

New Welsh Review

Catullus: Shibari Carmina

Isobel Williams (text and illustrations)

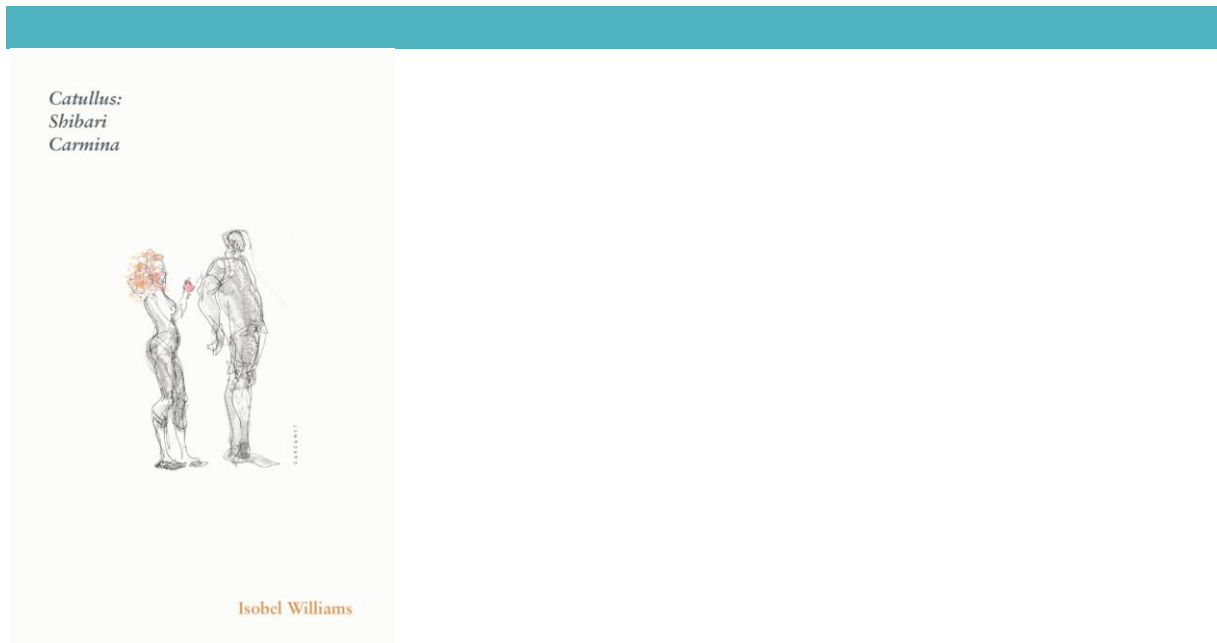
Jemma L King advises, 'when in Rome, join a fetish club', as she marvels at an exciting, breathing, timeless new adaptation, aided by Japanese rope bondage

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The term 'confessional poet' is obviously less of a descriptor and more of a slur, largely aimed at mid-century female writers. But go back far enough (like pre-Jesus far enough) and you'll find actual male 'confessionals' who got busy writing about emotional entanglement, scandals and sexy-time, long before Wordsworth et al bloomed into boring existence, apparently setting in stone the gender norms of our craft.

King of the original confessionals was Catullus, a petty, judgemental Roman who eschewed the classical heroes and gods to write vindictive and desperate verse that covered the filthy, the depraved, the everyday humdrum.

And as artists, we can't seem to put him down. The man's had operas built around him, fussy romantic paintings composed of him. And obviously, he's inspired endless, endless poetry collections.

To give you an idea of how much of a cultural touchstone Catullus is, this is the second time that I've reviewed a contemporary collection based on his works, and the publisher of today's subject [Carcanet] already publishes three other 'Catulluses'.

So what's new about [this one](#)?

Well, quite a lot actually. The poet/translator, Isobel Williams, has used an ingenious frame to rework Catullus' verse into something more contemporary: Japanese bondage.

As part of her research, Williams frequented a fetish venue in London, drawing pictures of men and women tying each other up in accordance with a practice known as 'shibari'. This became her jumping-off point into Catullus' world because, as she explains, 'Catullus was held in emotional bondage by affairs with men and women. The Roman Republic knew nothing of the Japanese archipelago: I use shibari simply as a context.'

As a symbolic device, it really works as a constant refrain that pulls the collection together. Shibari acts as a commentary on the world occupied by Catullus and his crew – the ropes and rope marks standing in for the binds and the finely balanced suspensions that encapsulated the politics of Rome.

Williams' erotic drawings from the bondage club are also used throughout [the book](#). These Schiele-esque abstractions of sexual energy almost disassociate from reality, except for an anchoring curve of a breast here or a vaguely recognisable thigh there.

'Shibari', Williams explains, 'is a form of translation. The top arranges the bottom in a shape he or she could not hold or maybe even attain alone.'

This neat trick of resculpting people is not dissimilar to Williams' immediate task in hand, binding and posing Catullus' Latin poems, giving them new form for new audiences.

She achieves this with aplomb, and I even think Catullus purists can't fail to admire her daring reimagining of his greatest works. Every single verse is untangled and re-tied to speak directly to modernity. Williams' Rome is inhabited by 'vanilla boys' and 'spray tanned posers from Watford'. In this Rome, sex pests send dick pics and bedrooms reek of Lynx and wanking.

If you're not familiar with Catullus, you might think that this all sounds a bit try-hard but this is a man who opened one of his most famous poems with the immortal line 'Pēdicābō ego vōs et irrumābō', or, 'I will sodomise and face-fuck you'. Williams emphatically isn't taking liberties here but enacting a sort of restoration of the original's shock value.

Shock value in safe-space times

On this point, let's take a look at '15', a poem that verily was not built for these triggering times. Famously, Catullus threatens a would-be rapist of his lover with vengeance in the form of, um, rape.

Lesser writers might approach this source material with reservation, perhaps abstracting the sense of the thing into unintelligible pixels to avoid whatever idiotic row might conceivably break out upon publication of the book. But Williams stares the material straight in the face and explicitly recreates Catullus' livid flight of fancy. For this, I applaud her resolve to respect the original. Brava!

Williams has a talent for peppering the text with Catullus' petty obsessions. His jealousies for example: 'He is no Master / And he's broke.... Spin it any way you like / But he's no Master / And he's broke.'. These detours humanise the person that Catullus was.

But actually, and unsurprisingly, sex is at the root of everything. It drives Catullus' rages, his torments, his judgements. It gets him out of bed in the morning.

Cousining up the source material with an allegorical sheen of London sex-dungeon fetish is just a masterstroke.

I have to admit at this point that bondage is not my kink so I genuinely believe that I'm missing a layer of response to [Catullus: Shibari Carmina](#). But if rope is your thing, then you're probably never going to meet a more perfect artistic rendering of how you sensually respond to the world.

It goes beyond that, though. Williams has served up what is possibly one of the most exciting translation volumes of recent years. I love the intertextuality (references to

Teresa May! X-Ray Spex! Plato!). I love the completeness of her allusion and the confidence with which she flogs the original material into shape.

The book is alive and breathing. It's a Confessional, slyly bitching and gossiping through the ages. And that, friends, is timeless.

Jemma L King won the Terry Hetherington Young Welsh Writer of the Year Award and was shortlisted for the Dylan Thomas Prize and the Wales Book of the Year Roland Mathias Prize for her debut poetry collection, [The Shape of a Forest](#) (Parthian, 2013). In 2014, Parthian published her second collection, [The Undressed](#), inspired by an antique cache of photographs, in which she considers the anonymous nude women depicted and restores to them their voices. She lives in Powys and is working on a new poetry collection and novel.