Lovereading.co.uk

Latin Love Lessons

Charlotte Higgins

Published by Short Books

Extract

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

I. Carpe Diem

Uivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus
Let us live and love, my Lesbia

In an article about the mottos that inspire famous women in their daily lives, Ann Widdecombe, *soi-disant* virgin and Conservative Member of Parliament for Maidstone and the Weald, told *Good Housekeeping* magazine the following:

> "Ever since I studied Horace at university, I've followed his words '*carpe diem*' or 'seize the day'. I instantly thought that was how I wanted to live my life. I interpret *carpe diem* as meaning to make the most of every day, as you never know if you're going to have a tomorrow. My attitude has always been, when an opportunity is there, grab it."

This is a wonderfully myopic view of Horace's great Ode

1.11, the thrust of which, if one can be forgiven for boiling a great poem down into a single crude sentiment, is: "Let's go to bed, right now." It's certainly about grabbing opportunities, Ann: specifically, opportunities for sex. Don't let your chance slip by, says the poet. Who knows how long we've got left?

Let's have the Latin:

> *Tu ne quaesieris – scire nefas – quem mihi, quem tibi*
> *finem di dederint, Leuconoë, nec Babylonios*
> *temptaris numeros. ut melius, quicquid erit, pati!*
> *seu plures hiemes, seu tribuit Iuppiter ultimam,*
> *quae nunc oppositis debilitat pumicibus mare*
> *Tyrrhenum. sapias, vina liques, et spatio breui*
> *spem longam reseces. dum loquimur, fugerit inuida*
> *aetas: carpe diem, quam minimum credula postero.*

> Don't ask what end the gods have laid down for us, Leuconoë, it's wrong to ask: don't play with Babylonian horoscopes. It's much better to put up with whatever comes, whether Jupiter grants us more winters, or whether this is the last now exhausting the Mediterranean on the cliffs that block its waves. Be wise, strain the wine, and prune back your hopes to the short term. While we're talking, jealous time has already fled: seize the day and put as little trust as possible in tomorrow.



Ann Widdecombe: an unlikely champion of the motto carpe diem...

We don't know anything about Leuconoë, to whom this poem is addressed: whether her name means she was Greek, or whether it's a pseudonym for someone Roman; whether she is a slave or a freedwoman or a courtesan or not; whether she even existed. Not that it really matters. The set-up is this: she is anxiously checking their horoscopes to try to figure out how long she and Horace each have left on this mortal coil. But there's no point, says Horace – we can't know what's in store for us, and we shouldn't try to find out. We may be carried off tomorrow, for all we know. In fact, we're wasting time even having this conversation. Let's go to bed. And while you're at it, pour us a drink – "*uina liques*", or, literally, "strain the wine". (I have one translation that gives this phrase as "busy thyself with household tasks", which always gives me the giggles, since it seems to suggest that Leuconoë pause for a spot of dusting, not my idea of "*carpe diem*" at all.)

The point is, if you use "*carpe diem*" to try to get someone into bed – as innumerable lovers have undoubtedly done since 23 BC when this poem was published – you are behaving entirely within the spirit of Horace, who, despite being projected by many Latin teachers as a sort of suburban worthy, impeccable as to his personal virtues, was a bit of a shagger, even to the extent of being given the rather compromising nickname "*purissimus penis*", or "purest penis", by the emperor Augustus.

The word "*carpe*" – "gather", "harvest" – is often used of plucking flowers; and plucking flowers in ancient literature is, well, nearly always an erotic metaphor. People pluck each other's virginity in ancient literature like there was no tomorrow. So congratulations, keep it up, and I am sure it is extremely effective. Those of you who have not used "*carpe diem*", do consider adding it to your armoury, in translation if your audience requires it. (And remember, have safe sex at all times, if you really are planning on enjoying "*plures hiemes*", "more winters".)

As it happens, the first ever episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* has its "*carpe diem*" moment, courtesy of writer Joss Whedon; and it is much closer to the spirit of the original than Ann Widdecombe's joyless take on the line.

