

Book Review: Switch: The Complete Catullus

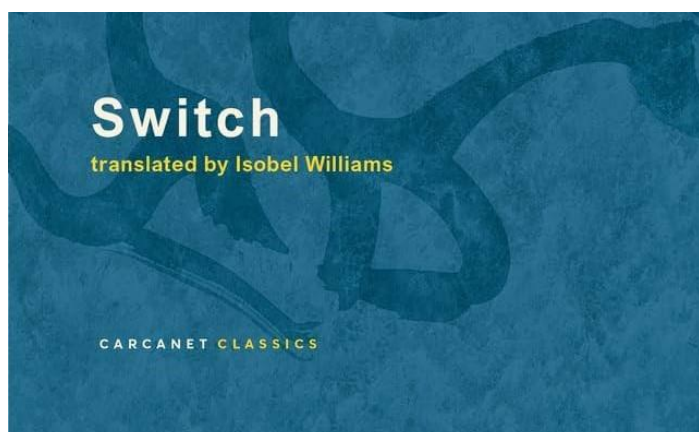
// Isobel Williams

By

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It is not often that I am reviewing something I have reviewed a part of before. In this case I should mention that *Switch* builds on Williams's previous selected translation of Catullus's poems – a review of which you should read [here](#) so I don't have to repeat my view of Williams's considerable poetic skill – and explores many of the same ideas. In this translation of the complete works of Catullus, it is impossible not to feel Williams's enjoyment of the poems.

This is translation not as some technical exercise or mechanical process by which words are moved from one language to another, but as a creative, interpretative act that seeks to carry over Catullus's brio and, honestly slightly annoying, sense of poetic fun.

Even before you get to the poems proper, this sense of a playful, yet deeply learned, approach can be seen by the brilliant "Box and Cocks" diagram and explanation of Catullus's sexual relationships and attractions. Now, I hesitate to be overly absolute but I am almost certain that this is the only translation of Catullus to attempt such a thing. Attempt is the only word that accurately describes the process, as trying to pin down Catullus's sex life is like trying to nail a blancmange to the ceiling – entertaining but prone to slippage.

I say 'poems proper' as the first poem is neatly positioned before the introduction and so is able to play its role as an opener in which the poet, with faux self-deprecation, claims that this is just a little book that you can read or not. "Whatever." It also, in playing with tropes about Latin teaching in the UK, gives a glimmer of the approach to translation that drives this novel rendering of Catullus's work.

In writing this review I went back over other English translations and was surprised at how it both reminds me of other translations – such as Brandon Brown’s rather irreverent seeming version – and resists any easy categorisation.

It is not a translation driven by a single poetic idea – such as the Zukofskys’ slightly absurd homophonic rendering – nor is it just another translation that plods along keeping close to the Latin. Instead, it plays with the poems and shifts focus as appropriate. Sometimes giving footnoted contextual information. Sometimes relying on the reader’s knowledge to subvert expectations.

This feeling of direct engagement with the reader also extends to how Williams is open about her translational style with a comprehensive introduction and other para-textual elements. Such things are common in translations. What is less so is the addition of original poetry. *The Lager Catullus* is inspired by a misreading of the book’s working title: *The Larger Catullus*. As a poem it sums up Catullus yet maintains a conversational voice and striking contemporary feel.

Now, I could go on to discuss the skilful paring of text and images, the many exquisite turns of phrase, or the resonance of the title, but I fear that would go against the ideals that underpin Catullus’s neoteric poetic drive for brevity and excellence.

So, if you want to read something to see the words Catullus shaped into verse – and aren’t willing to slog through the Latin – this is not the book for you. If, however, you want to get a sense of what it would have been like for a Roman to first read Catullus’s work, buy a copy of this, sit down with it, pour yourself a drink, and revel in the gossipy, jealous, ramblings of a great poet playing with himself.

Words by Ed Bedford

