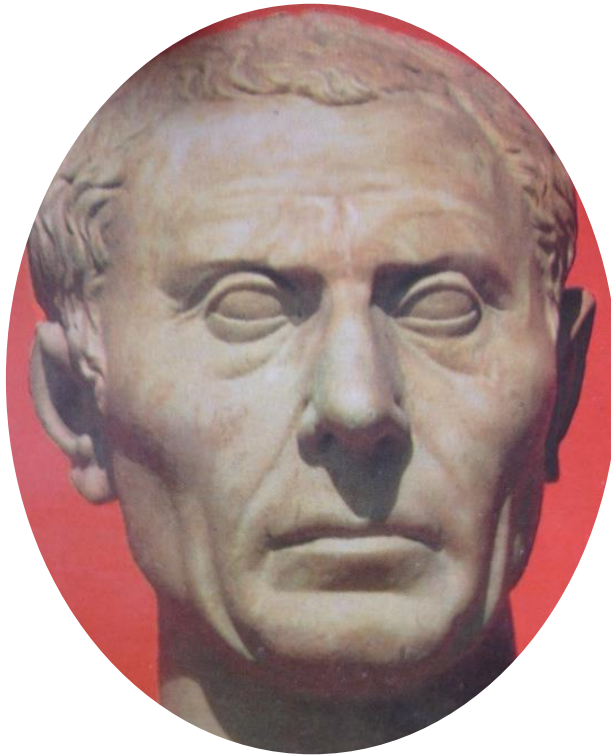


BELLARIA (VII)



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.

Tom Holland 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.

Suetonius, who wrote widely on literary and grammatical topics, here summaries his findings from examining Augustus' formal and informal literary style, handwriting and spelling. Such topics were of great interest to the Roman elite, the purpose of whose education was to produce men steeped in the history of Rome, schooled in stylistic, grammatical and linguistic 'correctness' and masters of the written and spoken word. Augustus clearly had strong views on the subject—which he did not shrink from making known to his subordinates—as well as a number of quirky personal preferences.

SCENES FROM SUETONIUS (2)



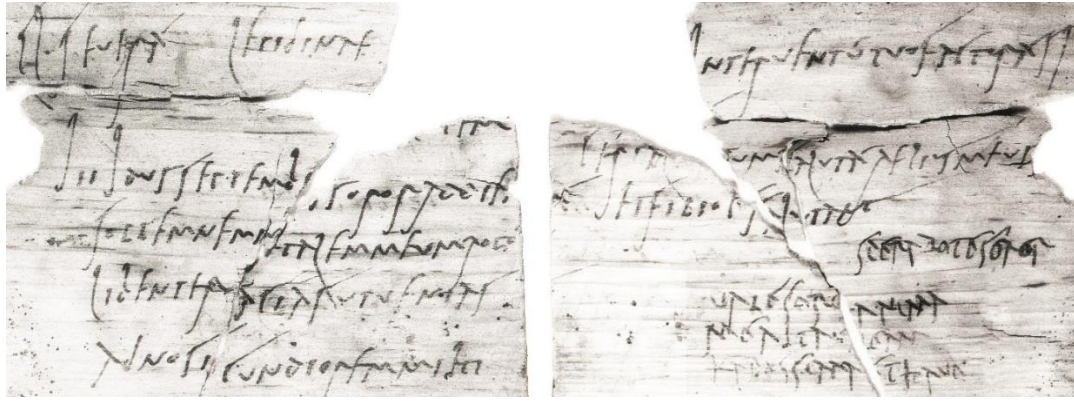
A gold coin of Augustus minted by Trajan, AD 107

Augustus' linguistic and literary preferences

Suetonius, Life of Augustus 86-88

[86] genus eloquendi secutus est elegans et temperatum, uitatis sententiarum ineptiis atque concinnitate et 'reconditorum uerborum,' ut ipse dicit, 'fetoribus'; praecipuamque curam duxit sensum animi quam apertissime exprimere. quod quo facilius efficeret aut necubi lectorem uel auditorem obturbaret ac moraretur, neque praepositiones urbibus addere neque coniunctiones saepius iterare dubitauit, quae detractae afferunt aliquid obscuritatis, etsi gratiam augent. cacozelos et antiquarios, ut diuerso genere uitiosos, pari fastidio spreuit, exagitabatque nonnumquam—in primis Maecenatem suum, cuius 'myrobrechis,' ut ait, 'cincinnos' usquequaque persequitur et imitando per iocum irridet ...