In the Bronze, Sunnydale's one and only nightclub, Buffy is chatting to her new schoolfriend, Willow, who is explaining

that she finds dating hard, since she happens to be struck by a paralysing shyness in the presence of boys whom she finds attractive. Buffy offers the following advice:

> Buffy: Well, my philosophy... Do you want to hear my philosophy?
> Willow: Yeah, I do.
> Buffy: Life is short.
> Willow: Life is short?
> Buffy: Not original, I grant you, but it's true. Why waste time being all shy and wondering if some guy is going to laugh at you? Seize the moment – because tomorrow you might be dead.

The joke here is that they both happen to have a very strong chance indeed of being dead tomorrow since, unbeknown to Willow, they are living atop the mouth of Hell in a town awash with vampires and demons. There's another twist, too: a few moments later, we see Buffy talking to her Watcher (a sort of mentor and adviser), who accuses her of insufficient commitment to her calling as the Vampire Slayer. Can she, for instance, sense if there are any vampires here now? Yes, says Buffy, there's one over there, I can tell by his outfit ("It's dated?" suggests Giles, the Watcher. "It's carbon-dated. Trust me, only someone living underground for ten years would think that was still a look," confirms Buffy). But suddenly,

Buffy realises that the girl the vampire is chatting up is Willow – who's busily acting on Buffy's advice to seize the moment, and thus well on her way to a grisly death by vampiric kiss.

It is necessary here to point out that acting within the spirit of "*carpe diem*" is not without its pitfalls. Seize the day, yes – but don't behave like a complete idiot.

There is another instance of the phrase that I have a soft spot for –although it's also missing the point of "*carpe diem*" (if not quite as piously as Miss Widdecombe) – in *Clueless* (1995). In this masterpiece of modern cinema, a witty take on Jane Austen's *Emma*, the fabulous but flawed Cher (Alicia Silverstone) is out shopping at the mall with the Frank Churchill character, Christian, now transmuted from love interest into gay best friend.

> Christian: This jacket. Is it Jason Priestley, or James Dean?
> Cher: *Carpe diem*! You look hot in it.

You have to imagine *carpe diem* as carp-ay diy-em, in the full glory of her Californian accent.

I suppose if we're on films, I have to mention That Speech, given by Robin Williams, as teacher John Keating, in *Dead Poets Society* (sic – they never gave those poor poets an apostrophe). It's a little too Ann Widdecombe for me, alas. If

you'll recall, Professor Keating is trying to inspire the posh schoolboys in his care to follow the example of the dead poets: to ignore dull convention and the status quo.

> "They're not that different from you, are they? Same haircuts. Full of hormones, just like you. Invincible, just like you feel. The world is their oyster. They believe they're destined for great things, just like many of you, their eyes are full of hope, just like you. Did they wait until it was too late to make from their lives even one iota of what they were capable? Because, you see gentlemen, these boys are now fertilising daffodils. But if you listen real close, you can hear them whisper their legacy to you. Go on, lean in. Listen, you hear it – *Carpe* – hear it? – *Carpe*, *carpe diem*, seize the day, boys, make your lives extraordinary."

Back to sex, mercifully – another side of the sentiment, "let's get on with it now", is "don't waste your youth" – as in the Clown's song in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*:

> What is love? 'Tis not hereafter;
> Present mirth has present laughter;
> What's to come is still unsure.
> In delay there lies no plenty,
> Then come and kiss me sweet and twenty;
> Youth's a stuff will not endure.



That Speech by Robin Williams

The lovely Young Vic Theatre in London nearly had "Youth's a stuff will not endure" inscribed around its bar area both as a delicate reminder of mortality (Young Vic/Youth's a stuff... get it?) and as a healthy incitement to debauchery to its punters. Then they decided it was a bit too pretentious.

The poet Tibullus had this to say in a similar spirit. This is from the first poem of his first book of elegies (published in 27 BC). Many of his love poems are addressed to a woman called Delia (though there's also another girlfriend with the cheerful name Nemesis, not a good egg by all accounts, and a boyfriend called Marathus).

interea, dum fata sinunt, iungamus amores:
iam ueniet tenebris Mors adoperta caput;
iam subrepet iners aetas, neque amare decebit,
dicere nec cano blanditias capite.

Meanwhile, with Fate's permission, let us unite and love.
Tomorrow Death will come, head hooded in the dark,
or useless Age creep up, and will not be seemly
to make white-headed love or pretty speeches.

