

ALIVE IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE

Rosanna Bruno and Anne Carson, The Trojan Women, Bloodaxe, £10.99, ISBN 9781780375908

Isobel Williams, Catullus: Shibari Carmina, Carcanet, £12.99, ISBN 9781800170742

Chrissy Williams on two visual approaches to classical texts

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Rosanna Bruno has made a comic, using text by Anne Carson, of Euripides' 415 BCE play *The Trojan Women*. Plays live in performance rather than on the page, so the transition into a more visual medium (as compared to an unillustrated text) feels apt, especially since a comic does not have the same theatrical constraints of space, time or money. The main limitations here are the imaginative and artistic capabilities of its creators, something we are quickly assured to have faith in.

Delightful, unexpected and provocative interpretations abound, most strikingly in Carson's descriptions of the key characters: Poseidon is 'A LARGE VOLUME OF WATER, MEASURING 600 CLEAR CUBIC FEET'; Athene is 'A BIG PAIR OF OVERALLS, CARRYING AN OWL MASK'; Hekabe (King Priam's wife) is 'AN ANCIENT EMACIATED SLED DOG'; Andromache is 'A POPLAR TREE'; and her son who

(spoilers) will be thrown to his death is a tiny sapling or twig.

As with most comics, the option to conjure up mental images from text alone is denied to the reader. Instead, we are gifted the more direct and immediate effect of seeing them through the artist's eyes, just as we might in film, fine art or photography. And comics' great ability to exploit action and drama using unusual imagery, one frozen moment at a time, serves to make key scenes even more unexpected and affecting. Athene and Poseidon's proposed destruction of Greek ships at sea, for example, is even more incomprehensibly cruel here, the scale and inhumanity of god-like powers recalibrated, where Athene is a disembodied pair of overalls lobbing thunderbolts into a curling sea, and the corpses of men and women are merely stick figures.

The register of the text overall is less epic and more gossip, in a way that invites affinity, like a friend leaning over the coffee table to say *Let me tell you about Ancient Troy...* (At one point, Cassandra literally pulls up an armchair: 'CROSSING HER LEGS AS FOR A FIRESIDE CHAT.')

It doesn't feel like irreverence so much as a desire to erase the boundaries between our time and antiquity that might be carried in by some more formal or scholarly tone.

That less-than-onerous air is echoed and built on by the artwork. Troy is characterised in the prologue text as a luxurious, old, damp hotel that 'KILLS AND EATS NO MORE'. The accompanying artwork shows us a ruined 'Hotel Troy': a hodge-podge Wes Anderson nightmare with broken and boarded-up windows, and sickly animals staring out at us grimly. The hotel itself is surrounded by the Poseidon tidal wave however (is it being swallowed or revealed as though in a dream, or both? We can decide...) – and we find ourselves reading the images as well as the words, having to work as translators and interpreters of the images ourselves.

The artwork is in black and white – linework at its cleanest – inviting focused attention on the art itself. It also allows for some powerfully effective moments where the palette is reversed out to white on black, enhancing the misery and horror of some of (literally) the play's darkest scenes.

As you will have gathered, the text is not a literal translation, although it is faithful to the story. There is even a little modern poetry thrown in at the start for reference, when Poseidon asks:

YOU KNOW THAT POEM OF FREDERICK SEIDEL
WHERE JAMES BALDWIN IS A LEOPARD?

In the referenced poem, a leopard attacks its trainer, whom it loves, over and over: 'Start with the trainer who keeps you alive / in another language' ('James Baldwin in Paris', Frederick Seidel). Some might view *The Trojan Women's* transposition into comics as an attack of sorts but, if it is one at all, it is done with love. The Seidel poem is about encroaching oppression, and what lives outside of language. This violence, both literal and linguistic, is very much echoed in *The Trojan Women*, a play that is at its heart about the violence done to women. Fitting then that this violence has been reimagined by women, and depicted in such unusual, compelling and nuanced ways.

It is interesting to consider Isobel Williams' *Catullus: Shibari Carmina* in this light, as she contextualises Catullus against the art of Japanese rope bondage (shibari). Artworks showing, mostly, figures in bondage poses intersperse the poems throughout. These were observed and drawn by Williams at a fetish club where shibari is performed to an audience with the full consent 'of all parties', including that of the spectators who witness it. In reading the book, the reader must also consent to view these images, giving us a sense of complicity that we often take for granted when reading poems. The poet's interest is less focused on fetish however, and more on constraint:

Whatever diminishes constraint, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains the shackle the spirit.

This quotation, by Stravinsky, appears in the 'Strands' section at the end of the book, where Williams presents a selection of sources by other poets and creators whose quotes are or can be read as pertaining to constraint. The difference drawn between nourishing constraint and restrictive shackles is an interesting one (reminiscent to me of Lars von Trier and Jørgen Leth's film *Five Obstructions* (2003): 'The room with no limits is an empty room...'). The sense overall is that the creative constraint imposed by the desire to incorporate shibari adds focus and cohesion to these Catullus poems, while a need to stick too literally

or closely to the original text itself would be an unwieldy, or simply impractical, shackle.

As with Carson's Euripides, these texts are explicitly versions rather than translations, choosing contemporary vernacular over archaic resonance. Williams' words, as she tells us, 'take an elliptical orbit around the Latin':

So I'll tell you.

You've picked up some toxic tramp and you're ashamed.

Don't pretend you're filling in time with hand-jobs.

This bedroom's the crime scene –

Reeking of Lynx and sex-club lubricant.

(Poem 6)

The fetish club is ever present. The artwork brings us back to its activities every few pages, reminding us that, even as readers, we are engaged in a participatory act. Williams tells us 'shibari is a form of translation', and the reader here is obliged to consider how translation acts not just on language but also on experience, and how we feel about the resulting sense of intimacy.

The shorter poems are the more explosive and impactful of these pieces. I find myself slightly resistant to the Covid references, where some of the Catullus versions have been bent into the shape of lockdowns and shielding. Although they feel relevant as part of the creative restraint of writing and editing any poems in these times, they seem to me less fully integrated into the concept of the book as a whole. Although perhaps I am just Covid-weary and, like Catullus himself, being too judgemental, and should instead welcome them as a further constraint in the spirit of Stravinsky.

The collection is bookended with intriguing and thought-provoking prose sections which give us more context as to the aims, influences and thoughts that went into creating these versions: the opening gives us a quirky potted history of Catullus' life and literary appearances through the ages; the ending gives us various additional sections, including 'Strands' (as mentioned above), a section on the scholarly background of the translation process, and other notes. These contexts

nourish our understanding of the project as a whole, reminding us of the corrupt nature of the surviving Catullus texts all translators work from in the first place, and underscoring what an ephemeral snapshot each translation really is. Williams talks about scholars' 'unachievable quest for authenticity', and what we are given instead, richly, is the authenticity of the translator's intent, and the liberty in which to enjoy its playfulness.

Each of these books is a compelling and impressive project which translates for us not only the words of these ancient texts, but recontextualises them on the page, drawing out new layers of meaning and allowing us to experience them in new and novel ways.

Chrissy Williams' most recent collection is *Low* (Bloodaxe, 2021).