

BELLARIA (III)



Saturnalia, Antoine-Francois Callet, 1783

'Bellaria' means 'sweets, dainties', and in these hard times Classics for All will try to lighten the mood and put a spring in the step by posting delicious extracts from ancient literature, the original text followed by a translation or translations, and very occasionally with explanatory notes.

Responding to Literary Review's annual 'Bad Sex' Awards, Classics for All responds with 'Good Sex' awards. Here Propertius (c. 50-15 BC), in a sort of post-coital haze, moves from monologue to dialogue and back again, shifting between past and present, hope and desire, as he recalls and reflects on a night of love-making.

Cynthia certainly plays an active part in it all (contrast Bellaria II). Note the Catullan touch at 23-4 and the play on night-day and light-dark throughout. The call to enjoy the fruits of life, contrasted with that of withered garlands floating on cups of wine when the party is over (49-52), hints at a 'gather ye rosebuds' moment. Does the last couplet rather undercut that conclusion?

GOOD SEX AWARD (3)

A night with Cynthia

o me felicem! o nox mihi candida! et o tu,
lectule, deliciis facte beate meis.
quam multa apposita narramus verba lucerna,
quantaque sublato lumine rixa fuit!
5 nam modo nudatis mecum est luctata papillis,
interdum tunica duxit aperta moram.
illa meos somno lapsos patefecit ocellos
ore suo et dixit, "Sicine, lente, iaces?"
quam vario amplexu mutamus bracchia! quantum
10 oscula sunt labris nostra morata tuis.
non iuvat in caeco Venerem corrumpere motu:
si nescis, oculi sunt in amore duces.

[He instructs her always to come to bed naked]

23 dum nos fata sinunt, oculos satiemus amore:
nox tibi longa venit, nec reditura dies.
25 atque utinam haerentis sic nos vincire catena
velles, ut numquam solveret ulla dies!
exemplo iunctae tibi sint in amore columbae,
masculus et totum femina coniugium.
errat, qui finem vesani quaerit amoris:
30 verus amor nullum novit habere modum.

[Nature might do odd things, but Cynthia will always be the one: "I'll be hers, alive or dead"]

37 quod mihi secum talis concedere noctes
illa velit, vitae longus et annus erit.
si dabit haec multas, fiam immortalis in illis:
40 nocte una quivis vel deus esse potest.

[If we just drank and love ruled the world, there would be no war. So]

49 tu modo, dum lucet, fructum ne desere vitae!
50 omnia si dederis oscula, pauca dabis.
ac veluti folia arentis liquere corollas,
quae passim calathis strata natare vides,
sic nobis, qui nunc magnum spiramus amantes,
forsitan includet crastina fata dies.



A scene from the lupanar in Pompeii

Translated by A.E. Watts

O luck indeed! O radiant, rapturous night!
 O blessed bed, my heaven of sweet delight!
What talk we had, while yet the lamp burned on!
 What rough-and-tumble, when the light was gone!
5 Now with bared breasts she met me in the fray;
 Now drew her wrap, to tease me with delay;
Now when my drowsy eyelids drooped, she said,
 (Lipping them open): "Wake up, sleepy head!"
How variously with shifting arms we clung!
10 How long upon your lips my kisses hung!
It spoils the sport to see not what we do.

[He instructs her to come to bed naked]

Let's glut our eyes with love, while yet we may:
 A long night comes, with no return of day.
25 Oh may a chain so bind us, by your grace,
 That no day ever loose our locked embrace.
Let doves, by passion linked, your pattern be,
 Wedlock inseparable, the He and She.
Folly to ask what end to love is found:
30 True love runs mad, and has, and knows, no bound.

[Nature might do odd things, but Cynthia will always be the one: "I'll be hers, alive or dead"]

Oh would she by her side ungrudging give
 Such nights to me, a year were long to live.
Give many—I'll transcend the mortal span:
40 One night might make a god of any man.

[If love ruled the world, there would be no war]

49 Cling to life's joys, while daylight lasts for you:
50 Your kisses—give them all—will be but few.
And as you see, when chaplet roses wilt,
The floating petals in the wine-cups spilt,
So we, now drawing love's impassioned breath,
With dawn perhaps will end our span in death.

The Poems of Propertius (Penguin, 1966)



This is an extract selected for you as part of Classics for All's 'Bellaria' series to cheer us up during the COVID-19 pandemic. The full series of weekly instalments may be found on our website classicsforall.org.uk/bellaria/