[Guy Lee]

Up to a point, Tibullus, though if you are contemplating a long-term, till-death-us-do-part relationship, white-headed love in "*iners aetas*", "useless old age", will be just the thing.

Even more urgently Robert Herrick, in his "*To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time*", suggests:

Gather ye rosebuds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying:
And this same flower that smiles to-day
To-morrow will be dying.

He puts a sting in the tail in that last line. Time is rushing on; it's a short step from smiling to dying. It's not entirely unlike Ovid's cheeky version of the thought in the third book of his *Ars Amatoria*, where the idea of "*carpe diem*" is turned into a piece of rather cynical advice on pulling-technique for the ladies (really, one suspects here, handed out for the benefit of men). His message? Get out there, girls, and have fun, before you lose your looks: it's easier to get laid if you're young and haven't ruined your figure already with babies. After all,

you're going to end up a withered old hag sleeping alone in bed at night in no time at all. (I am sure you will join me in thanking Ovid for the reminder that sagging skin, a Zimmer frame and incontinence pads are only just round the corner.)

quam cito, me miserum, laxantur corpora rugis
et perit, in nitido qui fuit ore, color,
quasque fuisse tibi canas a uirgine iures
sparguntur subito per caput omne comae!
anguibus exuitur tenui cum pelle uetustas,
nec faciunt ceruos cornua iacta senes;
nostra sine auxilio fugiunt bona: carpite florem,
qui, nisi carptus erit, turpiter ipse cadet.
adde, quod et partus faciunt breuiora iuuentae
tempora: continua messe senescit ager.

Ars Amatoria III, ll. 73-82

Too soon – ah, horror! –
Flesh goes slack and wrinkled, the clear
Complexion is lost, those white streaks you swear date
back to
Your schooldays suddenly spread,
You're grey-haired. A snake husks off old age with its fragile
Discarded skin; cast horns
Leave the stag in its prime. Unaided, a woman's charms will
Vanish away. Pluck the flower; left unplucked
It will wither and fall. Youth's span is shortened yet further
By childbirth: overcropping ages a field.

[Peter Green]

He takes the "*carpe diem*" thought to its rather unpleasant conclusion – that is, if you don't "*carpite florem*", "pluck the flower" – it will wither on the bough. (Unplucked, you wither on the the bough; plucked, you risk being overharvested; who said it wasn't tough being a woman?)

Much more cheerfully in the spirit of "let's get on with it" is the marvellous Catullus Poem Five, one of the most justly famous poems in ancient literature. Addressed to his girlfriend Lesbia, it's a fabulous manifesto for grasping life by the balls and getting on with love, no matter what petty disapproval one might encounter from bitter and jealous naysayers along the way. The first line alone will suffice as a seduction.

Viuamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus
rumoresque senum seueriorum
omnes unius aestimemus assis.
soles occidere et redire possunt;
nobis, cum semel occidit breuis lux,
nox est perpetua una dormienda.
da mi basia mille, deinde centum,
dein mille altera, dein secunda centum,
deinde usque altera mille, deinde centum.
dein cum milia multa fecerimus,
conturbabimus illa, ne sciamus
aut ne quis malus inuidere possit,
cum tantum sciat esse basiorum.

My Lesbia, let us live and love
And not care tuppence for old men
Who sermonise and disapprove.
Suns when they sink can rise again,
But we, when our brief light has shone,
Must sleep the long night on and on.
Kiss me: a thousand kisses, then
A hundred more, and now a second
Thousand and hundred, and now still
Hundreds and thousands more, until
The thousand thousands can't be reckoned
And we've lost track of the amount
And nobody can work us ill
With the evil eye by keeping count.

[James Michie]

This is a rather nice version of the opening lines by the sixteenth/seventeenth-century poet and composer Thomas Campion, the first stanza of a longer poem:

My sweetest Lesbia, let us live and love,
And, though the sager sort our deedes reprove,
Let us not way them: heavn's great lampes doe dive
Unto their west, and strait againe revive,
But, soone as once set is our little light,
Then must we sleepe one ever-during night.

Viuamus atque amemus: let us live and love. If, like Ann

Widdecombe, you must have a motto, then here is one worth sticking to.



Don't care tuppence for the disapproval of grumpy old men, says Catullus