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Riggers and Bunnies

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Isobel Williams, *Switch: The Complete Catullus* (Carcanet, 2023) £16.99

How is translating Latin poetry like sado-masochism? At one pole, the dom translator works their will upon the corpus of the poet, bending and binding a squirming original to a single persona and a single, tight cluster of themes; the dom translator, that is, strips bare the object of their ministrations to the signal sense, the defining desire, that, so the dom thinks (and so the good dom perceives), *is* the very essence – even if only partially spoken – of the original. At the opposite pole, the sub translator – moved by a desire to know their poet ever more fully – ever performs their own insufficiency to the body of work that has captured, mastered, and eluded them, ever performatively abject before the polymorphous (polymorphological?) power of their poet – though abjection itself can be a goad to ever more desperate, ever more inventive efforts to draw forth – and make legible – the power of their master. But as in life, so in translation: these poles of dom and sub – of top and bottom, of rigger and bunny – are, as they complete themselves, mutually implicative and mutually live: if the rigger gives new form to the bunny, it is the bunny's allure and shape-shifting matter that commands the rigger. Power recalibrates and recirculates; ritual becomes play. Both rigger and bunny are revealed, even as they mutually remake each other. The ideal translator is, from the get-go, a switch, able to inhabit both roles: at once revealing the beloved by subjecting their words to discipline, to the gags and ties of the translator's subjectivity and the translator's language, even as that same translator, now in the thrall of their subject – of the subject that asks and challenges to be revealed – is provoked to find new forms and voices, new constraints and freedoms within which his subject – the corpus of the poet – might be disclosed and freed.[1]

Isobel Williams, in her translations of Catullus, is a superb switch: her versions – especially of the love poems to Lesbia, to Juventius and to sundry others, as well as of the poems of abuse, also directed at Lesbia, Juventius and sundry others – course with a libidinal energy, a lexical inventiveness, a gaming allusiveness, an all-in delight in obscenity and a high and low hilarity; this is the dirtiest and funniest version of Catullus that I know. Williams has entitled her translation of the complete Catullus 'Switch', because – on her account – Catullus is himself a switch, who 'splits into an anxious bitchy dominant with the boys, a howling submissive with his nemesis, the older woman he calls Lesbia'.[2] Williams heightens this interpretation of Catullus by often making use – 'as context' – of shibari, a form of Japanese rope bondage, in which the rigger binds the bunny in increasingly elaborate – and highly aestheticized – ties and increasingly constrained positions. Shibari begins with floor-work and can end with the bunny tightly bound and suspended on high. In her introductory remarks to *Switch*, Williams writes that she comes to shibari 'as an outsider', a spectator of what has been 'created for an audience'; she is not herself 'Miss Whiplash', but rather a close observer of a highly theatrical scene (and throughout *Switch*, Williams interweaves her own highly kinetic drawings of various scenes of shibari).

Shibari as context for a Roman poet of the mid-first century BC might seem a wilful claim – a po-mo hoist too far – but one of the pleasures of *Switch* is that the disjunctive succeeds so well. In using shibari as a ground, Williams brings strongly to the fore the turns of

consciousness of a narrator who is a switch not only in his erotic objects and practices, but also in his relation to the mores of Roman aristocratic masculinity and his own exuberantly undisciplined sexuality, as well as in relation to the provincial, familial Verona of his youth and the sexy, fame-making, and corrupt Rome of his present. Further, Catullus's poems are themselves marked by sudden swerves of imagination and of language, from comic-book accounts of sexual super-powers ('I'll fuck all 200 of you bitches', poem 57) to images of extraordinary pathos and delicacy – and self-mockery as well ('my love lies fallen like a flower at field's edge, nicked by a passing plough,' poem 11, which alludes to Sappho), from showy translations of the high-brow Hellenistic poet Callimachus to dialectical slang (*salaputium* in poem 53, Veronese argot for, perhaps, 'jumped-up little prick' – surely a word worth reviving). Or, differently, Catullus's collection of poems teases with the promise of a unified narrative – a near-novel even – of a talented young man from the provinces who comes to Rome, falls passionately, disorientingly in love with a woman of dazzling independence and likely little patience for her puppy lover, who plunges into ever deeper depths of abandonment and disillusion, then – at age thirty or so – disappears, like a Roman Rimbaud (such is the tale some critics have hallucinated). Yet the collection also refuses to tell wholly or in chronological order the episodes of that story, for all its obsessive returns to the damage done; rather, it forks and switches – from narrative to lyric and back again – and sometimes baffles (what's a poem about a talking boat have to do with anything at all?), never fulfilling its readers' desires for the whole, beginning-middle-end story that it itself provokes – and certainly never giving them the satisfaction of an ending. Rather, the reader is left to read, and re-read, and re-order – and to recirculate desire, just like a good little switch. Williams's use of the figure of the switch presents a generative interpretation of the persona named 'Catullus', while her use of shibari as context usefully defamiliarizes poems that have had the strange and atrocious fate of serving as a learner's text for intermediate Latin students, and revivifies the disjunctive experience of reading the book of poems that also goes under the name of 'Catullus'.

