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# Song of Snogs

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CATULLUS: SHIBARI CARMINA

by Isobel Williams.

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**W**HAT an innocent I am. Until I read Isobel Williams's reinventions of Catullus as *Shibari Carmina* I would have guessed that 'shibari' was an exotic seasoning, or perhaps a rare type of plant. Having now looked it up online and averted my gaze from the pictures (what ads will I get served in future? Will my IT department shop me?), I learn it's a form of Japanese bondage, which involves consenting adults and carefully calibrated widths and strengths of jute rope. I'm sure the jute makes all the difference, and that nylon would be quite horrid. Or maybe just more horrid. The person doing the tying up in shibari is regarded as the servant of the person being trussed, and the loops of jute are defined in a series of elegant moves as though the whole thing were a martial art, so the activity inverts expectations about power relations even while seeming to make them pretty darn obvious.

Williams has visited some discreet emporia in the UK that offer instruction in this art (apparently they treated her like the Queen Mother), and has made some excellent drawings of people tying and being tied, in which the outlines of bodies look a bit like swirls of string that have been cascaded onto the floor, with transverse lines that blur the line (this could go on and on) between the outlines of the body and the restraining lines of jute. She even gives addresses of places where you can find out more about shibari, both online and in person. I pass on these tips just in case they strike a chord, though I also pass on her final caution: 'Please do not try shibari without instruction.'

These illustrations punctuate her energetic and (can one in this context say it?) 'free' translation of around half of Catullus' poems. Some she translates several times. There are seven or so versions of the two-line poem about Catullus' love-hate relationship with his mistress, 'Odi et amo'. One of these sounds a bit like Ezra Pound in troubadour mode:

I hate where I do love. Perchance  
 Thou seek'st to know *de quelle façon*  
 [Doffs hat, strums lute-strings].  
 I don't know. It's hurting. *Here.*

Another sounds like a resentful adolescent:

Stuck in a hate-love trap.  
 ‘How does it make you feel?’  
 Don’t give me that counselling crap.  
 The wheel has spikes. Bones snap.

Shibari provides Williams with a metaphor for the emotional torture of Catullus, who is bound to and yet seeks to control his mistress, Lesbia (as he calls her) or Clodia (the most likely historical person), who nonetheless has him all tied up in emotional knots. Not only that: shibari also serves as a metaphor for the relationship between the translator and the original text, since a translator is bound to the sense of the original and yet is also committed to setting it free by tying it down, being at once its servant and also a kind of master. Williams is not bound to literal translation – ‘No! I am not Miss Whiplash, nor was meant to be’ – and says that her poems ‘take an elliptical orbit around the Latin, brushing against it or defying its gravitational pull’.

As a way of thinking about translation this isn’t as outré as it may sound. In fact, it’s natural enough: the Latin term *translatio* is the equivalent of the Greek *μεταφορά* (‘*metaphorá*’) and both mean ‘carrying across’. Rope tricks of various kinds have for centuries been part of the armoury of metaphors used to describe translation, though usually in less intricate and more negative forms than shibari. Dryden said of word-for-word translation: ‘Tis much like dancing on Ropes with fetter’d Legs: A man can shun a fall by using Caution, but the gracefulness of Motion is not to be expected.’ Shibari translation, by contrast, implies that the fetters are a good thing – and as Williams says, no permanent harm is done to the original because ‘rope marks on the skin should leave a pleasing pattern but will soon fade.’

Catullus is a good subject for shibari translation because a) his poems are often dirty to the point of showing you stuff that might make you close your browser window quickly; b) the dirtiness tends to be very carefully shaped, as though the sexual energy is formed by generations of artful convention, so that you could well imagine that if he had actually been into bondage (and who knows?) it would have been carefully planned out with circles and arrows and allusions to Callimachus and maybe in grislier moments to Homer; and c) quite apart from the fact that the text of Catullus is a conjectural amender’s paradise, with lacunae and all kinds of textual S&M to be performed on it for the pleasure, or possibly the pain, of both the poet and the critic, his words often seem to be saying more than they ought to. You don’t get much simpler than ‘*odi et amo*’, but in that poem ‘I love you’ and ‘I hate you’ are more like twins than opposites. So translators have to think about how to pin those simple words down.

