

Catullus: Shibari Carmina. By Isobel Williams. Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2021. Pp. 100. Paper. \$17.89.

This volume puts adaptations of 60 of Catullus' poems in the context of *shibari*, an artistic form of Japa-

nese rope bondage in which “a dominant top, or rigger, ties a submissive, also called a bottom, model, or bunny” (p. 7). Why this nexus of fetish and Roman poetry? Williams writes in Carcanet Press’ blog that as a Latin student she had been drawn to Catullus’ “tormented intelligence and romantic versatility,” but didn’t find the inspiration for these translations until decades later, when she went to a *shibari* venue in South London as a life-drawing challenge (<https://carcanetblog.blogspot.com/2021/02/isobel-williams-npviii-meet-contributor.html>, quoted on the back cover). Williams illustrates the book with gestural line drawings, giving the reader some conception of *shibari*; a list of websites on the final page provides a gateway for further study.

Williams discovered a Catullan dynamic at the *shibari* club and a *shibari* dynamic in Catullus. “Catullus was held in emotional bondage by affairs with men and women” (p. 7), and his poetic persona careens between roles: “an anxious bitchy dominant with the boys, a howling sub with his nemesis . . . Lesbia” (back cover). In *shibari*, “There is a fluid dynamic with a constant flicker of role-reversal. Gorgone, a French star of tying and being tied, describes the paradox of who’s really in charge: being a top is about humility; being a bottom is about power” (p. 7).

Catullus’ verse, too, is paradoxical: as many have noted, his poems can give the impression of spontaneous emotional effusions, yet they are manifestly crafted with great precision and forethought. The idea that creativity can be unbridled by bridling it is expressed by Igor Stravinsky in his *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons* (1947): “The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit” (quoted in an appendix called “Strands,” a collection of passages related to knots and tying, pp. 94-98; Stravinsky on p. 95). Williams applies the bondage metaphor to poetic creation in her version of Poem 50 (*Hesterno, Licini, die . . .*): “Coining words for torso / Torment torque torsion” Catullus’ poem describes the erotic charge of two people working with language together in a spirit of competition for dominance.

The *shibari* context works better for some poems than for others. To my mind the best combination of *shibari*-themed adaptation and illustration is found on pp. 40-41: Williams’ version of Poem 45 (Acme and Septimius) and its accompanying line drawing, portraying the lovers in an acrobatic kiss. Williams captures the voice of what she calls the “anxious bitchy dominant” in Poem 81 (*Nemone in tanto potuit populo . . . ?*): “Couldn’t you

find a decent rigger, Juventius . . . ?”, and of the “howling sub” in Poem 73 (*Desine de quoquam quicquam bene velle mereri*): “They won’t break your fall . . . They let your harness slip . . . All of them, all of the time.” Elsewhere the *shibari* references seem forced, for example in Poem 7 (*Quaeris quot mihi basiationes . . .*), where Williams gives a catalogue of terms for different ties.

Those who find Williams’ focus on bondage gimmicky or distasteful might nevertheless enjoy this book as an artful collection of adaptations, for fans of, say, Ann Carson’s versions of Catullus in *Men in the Off Hours* (2000)—Williams mentions Carson’s *Nox* (2010) in her pithy and urbane annotated timeline of Catullus’ life, textual history, and reception (pp. 9-14). Fewer than half of the poems engage directly with *shibari*, a wise decision which frees Williams to explore Catullus’ voice and place it in a variety of contemporary contexts: for example, Williams appends to Poem 93 (*Nil nimium studeo, Caesar, tibi velle placere*) the image of a Microsoft Outlook pop-up: “GV Catullus requested a read receipt be sent . . . Do you want to send a receipt?” Williams is witty throughout; in Poem 76 (*Siqua recordanti benefacta priora voluptas*) she injects some humor, and an addiction metaphor, while still capturing Catullus’ tone of wounded self-righteousness:

Intra-Venus

. . . There’s comfort when your hair’s gone white
[Don’t bother, you won’t make it. – Ed.]
Salvaged from this obsessive blight.

What altruism says or does,
You’ve said, done, and been called
A prick for it. Accept the pain.
The vein’s collapsed. Rip out the line. . . .

