

**JOHANN  
WOLFGANG  
GOETHE**

EROTICA ROMANA

# **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe**

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*Erotica Romana:*

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## Erotica Romana

### I

Here's where I've planted my garden and here I shall care  
for love's blossoms —

As I am taught by my muse, carefully sort them in plots:  
Fertile branches, whose product is golden fruit of my  
lifetime,

Set here in happier years, tended with pleasure today.

You, stand here at my side, good Priapus – albeit from  
thieves I've

Nothing to fear. Freely pluck, whosoever would eat.

– Hypocrites, those are the ones! If weakened with shame  
and bad conscience

One of those criminals comes, squinting out over my  
garden,

Bridling at nature's pure fruit, punish the knave in his  
hindparts,

Using the stake which so red rises there at your loins.

## II

Tell me ye stones and give me O glorious palaces answer.

Speak O ye streets but one word. Genius, art thou alive?

Yes, here within thy sanctified walls there's a soul in each object,

ROMA eternal. For me, only, are all things yet mute.

Who will then tell me in whispers and where must I find just the window

Where one day she'll be glimpsed: creature who'll scorch me with love?

Can't I divine yet the paths through which over and over

To her and from her I'll go, squandering valuable time?

Visiting churches and palaces, all of the ruins and the pillars,

I, a responsible man, profit from making this trip.

With my business accomplished, ah, then shall only one temple,

AMOR's temple alone, take the initiate in.

Rome, thou art a whole world, it is true, and yet without love this

World would not be the world, Rome would cease to be Rome.

### III

More than ever I dreamed, I have found it: my happy good fortune!

Cupid sagaciously led past those palazzos so fine.

He of course knows very well (and I have also discovered)

What, beneath tapestries rich, gilded boudoirs conceal.

One may if one wishes call him a blind, wanton boy – but I know you,

Clever Cupid, too well! O, incorruptible god!

We were by no means inveigled to enter façades so majestic;

Somber cortilé we passed, balcony high and gallant,

Hastening onward until an humble but exquisite portal

Offered a refuge to both, ardent seeker and guide.

Here he provides me with ev'rything, sees that I get what I call for;

Each day that passes he spreads freshly plucked roses for me.

– Isn't that heaven on earth? Say, beautiful Lady Borghese,

What would you give to me more? – You, Nipotina, what yours?

Banquets and game tables, operas, balls, promenades down the Corso?

These but deprive my sweet boy of his most opportune times.

Finery, haughtiness do not entice me. Does one not lift a

Gown of the finest brocade just as one lifts common wool?  
If she's to press in comfort a lover against that soft bosom,  
Doesn't he want her to be free from all brooches and chains?  
Must not the jewelry, and then the lace and the bustles and  
whalebone

All of it come off entire, if he's to learn how she feels?

I encounter no troubles like those. Simple dress of rough  
homespun,

At but a lover's mere touch, tumbles in folds to the floor.

Quickly he carries the girl as she's clad in chemise of coarse  
linen —

Just as a nursemaid might, playfully up to her bed.

Drapings of satin are absent; the mattress is quite  
unembroidered.

Large is this room where the bed offers its comfort for two.

Jupiter's welcome to more from his Juno if he can get it;

Let any mortal find rest, softer, wherever he can.

We are content with Cupid's delights, authentic and naked

—

And with the exquisite creak /crack of the bed as it rocks.

## IV

Ask whomever you will but you'll never find out where I'm lodging,

High society's lords, ladies so groomed and refined.

"Tell me, was Werther authentic? Did all of that happen in real life?"

"Lotte, oh where did she live, Werther's only true love?"

How many times have I cursed those frivolous pages that broadcast

Out among all mankind passions I felt in my youth!

Were he my brother, why then I 'd have murdered poor Werther.

Yet his despondent ghost couldn't have sought worse revenge.

That's the way "Marlborough," the ditty, follows the Englishman's travels

Down to Livorno from France, thence from Livorno to Rome,

All of the way into Naples and then, should he flee on to Madras,

"Marlborough" will surely be there, "Marlborough" sung in the port.

Happily now I've escaped, and my mistress knows Werther and Lotte

Not a whit better than who might be this man in her bed:

That he's a foreigner, footloose and lusty, is all she could tell you,

Who beyond mountains and snow, dwelt in a house made of wood.

## V

Do not, beloved, regret that you yielded to me so quickly:

I entertain no base, insolent thoughts about you.

Arrows of Cupid work divers effects. Some do but scratch us:

Slow and insidious these poison our hearts over years.

Yet with a head freshly honed and cunningly fledged, certain others

Pierce to the marrow, inflame rapidly there our blood.

When gods and goddesses in days of heroes made love, then

Lust followed look and desire, with no delay, was indulged.

Surely you don't think the goddess of love lost a moment reflecting

When, in Idean grove, Anchises caught her eye.

Nor did Luna delay about kissing that beautiful dreamer —

Jealous Aurora had else hastily wakened the lad.