Then there are the dirty words that Lewis and Short sell you very short on indeed, like *irrumabo*, which the Latin dictionaries will translate as ‘irrumate’, forcing the prurient teenager within to look it up in the OED. There you will find that ‘irrumate’ means (yes, means) ‘*Obsolete. rare. Apparently only attested in dictionaries or glossaries*’ – which is possibly the best dickshunry definition ever: unless you bother to look at the etymology of the word you won’t even discover that it means ‘to give suck’ from *ruma*, a teat or a dug. This all sounds oh so cosy and maternal, though when Catullus says to his hostile critics in poem 16 ‘*paedicabo vos et irrumabo*’ he is quite definitely not offering to suck their breast or to offer his own gremial region for lingual delight – and good luck looking up *paedicabo* too, though that’s an easier one to guess from its English derivatives. So, OED, please henceforth cite Burrow 2021: Catullus wants to fuck his critics up the arse and irrumate them, viz, fuck them in the mouth. Without their consent, just to be clear.

As soon as I spit out my translation in its literal form I see it has lost the genuine obscenity of Catullus, who brings a deeply unsettling suggestion of mothering warmth to his abuse by combining ‘giving suck’ and ‘paed-’, and who is, like all the people who are best at being filthy,

performing filthiness rather than just being filthy. C.H. Sisson, in many respects a dry old stick as a translator, but whose painstakingness ensures that his translations always have the cleansing sting of a styptic pencil, has Catullus offer to do the sucking ('All right I'll bugger you and suck your pricks'), presumably because that was what Sisson inferred was going on from his shelf of coy dictionaries. Williams is more successful at working out who is threatening to do what to whom, but also realises that the point of Catullus 16 is less the filthy vocabulary than the extravagantly overblown rhetoric. She calls the poem 'Sweet' and begins it like this:

Beware the mighty sodomite face-bandit.  
You two batty-boys dishing out lit crit  
Insist my kissy-fit verse is Hello Kitty.

Williams ties Catullus' ultra-rude poem to the Japanese cat Hello Kitty, whom I believe to be the ultimate non-sexual cartoon being (though I haven't googled to verify this claim, since surely there is yet something sacred?), even to the extent of having no mouth at all. This rules out not only kissing but all other kinds of face-banditry, which is not in the OED or other reference works I have consulted, but it's not hard to work it out. Williams goes on to evoke Catullus' recurrent desire to be free of all constraints including that of pleasing his critics:

Liberation from your taste police  
Gives my words a musky allure that can stir

Not just boys but the prick-memory  
Of shaggy old ex-shaggers.

Catullus was a master of many kinds of oral delight. The real challenge in translating him is to capture the pleasure and the delicacy that exists alongside the frank and direct filth. The first line of his famous kissing poem, 'Vivamus, mea Lesbia, atque amemus' (Catullus 5), brought out the jaundiced civil servant in Sisson: it really doesn't mean 'Living, dear Lesbia, is useless without loving.' The jussive subjunctives are much closer in their effect to Williams's faintly hippyish 'Open out to life and love with me.' She renames the poem 'Song of Snogs' (I wish I'd thought of that one), and when Catullus grows dark she follows him and emerges on the other side into the multilingual kiss-counting with which her poem concludes:

Suns go down and dawns will come  
But once our pinprick light is out  
The night will never be for more than sleeping

I love doing this, let's  
Take a long position, swell the  
Abacus with kisses  
M Cxxx  
MM CxCx Cxxx  
MMM CxCx Cxxx CxCx

And when we've made a killing kissing  
Shake the totals to lose count,  
Take them beyond the kiss inspector's reach.

'Take a long position' neatly fuses sex and money, and 'swell' is just swell in this erotic setting. Catullus' 'nox est perpetua una dormienda' includes the schoolchild's hated gerundive and means roughly 'there is one perpetual night that must be slept.' It is more than just clever to hear in it the

exclusion of sex from the sleep of death, since the main point of the poem is that the perpetual night of death will indeed never be for more than sleeping. Then there are the games with Latin counting and the way it translates or slides sideways into English. MMM: 3000, but also mmm. XXX: 30, but also kisskisskiss. And, in another penetrating intralingual exploration, Cxxx is both 130 and a triple X-rated C word, conveniently male or female, either cxxx or cxxx, or both, depending on your sexual preference, with or without three kisses.

**C**ATULLUS 5 might be the most perfect lyric ever written. It's poised between desperation (give me more kisses) and mental clarity (I'm counting, you know) and hyperbole (I'd say anything to stop the kissing stopping), and delight and fear and bullying (you're going to die and I'm going to die too, so give me more kisses). It evokes a world of calculation and bookkeeping in order to cancel it out through the glory of physical touch, but it's still looming somewhere in the background. You need those jealous eyes spying on the edges of the poem in order to create a space for the endless and uncountable delight that really doesn't give a damn about what the prudes think. And in the middle of it all is the one really uncountable and perpetual thing: death.