Also funny is the “punch line” to the first stanza of her second version of Poem 51 (*Ille mi par esse deo videtur*), all the more effective for its metrical fidelity:

Oh go ahead with giving head to the godhead
God help us he outdogs the gods of dogging
Monopolising you with his cheap tactics
Paying attention

“The gods of dogging” exemplifies Williams’ delight

in punning and sound-play: she calls Poem 5 “Song of Snogs,” and has Catullus invite Fabullus to an “engorgement party” (Poem 13). Williams’ names for Catullus’ cast of characters are entertaining: the color-based names—Mr Gold for Flavius (Poem 6), Mr Blond for Aurelius (15, 21), etc., give the collection a “Reservoir Dogs” vibe, and Mr Voluble is perfect for Volusius, the poet of “epic crap” in Poem 36 (*Annales Volusi, cacata carta*). Williams strikes an appropriate note of Catullan snark with “Ameana, Lady Fuck-me” (Poem 41, *Ameana puella defutata*) and “our own Lady of the / Labia” in Poem 58 (*Caeli, Lesbia nostra, Lesbia illa*). Descriptive phrases are often memorable: Hebe at 68.116 is “the goddess of being young”; the woman in Poem 104, *mihiquae carior est oculis*, is “More central to me than my brain stem.” In Williams’ first version of Poem 51, the third stanza is impressively evocative.

Most of Williams’ poems are in free verse, but not in the sadly prevalent sense of “having no feel for prosody whatsoever.” Williams has a terrific ear, both for poetic rhythm and for speech patterns, and her formal decisions are well-suited to Catullus’ manner. She uses rhyme sparingly but effectively, for example in her version of Poem 70 (*Nulli se dicit mulier mea nubere malle*): “She says she wouldn’t marry / Anyone but me / Even if God Almighty / Got down on one knee,” and in these lines from Poem 63 (*Attis*): “The sea tried to drown you in salt-eroded wrecks, / You gelded yourselves in disgust at grown-up sex.”

Williams draws on a varied metrical palette. Iambic pentameters sometimes have a comic effect—“You know he calls it ‘fucktuations’, right?” (Poem 32)—and sometimes tragic: “I come to claim you and to let you go” for *ave atque vale* at the end of Poem 101. Poem 63 (*Attis*) includes iambic pentameters, trochees (“Sawed into his scrotal sac with sharp serrated stone”), choriambes (“Now I am punished”), dactyls (“There in the name of the goddess her acolytes levitate”), and more. Williams deploys anapests (“The spider at work in the cornice,” Poem 68B) and even the odd glyconic (“No regret for my lost embrace?”, Poem 30). Williams’ ear for dialogue, speech rhythms, and turns of phrase can be seen in her versions of Poem 13 (*Cenabis bene . . .*): “bring . . . jokes that are actually funny,” Poem 56 (*O rem ridiculam . . .*): “Bloody hilarious / Cato yes no really look at me,” and her sixth version of Poem 85 (*Odi et amo*): “Don’t give me that counselling crap.”

Poem 85 (*Odi et amo*), with its finely-calibrated language, its *shibari*-worthy rigging of chiasmuses, and

its emotional power, has long challenged translators. English, unable to combine subject and verb in a single word, cannot match its economy. Of Williams’ six variations, the two that strike me as worthy entries into the canon of Anglophone versions are the one quoted above, and, even more so, this couplet: “Hate-love-hate-love you ask why the needle’s stuck / I can’t say but the pain is an endless track.” The record-player metaphor (still comprehensible to some!) gains an overlay of addiction metaphor (cf. 76, *Intra-Venus*, quoted above) from the double senses of “needle” and “track,” recalling Jane Wilson Joyce’s rendering, “needle-jab in the vein” (1995). Another one for the canon is Williams’ ingenious version of Poem 5; for the “counting” lines (*da mi basia mille . . .*), she uses Roman numerals, playing on the sonic qualities of “M” and the symbolic meanings of “x”: “let’s / . . . swell the / Abacus with kisses / M Cxxx / MM CxCx Cxxx / MMM . . .” Her translation of line 6, “The night will never be for more than sleeping,” brings out the full implications of Catullus’ *dormienda*.

Though not every poem here will work for every reader, Williams at her best is lyrical, funny, engaging, and insightful, and I recommend this book to anyone interested in poetry and in Catullus. It is probably too freewheeling to be used in a Survey of Ancient Poetry class, but it could be well-suited to a course in reception/verse translation/adaptation. Perhaps it will attract a new audience to Catullus from the *shibari* community. The volume is well-produced and I spotted only one misprint, but it’s a bad one: in the Introduction, the Hebrew characters of the word *emet* (truth) appear in backwards order (p. 7).

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