At the loud banquet Hero regarded Leander – then promptly

Into dark waters he plunged, ardently swam toward his love.

When Rhea Silvia, princess and virgin, came down to the Tiber

Just to fetch water, a god seized her and that is the way

Mars begat himself sons, a pair of twins whom a she wolf

Suckled. Today a proud Rome claims to be queen of the world.

## VI

We are so pious, we lovers. Discreetly we worship all powers,

Hoping for favor from each god and each goddess as well.

We are like you, ye victorious Romans, in this: for we offer

Gods of all peoples and tribes, over the whole world, a home —

May the Egyptian, black and austere out of primeval basalt,

Or from the marble a Greek, form them charming and white —

Yet the eternal ones do not object to particularism

(Incense of most precious sort, strewn for just one of their host).

Therefore we gladly confess to singling a special immortal

And our devotions each day pledging but solely to her.

Mischievous celebrants we at these mysteries gay, and so solemn:

Silence exactly befits rites at which we're adepts.

Rather onto our heels by horrible deeds the Erinyes

We would allure, even Zeus' punishment sooner we'd dare

—

Under that rock, or bound to a tumbling wheel we'd endure it —

Than we'd withdraw our hearts from the delights of her cult.

Sweet Opportunity, that is her name. You should meet her.

Often will she turn up, ever in a new form.

Daughter of Proteus might well she be whom he sired upon  
Thetis.

In metamorphoses they've many a hero deceived.

So now the daughter beguiles the naive and bedazzles the  
foolish,

Teases you while you're asleep; when you awaken, she's  
flown.

Eagerly yields herself up to the quick, to the active man only.

He discovers she's tame, playful and tender and sweet.

Once she appeared to me, too: a dark-skinned girl, tumbling

Over her forehead the hair down in waves heavy and dark.

Round about a delicate neck curled short little ringlets;

Up from the crown of her head crinkled the unbraided hair.

When she dashed by me I seized her, mistaking her not.

Lovingly

Kiss and embrace she returned, knowing and teaching me  
how.

O how enraptured I was! Ah, say now no more. It's a bygone.

But, O pigtails of Rome, still I'm entrammled in you.

## VII

Happily now on classical soil I feel inspiration.

Voices from present and past speak here evocatively.

Heeding ancient advice, I leaf through the works of the  
Ancients

With an assiduous hand. Daily the pleasure's renewed.

Throughout the night, in a different way, I'm kept busy by  
Cupid —

If erudition is halved, rapture is doubled that way.

Do then I not become wise when I trace with my eye her  
sweet bosom's

Form, and the line of her hips stroke with my hand? I  
acquire,

As I reflect and compare, my first understanding of marble,

See with an eye that feels, feel with a hand that sees.

While my beloved, I grant it, deprives me of moments of  
daylight,

She in the nighttime hours gives compensation in full.

And we do more than just kiss; we prosecute reasoned  
discussions

(Should she succumb to sleep, that gives me time for my  
thoughts).

In her embrace – it's by no means unusual – I've composed  
poems

And the hexameter's beat gently tapped out on her back,

Fingertips counting in time with the sweet rhythmic breath  
of her slumber.

Air from deep in her breast penetrates mine and there  
burns.

Cupid, while stirring the flame in our lamp, no doubt thinks  
of those days when

For the triumvirs he similar service performed.

## VIII

"Can you be cruel enough to sadden me thus with reproaches?

Germans speak, I suppose, bitterly when they're in love.

Bear it I must when the gossips bring forth accusations: I'm guilty —

Or am I not? But, alas, all of my guilt was with you.

Clothes that you've given bear witness for envious neighbors

That the poor widow no more grieves for her husband alone.

Did you not thoughtlessly visit me in the disguise of a cleric,

Muffled all up in a cloak, hair all rounded behind?

Who was it chose that gray monk if not you? Well then a prelate

Now is my lover – Ah, who is my prelate but you?

Never, incredible as it may sound in this clerical city,

Has any cleric brought me – swear it I will – to his bed.

I was sufficiently poor, sad to say. I was young. The seducers

Noted it well. Falconier ogled me often enough.

One of the pimps for Albani with billets doux very impressive

Called me to Ostia once. Quattro Fontani next time.

Who was it did not appear there? Why, who but the very same girl who

Hated with all of her heart stockings both violet and red.

For: 'In the end you poor girls are the ones who are sure to be cheated.'

So said my father although – Mother was not much impressed.

Father was right. Here I stand in the end being cheated and scolded.

You don't believe your own words. They're your excuse to escape.

Go, then. Unworthy of women are men. We, who carry your children

Next to our hearts, in these hearts loyalty we bear you, too.

As for you men, when you've poured out your potency in our embraces

And your desires dissipate, love with them passes away."

These things expressed, and taking her child from its chair, my beloved

Presses it close to her heart, kisses it, tears in her eyes.

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