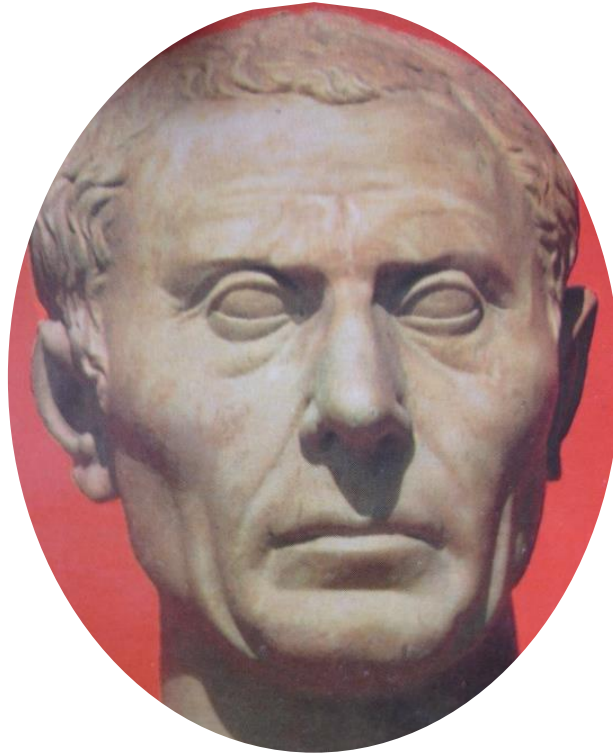


BELLARIA (VI)



Suetonius AD 69-after AD 122

'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.

*Horace declared that books combining *utile dulci* won everyone's vote (*punctum*). Since pleasure is the most useful thing in the world, that is no surprise, but Horace was clearly distinguishing the two. So in this case, 'useful to whom?' This run of Bellaria answers as follows: the historian Tom Holland.*

*Tom is currently translating Suetonius' *de vita Caesarum* for Penguin Classics. Like Suetonius, he is thoroughly in favour of Classics for All, and would be delighted if CfA were to run the rule over his first draft (he is currently up to Vespasian). So the next five Bellaria will feature scenes from Suetonius in Tom's translation. One of his stated aims is to keep as close as possible to Suetonius' word-order.*

All comments should be sent to Tom Ingram at contact@classicsforall.org.uk, who will forward them to him.

SCENES FROM SUETONIUS (1)



Julius Caesar and the crossing of the Rubicon, Francesco Granacci, 1493-4, Victoria & Albert Museum

Caesar crosses the Rubicon

One of the joys of Suetonius, who in his various secretarial roles to the emperors Trajan and Hadrian (AD 112-122) had access to all the lies and smears, is that he lets you into the stories behind the stories. In his *Bellum Civile*, Caesar never even mentions the Rubicon, let alone crossing it. As Suetonius' account makes, that is no surprise. It is one of Caesar's less masterful moments (though it is still the case that no one is absolutely certain where the Rubicon is).

On January 7 49 BC, the senate finally dismissed the effective plea of the pro-Caesar tribunes that he should be immune from prosecution when he returned from his consular province (after his Gallic campaigns) back into Italy. Caesar was awaiting the answer in Ravenna.

[31] cum ergo sublatam tribunorum intercessionem ipsosque urbe cecissee nuntiatum esset, praemissis confestim clam cohortibus, ne qua suspicio moueretur, et spectaculo publico per dissimulationem interfuit et formam, qua ludum gladiatorium erat aedificaturus, consideravit, et ex consuetudine conuiuio se frequenti dedit. dein, post solis occasum, mulis e proximo pistrino ad uehiculum iunctis, occultissimum iter modico comitatu ingressus est; et cum, luminibus extinctis, decessisset uia, diu errabundus tandem ad lucem, duce reperto, per angustissimos tramites pedibus euasit. consecutusque cohortis ad Rubiconem flumen, qui prouinciae eius finis erat, paulum constitit, ac reputans quantum moliretur, conuersus ad proximos: 'etiam nunc,' inquit, 'regredi possumus; quod si ponticulum transierimus, omnia armis agenda erunt.'

[32] cunctanti ostentum tale factum est: quidam eximia magnitudine et forma, in proximo sedens, repente apparuit, harundine canens; ad quem audiendum, cum (praeter pastores) plurimi etiam ex stationibus milites concurrissent, interque eos et aeneatores, rapta ab uno tuba, prosiliuit ad flumen et ingenti spiritu, classicum exorsus, pertendit ad alteram ripam. tunc Caesar: 'eatur,' inquit, 'quo deorum ostenta et inimicorum iniquitas vocat. iacta alea est,' inquit.

[33] atque ita traiecto exercitu, adhibitibus tribunis plebis, qui pulsati supervenerant, pro contione fidem militum flens, ac veste a pectore discissa, invocavit. existimatur etiam equestres census pollicitus singulis; quod accidit opinione falsa. nam cum, in adloquendo adhortandoque, saepius digitum laevae manus ostentans, adfirmaret se, ad satis faciendum omnibus per quos dignitatem suam defensurus esset, anulum quoque aequo animo detracturum sibi, extrema contio, cui facilius erat videre contionantem quam audire, pro dicto accepit, quod visu suspicabatur; promissumque ius anulorum cum milibus quadringenis fama distulit.

Suetonius, Life of Julius Caesar 31-33

[31] So it was, the moment news reached him that the tribunes' veto had been overridden and the tribunes themselves had fled the city, he ordered his cohorts to advance, but under cover, so as not to rouse suspicion; meanwhile, keeping his own intentions disguised, he attended a public festival, inspected the plans for a gladiator school which he was planning to have built, and hosted a well-attended dinner-party, as he invariably did. Then, after the sun had set, and mules taken from a nearby mill had been harnessed to his carriage, he set out in the utmost secrecy, with only a modest retinue as company; for a while—because his torches had gone out, and he had lost his way—he wandered here and there, until, as the sky began to lighten, he located a guide, who led him along narrow footpaths back to the road; catching up with his cohorts on the banks of the Rubicon, the river which marked the frontier of his province, he paused for a while, revolving in his mind the sheer enormity of what he was contemplating, before turning to those nearest to him, and saying: 'Even now we could turn back. But once we have crossed that tiny bridge, everything must be decided by war.'

[32] Then, as he was hesitating, a wondrous thing happened: nearby him, a figure of remarkable size and beauty abruptly appeared, sitting and playing on a pipe; and when some of his soldiers—trumpeters among them—abandoned their posts to join the large number of shepherds who had run to listen to the music, the apparition snatched a trumpet from one of the trumpeters, leapt into the river, sounded the advance with a mighty blast, and crossed over to the far bank. Then Caesar spoke. 'Let us go where we are summoned both by divinely-authored signs and by the wrongs our foes have done us. The die is cast.'

[33] And so his army crossed the Rubicon; and he welcomed the tribunes who, following their expulsion from Rome, had come to join him, summoned the soldiers to an assembly, and then, weeping and tearing the garments from his breast, called on them to pledge him their loyalty. Some have thought that he went so far as to promise each and every one of them equestrian status—but this is incorrect. What actually happened is that, while he was giving his rallying cry to the troops, he would point again and again to a finger on his left hand, insisting that he would gladly tear the ring from it if only it would provide to those who were backing him in defence of his honour commensurate reward; but because those on the margins of the assembly—who could see him better than they could hear him—based their understanding of what he was saying on his gestures rather than on his words, the story spread that he had promised them all the right to an equestrian ring, plus four hundred thousand sesterces each.

Tom Holland (first draft, 2020)



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/