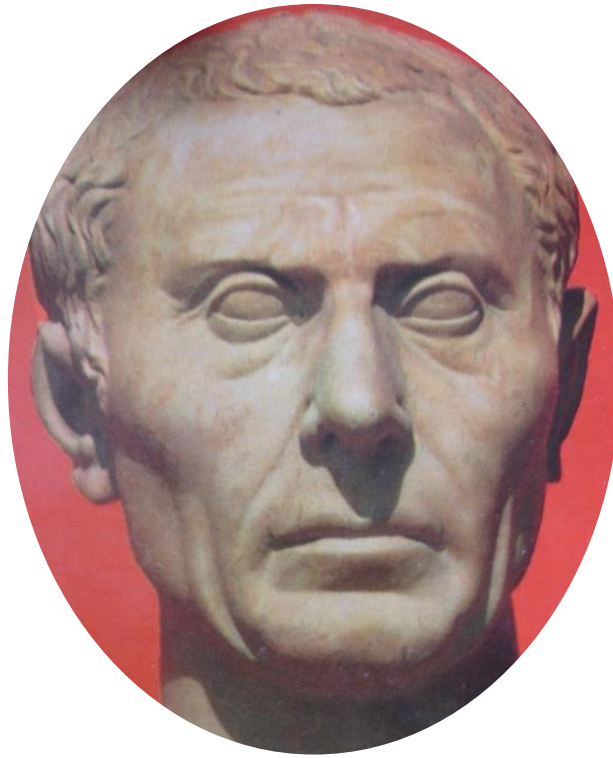


BELLARIA (VIII)



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 pulled no punches about the imperial family's horrified sense of shame at Claudius' physical condition (cerebral palsy? Dystonia?). Immediately before this passage, the historian recounted how his mother Antonia described him as 'a monstrosity of a human being, begun by Nature but only half-finished ...; his grandmother Augusta always treated him with the utmost contempt; ... his sister Livilla, on hearing that he was to have the rule of the empire, did not mince her words when she openly expressed her horror that such a cruel and unmerited fate should have befallen the Roman people.'

SCENES FROM SUETONIUS (3)



Bronze head of Tiberius Claudius Nero, Roman emperor AD 41-54, originally sat atop a life-size statue, British Museum, #1965,1201.1

Claudius in the eyes of his great-uncle Augustus

In this passage Suetonius, who had full access to the imperial library and its archives, quotes directly from three of Augustus's letters on the matter to his wife Livia. While Augustus is absolutely frank about the practical problem that Claudius (aged 21 at the time) presents for the imperial family, there is a touching humanity about his feelings for his great nephew.

The Greek in this passage is not uncommon in Roman letters. Part of the reason for it here is that Greek was often used to describe medical conditions (the Roman language of medicine is derived from the Greeks); but it is also used here to emphasise the unique problem that Claudius presented.

Suetonius, Life of Claudius 3-4

[3] nam auunculus maior Augustus, quid de eo in utramque partem opinatus sit, quo certius cognoscatur, capita ex ipsius epistulis posui.

As for the opinion held of him by his great-uncle Augustus, both good and bad, I here append some extracts from his letters, so that no one be in any doubt on that score.

[4] 'collocutus sum cum Tiberio, ut mandasti, mea Livia, quid nepoti tuo Tiberio faciendum esset ludis Martialibus. consentit autem uterque nostrum semel nobis esse statuendum, quod consilium in illo sequamur. nam si est artius, ut ita dicam, holocleros, quid est quod dubitemus, quin per eosdem articulos et gradus

producendus sit, per quos frater eius productus sit? sin autem ἡλαττῶσθαι sentimus eum, et βεβλάφθαι καὶ εἰς τὴν τοῦ σώματος καὶ εἰς τὴν τῆς ψυχῆς ἀρτιότητα, praebenda materia deridendi et illum et nos non est hominibus τὰ τοιαῦτα σκώπτειν καὶ μυκτηρίζειν εἰωθόσιν. nam semper aestuabimus, si de singulis articulis temporum deliberabimus, μὴ προὔποκειμένου ἡμῖν posse arbitremur eum gerere honores necne.’