That poise between the self-indulgent and the threatened, shouldering aside the kiss-police and the knowledge of death and struggling to get on with the kissing, is part of the magic of Catullus. It may remind us that his (probable) lover Clodia was sister to Publius Clodius Pulcher, who was one of the most powerful and dangerous men in republican Rome, so watching his tongue and watching who talked about what his tongue got up to was something Catullus had to manage – alongside cultivating an aristocratic frankness in telling his critics exactly how and when to get fucked. A two-fingered two-liner to Julius Caesar declares that he doesn't care whether Caesar's 'hide' is white or black, after which Williams mocks up a Microsoft Outlook alert to make sure Caesar has got the message: 'G.V. Catullus requested a read receipt be sent . . . when message is read. Do you want to send a receipt?' She titles the poem 'And your mother', which just about nails it.

The other kiss poem, Catullus 7, in which Lesbia asks him how many kisses would be enough, and the loquacious Catullus says, 'as many as . . . as many as ooh anything', gets bound up by Williams into a bundle of shibari-speak:

Stress-testing are we, Mistress?  
How many of your tropes in rope  
Can be endured before the poet chokes?

Ply me hemp silk jute and tie me  
Ichinawa, takate kote,  
Futomomo, hishi karada,  
Tasuki, kannuki,  
Hashira, daruma shibari.  
All of it. Semenawa for the burn.

'Semenawa' may sound a bit more lubricating than it actually is: it means 'tormenting rope'. The other terms are variously shibari kit or moves, or maybe 'unmoves' would be a better way of describing them – but why spoil the fun? They aren't simply whimsy whippy talk, since they stand in for words in the original which even Roman readers might have needed to google. The epithet 'lasarpiciferis' is found only in this poem: Catullus says he wants as many kisses as grains of sand in the deserts of Libyan Cyrene, which is said to be 'lasarpiciferis'. The dictionaries say this means 'silphium-bearing'. Thank you, dictionaries. So you look up *silphium*, and you find that it, unlike shibari, actually was a kind of plant, used in the ancient world as an aphrodisiac and a

contraceptive and an abortifacient. Who, one wonders, managed to corner that lucrative nook of the drug market? And before you shoot off to Cyrene for some Class A silphium, it appears that no one is sure what sort of plant it was: the Romans seem to have eaten it to extinction.

Williams has created a bracingly foul, but also a shrewd and funny Catullus, though it might in various senses be called explicitly partial. *Shibari Carmina* excludes almost half of Catullus' poems, and the ones that don't make it into English are generally the ones that don't much want to be bound up in jute. That is a loss. Once Catullus began to be printed, from the 1470s onwards, he had an incalculable impact on the way Renaissance poets thought about lyric poems – and about love. The bits of Catullus that Williams chooses not to translate – particularly the marriage songs or epithalamia, and his artful short epic about the love of Peleus and Thetis, which dwells on the abandonment and loss that can follow all the kisses and repeat doses of silphium – were revolutionary. Elizabethan poets could do kisses, and they could do beautifully overworked erotic narrative poems and explore a full range of amorous experiences from the anticipatory tingles of desire to nuptial delights, partly because they read Ovid but partly also because Catullus made love such a long and winding story, and so generative of genres. His shorter lyrics of pained desire also allowed Renaissance poets to open windows onto vernacular beauty, as when Ben Jonson, who provides a prim but palate-cleansing contrast to Williams, fused together the kiss-counting of Catullus 5 with the exotic locations and silphium-bearing shores of Catullus 7 like this:

Kiss again: no creature comes.  
 Kiss, and score up wealthy sums  
 On my lips, thus hardly sund'red,  
 While you breathe. First give a hundred,  
 Then a thousand, then another  
 Hundred, then unto the tother  
 Add a thousand, and so more:  
 Till you equal with the store,  
 All the grass that Romney yields,  
 Or the sands in Chelsea fields,  
 Or the drops in silver Thames,  
 Or the stars that gild his streams,  
 In the silent summer nights,  
 When youths ply their stol'n delights.  
 That the curious may not know  
 How to tell 'em, as they flow,  
 And the envious, when they find  
 What their number is, be pined.

It's hard to read this beside Williams and not feel a twinkle of nostalgia for the old-fashioned beauty that the silent summer nights bring to Jonson's remade-in-Chelsea Catullus. But there are losses in Jonson too: the 'Libyssae harenae' (Libyan sands) and the silphium-bearing Cyrene are brought back to Romney Marsh, and the result sounds a bit parochial. Jonson did this partly because he wanted everyone to notice he was making Catullus English, but also because he recognised that the swooping geographical hyperbole and bafflingly obscure words in Catullus mattered less than his ability to deploy a vocabulary that seemed like Basic Latin but was charged with more emotion than seemed proper. Any translator who has a feeling for what they're doing will always be asking the question: how can a simple phrase like 'odi et amo' or 'vivamus atque amemus' be made to convey as much as it does in Catullus?

