BELLARIA (IV)

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 is a magnificent single stanza poem from Petronius' Satyricon, which is not what it seems.

GOOD SEX AWARD (4)

Mortality's Eclipse

qualis nox fuit illa, di deaeque,
quam mollis torus! haesimus calentes
et transfudimus hinc et hinc labellis
errantes animas. valete, curae
5 mortales ...
       Petronius Arbiter, *Satyricon* 79

Translated by Helen Waddell
Ah God, ah God, that night when we two clung
So close, our hungry lips
Transfused each into each our hovering souls,
Mortality's eclipse …
Mediaeval Latin Lyrics **(Penguin, 1952)**

But Helen Waddell omitted the conclusion of the last line. It ends *ego sic perire coepi* ('so began my end'). The reason is that the speaker Encolpius, who then fell asleep, woke up to find that his youthful male lover (Giton) was now in the arms of his friend Ascyltus!

There is nothing surprising here. Ancient literature is full of magnificent love poems written by males, as many extolling the beauty, desirability and faithlessness of a boy as of a woman, and Petronius, the *arbiter elegantiae*, is showing he can play the game as well as anyone. Shakespeare explored its possibilities with 126 poems to his 'fair youth', his 'master-mistress'.

The Warren Cup (1st C AD), named after its original owner (an American art collector) and now in the British Museum. Scientific tests demonstrate its authenticity.

1. 3 *et transfudimus*…draws on famous couplet, one among eighteen falsely attributed to Plato:

τὴν ψυχήν, Ἀγάθωνα φιλῶν, ἐπὶ χείλεσιν ἔσχον.
    ἦλθε γὰρ ἡ τλήμων ὡς διαβησομένη.
    Palatine Anthology 5.78

Kissing Agathon, I held back my soul on my lips.
    It had come, poor thing, to cross over.

Encolpius was happy 'to pour [his soul] into' (*transfundo*) Giton; 'Plato' was less keen to do so with Agathon.