

“O Fortuna” Has Some Racy Origins

Chances are you have heard “O Fortuna.” It’s one of the most played classical songs of all-time, and is frequently heard on the radio and in movie trailers.

But do you know where it comes from?

“O Fortuna” is part of a collection of Latin and German poems from the 11th-13th centuries known as [Carmina Burana](#), or “Songs of Beuern.” “Beuern” refers to a monastery in Bavaria where they were discovered in 1803. Some of these poems were put to music Carl Orff in 1936.

And as I discovered when translating them for Latin class in college, some of them are very bawdy, and some are critical of the Catholic Church.

The famous “O Fortuna” is pretty tame:

O Fortuna **O Fortune**, velut luna **like the moon** statu
variabilis, **you are changeable**, semper crescis **ever waxing**
aut decrescis; **and waning**; vita detestabilis **hateful life**
nunc obdurat **first oppresses** et tunc curat **and then soothes**

ludo mentis aciem, **as fancy takes it**; egestatem, **poverty**
potestatem **and power** dissolvit ut glaciem. **it melts them like**
ice. Sors immanis **Fate – monstrous** et inanis, **and empty**, rota
tu volubilis, **you whirling wheel**, status malus, **you are**
malevolent, vana salus **well-being is** vainsemper dissolubilis,
and always fades to nothing, obumbrata shadowed et velata **and**
veiled michi quoque niteris; **you plague me too**; nunc per ludum
now through the game dorsum nudum **I bring my bare back** fero
tui sceleris. **to your villainy**. Sors salutis **Fate is against**
me et virtutis **in health** mihi nunc contraria, **and virtue**, est
affectus **driven on** et defectus **and weighted down**, semper in
angaria. **always enslaved**. Hac in hora **So at this hour** sine
mora **without delay** corde pulsum tangite; **pluck the vibrating**
strings; quod per sortem **since Fate** sternit fortem, **strikes**
down the string man, mecum omnes plangite! **everyone weep with**
me!

But then there's this passage (and many others like it!) from
the 16th poem:

*Pedlar, give to me some rouge my cheeks to redden, till
I make all these handsome men love me against their will.*

*Gaze at me,
young man, see:*

let me pleasure you!

Here is a rather funny passage of a man making a confession to an Archbishop:

*"The third charge, of all
I think of, is the tavern:
I've never passed one by,
I shall never spurn them,
until the holy choir
of angels I discern them,
singing for the dead:
'Requiem eternam.'"*

And here's a rather unflattering portrait of an Abbot:

*"The Abbot of Cockaigne I am, and this
my council's all furnished with drinkers, it is, to be one of
the gamblers is my dearest wish, and whoever at dawn seeks me
in the tavern come vespers, he'll be stripped naked as Adam,
and thus relieved of his shirt he'll cry:
'Oh woe! Oh woe!
Lady Luck, oh what have you done!
The joys of my life are all gone,
you've stolen them all every one!'"*

(For a further explanation of the above poem, click [here](#).)

And there's also this mocking hymn that intentionally draws on language usually reserved for the Virgin Mary, only to apply the praises elsewhere:

*"Hail, most beautiful one, precious jewel,
Hail, Pride among virgins,
glorious virgin,
Hail, light of the world,
Hail, rose of the world,
Blanchefleur and Helen,
noble Venus!"*

Interestingly, it's likely that the authors of these poems were themselves either seminary students or clerics.

There's some context for the next time you hear "O Fortuna"!