The most famous instance of his Basic Latin occurs at the end of poem 101, about the death of his brother. It concludes with what's probably the best-known line of Catullus: 'atque in perpetuum,

frater, ave atque vale.’ Crusty Sisson renders this ‘And then forever, brother, hail and farewell,’ though ‘hail and farewell’ now seems a terribly stagey translation of those routine Roman greetings *ave* and *vale*, while ‘hello and goodbye’ sounds like a catchphrase from a TV comic, and won’t do either. The longest English version of the sparse ten lines of Catullus 101 is Anne Carson’s *Nox* (2009), which is both a translation and a meditation on translation and on the loss of her own brother. This is extended through a single sheet of paper which stretches out, by my rough measurement, to 25.6 metres, into which Carson pastes postcards from her dead brother and dictionary definitions of individual perplexing words, before unfolding, concertina-like, at its terminal destination in a translation of the poem’s concluding hail and farewell, which becomes ‘farewell and farewell’. Carson says that ‘over the years of working at it, I came to think of translating as a room, not exactly an unknown room, where one gropes for the light switch. I guess it never ends. A brother never ends. I prowl him.’ Williams’s version of this poem captures its sadness by turning it artfully, but without jute entanglements, into an airport misery poem which begins like this:

Flight-shamed through the earthbound ports and checkpoints  
I’m here, brother, for this bleak ceremony

and ends:

Here are the conventional sad tokens  
For the old rituals that told us so.  
Take them sea-splashed with a brother’s tears  
And for ever like the tide, my brother,  
I come to claim you and to let you go

The last two lines are excellent: the ashes of the brother are scattered on the waves, coming and going forever, and the monosyllables of the final line do catch the Catullan note of simplicity overburdened with pain. But the preceding lines display the inherent weakness in Williams’s version, which is not very good at rendering stubbornly antique practices for which there is no obvious contemporary equivalent. One could just about argue that ‘conventional sad tokens/For the rituals that told us so’ reflects the way formal rituals of mourning fail to capture Catullus’ grief (it’s not just tokens, but ‘tokens for rituals’), but that’s probably special pleading for lines that are really just out of focus. Sisson’s gravity at this moment strikes a better note: ‘Now take these offerings which, by ancestral custom,/Are given as a sad gift to the shades.’ But Carson’s rendering – ‘what a distant mood of parents/handed down as the sad gift for burials’ – is the best version of all: it’s mistily distant in a way that makes your eyes cloud over, partly because it recognises that Catullus’ ‘more parentum’ brings the ghosts of parents to the funeral of a brother.

The word ‘perpetual’ is a weighty one in Latin poetry. Ovid said that in the *Metamorphoses* he was writing a ‘carmen perpetuum’, a poem about all time, but also one that endures. Catullus used the word only three times, always with a peculiar power. It’s there in the perpetual night of death after the flurry of kisses has gone, as well as the ‘in perpetuity’ of his grieving departure from his brother. It comes back for the last time in poem 109, in which Lesbia promises her love will be ‘perpetual’, and the poet prays to the gods that indeed it will be. The word evokes the temporal space of the lover, wanting what he knows can’t last to go on forever, and knowing also that forever is actually a long cold lonely space that makes you want more than anything to be kissed. For this reason it’s canny of Williams to end her selection with poem 109 rather than persisting with the remaining half dozen or so poems – none of which is particularly good. She renames it ‘Lockdown’, and of course there is a bit of a shibari frisson in that word we’re all so sick of hearing. Her version of the poem has a swaying imbalance between a master and mistress in bondage to each other: ‘Our special place./Yes Mistress./You’re dangling/Our love affair/As a fixture, you and

me, I can nearly – '. 'Dangling' is a very good participle to dangle between active and passive senses at that point: she is presumably tied up, shibari-style, dangling the offer of perpetual love while dangling herself in a very contemporary vision of what has for many of us felt like a perpetual state of suspended animation, locked down or tied up together for what we're not quite sure will be forever. And 'perpetual' becomes 'a fixture' in a poem about tying people up in bonds that will necessarily at some point be untied. It is a fine way to end Catullus for now – though nothing lasts forever, and I have to go and answer a message marked 'urgent' and 'personal' from my IT department.

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