

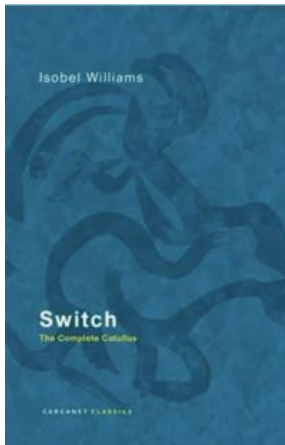
Quad (Oxford alumni online magazine)

OFF THE SHELF: AUGUST 2023

This month Catullus, the Holocaust, making money from Space and a new biography of Oxford big beast philosopher J.L. Austin

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Author: Richard Lofthouse



Switch: The Complete Catullus by Isobel Williams (31 August 2023, Carcanet Classics)

'Translating Catullus has been, for me, like cage fighting with two opponents, not just A Top Poet, but the schoolgirl I was, trained to show the examiner that she knew what each word meant.' So notes Isobel Williams (Somerville, 1972). But she's done it in an extraordinary style that is razor-edged and completely 2023 – translation in the most vibrant sense. It's often strikingly undergraduate and a welcome riposte to all the doomy codes that seem these days to police every action:

'Come clean. That fuck-wasted look

Says you've done something regrettable.

Who is it?

Don't worry about my reaction.'

Isobel published *Shibari Carmina* to great acclaim in 2021. Now in this volume, Catullus' complete works. To the uninitiated, the illustrations within a Japanese bondage tradition (shibari) are accomplished, graceful and always suggestive, but the words are frequently, as one critic put it, 'bracingly foul.' What's going on? Williams has sketched live performances of Japanese rope bondage at fetish clubs; she came to the view that it was a perfect metaphor for the voluntary emotional enslavement of a bisexual, vicious, hopelessly romantic Roman poet, whose works remain compelling after 2000 years. He is the switch of the title – oscillating between dominant and submissive. At the very end a note of caution: 'Please do not try shibari without instruction.'