He cultivated a precise and measured style of speaking, one that avoided the absurdity of flowery language and epigrams, and 'the reek,' as he put it, 'of arcane language'—for his principal concern was to express his opinions as clearly as possible. To facilitate this, and to ensure that his readers or his listeners would not be confused and given pause, he never hesitated to put prepositions before the names of cities, nor—on those occasions when elegance of style might require the omission of conjunctions, despite a resulting risk of confusion—to deploy conjunctions repeatedly. He was critical both of those who were forever coining new phrases and those who affected an antique style, despising both equally, albeit for opposing reasons, and would sometimes attack them openly; a particular target was his friend Maecenas, whose 'perfumed ringlets,' as he described them, he would repeatedly make the object of his banter, and whose style he loved to parody...



The famous 'birthday letter' of Vindolanda from Claudia Severa to Sulpicia Lepidina. British Museum, AD 97-105

[87] cotidiano sermone, quaedam frequentius et notabiliter usurpasse eum litterae ipsius autographae ostentant, in quibus identidem, cum aliquos numquam soluturos significare uult, 'ad Kal. Graecas soluturos' ait; et cum hortatur ferenda esse praesentia, qualiacumque sint: 'contenti simus hoc Catone'; et ad exprimendam festinatae rei uelocitatem: 'celerius quam asparagi cocuntur'; ponit assidue et pro stulto 'baceolum' et pro pullo 'pulleiaceum' et pro cerrito 'uacerrosum' et 'uapide' se habere pro male et 'betizare' pro languere, quod uulgo 'lathanizare' dicitur; item 'simus' pro sumus et 'domos' genetiui casu singulari pro domus. nec umquam aliter haec duo, ne quis mendam magis quam consuetudinem putet. notaui et in chirographo eius illa praecipue: non diuidit uerba nec ab extrema parte uersuum abundantis litteras in alterum transfert, sed ibidem statim subicit circumducitque.

It is evident from letters in his own handwriting that there were certain distinctive expressions he dropped into daily conversation on a regular basis: when, for instance, he wishes to convey that certain people will never pay their debts, he invariably says, 'They will pay on the Greek Kalends'†; when he urges people to put up with their current circumstances, he says, 'Let us be satisfied with the Cato we have'*; when he wishes to express the speed of something done fast, he says, 'Quicker than you can boil asparagus'. He consistently says *baceolus* [idiotic] rather than *stultus* [stupid], *pulleiaceus* [chick] rather than *pullus* [chicken] and *uacerrosus* [blockheaded] rather than *cerritus* [mad]; he talks of feeling *uapide* [poorly] rather than *male* [ill], and says *betizare* [be limp like a beet] rather than *languere* [be weak] or—the more colloquial word—*lathinzare* [be limp]; he uses *simus* rather than *sumus* [we are], and *domos* for the genitive singular of *domus* [house] rather than *domuos* (he deployed these last two usages consistently, to ensure that no one would mistake for errors what ranked as his settled practice). His handwriting—which I have personally inspected—also exhibits peculiarities: he does not leave gaps between his words, for instance, and, whenever he runs out of space writing a line, he does not run the letters of the word on to the next line but instead writes them directly underneath the word in a loop.

† i.e. never. The *Kalendae* (cf. ‘calendar’), the first of the month, were a feature of the Roman, not Greek, dating systems

*i.e. if you think Cato the Younger is bad, at least he’s not Cato the Elder

[88] orthographiam, id est formulam rationemque scribendi a grammaticis institutam, non adeo custodit ac uidetur eorum potius sequi opinionem, qui perinde scribendum ac loquamur existiment. nam quod saepe non litteras modo sed syllabas aut permutat aut praeterit, communis hominum error est. nec ego id notare, nisi mihi mirum uideretur tradidisse aliquos, legato eum consulari successorem dedisse ut rudi et indocto, cuius manu ‘ixi’ pro ‘ipsi’ scriptum animaduernerit. quotiens autem per notas scribit, B pro A, C pro B ac deinceps eadem ratione sequentis litteras ponit; pro X autem duplex A.

He never had much time for orthography (that is, the proper framework for spelling, as laid down by grammarians), and seems instead to have been a student of those who advise writing down words as they are spoken. He frequently transposes or omits letters, and even syllables—but then again, that is the kind of slip that anybody can make. Indeed, I would not even have drawn attention to it, were it not that some have made what seems to me the astonishing claim that he replaced a governor of consular rank for a lack of breeding and education after noticing that the man had spelt *ipsi* as *ixi*. Whenever he writes in code, he substitutes ‘B’ for ‘A’, ‘C’ for ‘B’, and so on, right the way through the alphabet—though ‘X’ he replaces with a double ‘A’.

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/