‘As you requested, my darling Livia, I have spoken to Tiberius* about what is to be done with your grandson Tiberius [i.e. Claudius] at the Games of Mars‡. We are agreed that we need to decide once and for all the approach we should be taking in his case. After all, if he is essentially sound and, as it were, ‘all there’‡, then surely there can be no doubt that he should be promoted step by step and office by office just as his brother† has been? If, on the other hand, we feel him to be—as the Greeks might put it—a moron, and not just mentally unsound but physically so as well, then we must on no account give the kind of people who jeer and laugh at such things the chance to make him (and us!) objects of mockery. This is a quandary we are repeatedly going to find ourselves facing if, rather than deciding once and for all whether he is capable of holding public office, we do it on a case by case basis.’

*Livia’s son, Augustus’s successor

‡‘Mars the Avenger’, celebrated in AD 12

‡ ‘sound’ and ‘all there’ are Greek words transliterated into Latin

† Germanicus

‘in praesentia tamen quibus de rebus consulis, curare eum ludis Martialibus triclinium sacerdotum non displicet nobis, si est passurus se ab Siluani filio, homine sibi affini, admoneri, ne quid faciat quod conspici et derideri possit. spectare eum circenses ex puluinari non placet nobis; expositus enim in fronte prima spectaculorum conspicietur. in Albanum montem ire eum non placet nobis, aut esse Romae Latinarum diebus. cur enim non praeficitur urbi, si potest sequi fratrem suum in montem?’

‘habes nostras, mea Livia, sententias, quibus placet semel de tota re aliquid constitui, ne semper inter spem et metum fluctuemur. licebit autem, si uoles, Antoniae quoque nostrae des hanc partem epistulae huius legendam.’

‘Nevertheless, since the issue you have raised with me is a pressing one, I think that giving him responsibility for the priests’ banquet at the Games of Mars is something I can live with—provided, that is, he is willing to be monitored by Silvanus’ son, his brother-in-law, and does not do anything that will render him conspicuous or an object of laughter. What I do not think acceptable, however, is for him to watch the circus games from my box, since there, exposed as he will be to the gaze of everyone in the stands above, there will be no hiding him. Nor would I be happy for him to go to the Alban Mount or to remain in Rome on the day of the Latin festival. After all, if

he is capable of accompanying his brother to the Alban Mount, then why should he not be made prefect of the city?*

‘So there, my darling Livia, you have my views: I want us to settle this matter once and for all, so that we are not forever veering between our hopes for the best and our fears of the worst. You may, if you wish, give this section of my letter to our Antonia to read.’

**City officials went to the Latin festival 14 miles away at the Alban Mount. A city prefect, often from the imperial family, was appointed to cover for their absence.*

rursus alteris litteris: ‘Tiberium adulescentem ego uero, dum tu aberis, cotidie inuitabo ad cenam, ne solus cenet cum suo Sulpicio et Athenodoro. qui uellem diligentius et minus μετεώρως deligeret sibi aliquem, cuius motum et habitum et incessum imitaretur. misellus ἀτυχεῖ—nam ἐν τοῖς σπουδαίοις, ubi non aberrauit eius animus, satis apparet ἢ τῆς ψυχῆς αὐτοῦ εὐγένεια.’

Again, in a second letter to Livia, Augustus wrote: ‘While you are away, I shall certainly invite young Tiberius to supper every day, to ensure that he is not dining alone with his friends Sulpicius and Athenodorus. Rather than have him copy just anyone, I would like him to consider more carefully whose manners, posture and behaviour he should properly be imitating. The poor boy has been cheated by fortune—for in significant matters, when he can hold his concentration, the nobility of his spirit is evident enough.’

item tertiis litteris: ‘Tiberium nepotem tuum placere mihi declamantem potuisse, peream nisi, mea Livia, admiror. nam qui tam ἀσαφῶς loquatur, qui possit cum declamat σαφῶς dicere quae dicenda sunt, non uideo.’

Then, in a third letter: ‘I’ll be damned, my dear Livia, if it’s not the most surprising thing—I actually find myself admiring your grandson Tiberius’ talent for declamation! How anyone who in his conversation talks such gibberish can possibly talk such sense when giving a speech is beyond me.’

In the event, Claudius featured nowhere in the imperial plans outlined in Augustus’ will (AD 14) and was left a small legacy of 800,000 sesterces. The best laid plans, however ...

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/