,* Greene inaugurates a persistent critical tradition in assuming that the protagonist of a Marlowe play speaks for the author, who dares God out of heaven 'with' Tamburlaine. Not only does Marlowe create an atheist hero, argues Greene, he shares that hero's atheism; the charge is levelled at not just the character but the dramatist himself. Similarly, Marlowe is accused of blaspheming 'with' the mad priest of the sun: irrespective of whether any play called *Heliogabalus* (by Marlowe or anyone else) existed in 1588, Greene aligns the playwright himself with Heliogabalus. While the date and authorship of such a play (not to mention its possible relationship with the anti-Greene play) cannot, under present evidence, be established, a consideration of Heliogabalus's early modern reputation helps shed some light on the nature of Greene's insinuations about Marlowe.

## Notes

1 Robert Greene, *Perimedes the Blacke-Smith: A Golden Methode, How to Vse the Minde in Pleasant and Profitable Exercise* (London, 1588; STC: 12295), A3r–v.

2 See Stanley Wells (ed.), *'Perymedes the Blacksmith' and 'Pandosto' by Robert Greene: A Critical Edition* (New York, 1988; first submitted as PhD thesis, University of Birmingham, 1961), xv–xxiii, and more recently James P. Bednarz, 'Marlowe and the English Literary Scene', Patrick Cheney (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Christopher Marlowe,* (Cambridge, 2004), 95. The Horatian tag is glossed by Madeleine Doran in *Endeavours of Art: A Study of Form in Elizabethan Drama* (Madison, 1954) as 'He has gained every point who has mixed the useful and the sweet' (98).

3 Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, 2002), 41.

4 Charles Nicholl, *The Reckoning: The Murder of Christopher Marlowe* (London, 1992), 205–6.

5 Ibid, 207–9.

6 David Farley-Hills, 'Tamburlaine and the Mad Priest of the Sun', *Journal of Anglo-Italian Studies* 2 (1992), 36–49; Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine,* ed. J. S. Cunningham (Manchester, 1981).

7 Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe,* 80; David Riggs, *The World of Christopher Marlowe* (London, 2004), 222; Park Honan, *Christopher Marlowe: Poet and Spy* (Oxford, 2005), 185; Lisa Hopkins, *A Christopher Marlowe Chronology* (Basingstoke, 2005), 90.
8 E.K. Chambers, *The Elizabethan Stage,* 4 vols (Oxford, 1923), 3.324. I would like to thank Matthew Steggle for drawing my attention to this reference. Chambers also cites E. Köppel in *Archiv für das Studium der neuren Sprachen und Literaturen,* 102, 357, and W. Bang, *Englische Studien: Organ für englische Philologie,* 28, 229. I have been unable to obtain full bibliographical details for these articles.
9 Mario Praz, 'Christopher Marlowe', *English Studies* 13.6 (1931), 218.
10 Wells, *'Perymedes the Blacksmith' and 'Pandosto'*, xxiii–xxv.
11 Kirk Melnikoff and Edward Gieskes, 'Introduction: Re-imagining Robert Greene', Kirk Melnikoff and Edward Gieskes (eds), *Writing Robert Greene: Essays on England's First Notorious Professional Writer* (Aldershot, 2008), 1.
12 S.N. Miller, 'The Army and the Imperial House', S.A. Cook, F.E. Adcock, M.P. Charlesworth and N.H. Baynes (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History,* vol. 12: *The Imperial Crisis and Recovery A.D. 193–324* (Cambridge, 1939), 51 n2.
13 This account is derived from Brian Campbell, 'The Severan Dynasty', Alan K. Bowman, Peter Garnsey, and Averil Cameron (eds), *The Cambridge Ancient History,* 2nd ed., vol. 12: *The Crisis of Empire, A.D. 193–337* (Cambridge, 2005), 1–27 (esp. 20–22); Garth Fowden, 'Public Religion', Bowman, Garnsey, and Cameron (eds) 553–72 (esp. 555); and Miller, 50–6.
14 *Herodian in Two Volumes,* ed. and trans C.R. Whittaker (Cambridge MA and London, 1969–70), 2.15–75, esp. 59, 57, 65.
15 *Dio's Roman History,* ed. and trans Earnest Cary, 9 vols (London and New York, 1914–27), 1.xix–xxv, 9.461, 465–7, 469, 471.
16 Ibid, 1.xxix; *Herodian in Two Volumes,* 1.lxxxv.
17 Thomas Elyot, *The Boke Named the Gouernour* (London, 1537; STC: 7636), f 131v; see also f 97v. *Early English Books Online* <http://eebo.chadwyck.com> has been an invaluable resource in the compilation of early modern references to Heliogabalus; citations of early modern editions are all via *EEBO.*
18 John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of Matters Most Speciall and Memorable* (London, 1583; STC: 11225), 57.
19 Richard Robinson, *The Rewarde of Wickednesse* (London, 1574; STC: 21121.7), K2r.
20 Robert Greene, *Menaphon* (London, 1589; STC: 12272), H3r.
21 Thomas Elyot, *The Image of Gouernance* (London, 1541; STC: 7664), f 1v.
22 Richard Rainolde, *A Chronicle of All the Noble Emperours of the Romaines from Iulius Caesar* (London, 1571; STC: 20926), f 75v.

23 Antonio de Guevara, *A Chronicle, Conteyning the Liues of Tenne Emperours of Rome,* trans Edward Hellowes (London, 1577; STC: 12426), 414–15.
24 Ibid, 422–3.
25 Rainolde, *Chronicle of All the Noble Emperours,* f 77r.
26 Elyot, *Image of Gouernance,* f 5r.
27 de Guevara, *A Chronicle, Conteyning the Liues,* 411. Robinson's speaker also relates how 'Because this valette, *Zoticus* did excell / in all wicked vices most abhominable: / I preferde him to the greatest liuing that fell' (K3v).
28 *Dio's Roman History,* 9.463.
29 Elyot, *Image of Gouernance,* f 4r.
30 de Guevara, *A Chronicle, Conteyning the Liues,* 410.
31 Robinson, *Rewarde of Wickednesse,* L1r.
32 John Stubbes, *The Discouerie of a Gaping Gulf VVhereinto England Is Like to Be Swallovved by Another French Mariage* (London, 1579; STC: 23400), E2r.
33 Henry Chettle, *Kind-harts Dreame* (London, 1593; STC: 5123), A4r.
34 Robert Greene, *Greenes, Groats-vvorth of Witte, Bought with a Million of Repentance* (London, 1592; STC: 12245), E4v.