The most condensed articulation of the switchy Catullus is also perhaps his most famous and most translated poem, which clocks in at two lines (poem 85):

Odi et amo, quare id faciam fortasse requiris?
    nescio, sed fieri sentio et excrucior.

which Ezra Pound translates:

I hate and love. Why? You may ask but
It beats me. I feel it done to me, and ache.

which Frank Bidart translates:

I hate and – love. The sleepless body hammering a nail nails
itself, hanging crucified.

and which Tiffany Atkinson translates:

I hate / I love / I
cannot grow apart
the black/red bloom
of one blood root that

forks and burns
/and burns

Each of these versions compels, each presents an overthrow of reason and the subsequent primacy of the body, its sensations and its excruciations. Bidart's coiling, claustrophobic second sentence figures a single body that is at once subject and object, that is its own sadist and masochist. Atkinson's 'blood root' and 'black/red bloom' evoke a single generative source of opposites that are inseparable. Each version expresses something of the entanglement of primary emotion, of love drives and death drives, the red and the black: 'I / cannot grow apart' well captures the constitutive rupture. In their focus upon a single involuted 'I', both of these versions – of Bidart and Atkinson – delete Catullus's second-person interlocutor, the 'you' who asks 'why' (or 'how,' which the Latin also permits, but which translators rarely adopt). The loss of that speaker – of the 'you' to whom the 'I' of the poem responds with unknowing, with the testimony of bodily pain – perhaps sacrifices another and prior aspect of the psychological and linguistic drama of the distich: the poet, as he projects his reader-interlocutor and as he utters 'I', calls into existence subjectivity itself; in the play of active and passive – in the division between the first line (all active verbs) and the second (all passive states) – the subject emerges, and at its very origin (at the moment that it is called into language by the presence of a 'you'), that subject is divided.

Williams, in a bravura display, translates the two lines of poem 85 seven times; here are the first and last of her versions:

Hate I/hating I and love I/loving I. By what thing it do I/doing
I perhaps enquire you/enquiring you
Not know I/not knowing I but to happen/to be happening feel I/
feeling I and tortured I/tortured I am being

…

Stuck in a hate-love trap.
'How does it make you feel?'
Don't give me that counselling crap.
Wheels have spikes. Bones snap.

Williams's first version is a very funny (especially for Latin teachers) specimen of what might well be found in the notebook of an annoyingly diligent Latin student, dutifully attentive to the possibilities of the simple and progressive present tense and to conjugation endings – and then the final '*tortured I am being*' catches hold, out of the turns and switches of linguistic excess; out of the compulsive jottings of the Latin student, out of hyperglossia, the self-divided Catullan subject is born. And in Williams's final version of poem 85, that riven subject is beyond the reach of the usual therapeutic and linguistic pieties; it is the body that testifies, itself called into being not by the therapist, but by the poet's (extraordinarily controlled) play of I and you.

One of Catullus's most pleasurable poems (and a personal favourite) is an account, in the form of a letter, of a day that has been gorgeously wasted with his poet-friend L. Licinius Calvus: the two drink, joke and make lyric poetry; in the night that follows, Catullus – unable to sleep for the erotic charge of it all – recalls the day and shapes that memory into a poem, which he sends to Calvus and which we now read (*hoc, iucunde, tibi poema feci*); the poem

concludes with an anxious threat: let Calvus accept Catullus's poem and Catullus's love, lest the goddess Nemesis – aka, Payback – take vengeance. Catullus's love for Calvus and his love for poetry intertwine and are, finally, the same passion and the same devotion. In Williams's version, that binding of love and poetry takes a rougher form:

Yesterday we filled
A void, Licinius…
Coils to lines on skin
Coining words for torso
Torment torque torsion
Flipped the Master switch
Who'll be Torquemada?
Purple and white hide
Jute-burned scored
Red at the denouement
Now alone in the night
Too full of you to eat
No sleep to smother fires
Squirming churning the covers
Spreadeagled aching for daylight
Muscles sore nerves
Numb from the tourniquet
I will open out the book of you
Make you soar with eagles over the edge
So be meek my love and take the hurt
Which Nemesis spears through me.
She's ruthless. Don't talk back.

Where Catullus writes of two poets at play, where one poet challenges the other to 'top' his lines (*scribens versiculos uterque nostrum* / *ludebat numero modo hoc modo illoc / reddens mutua…*), Williams writes of shibari – though the turns of rope and the turns of verse are also mutually spun. Lines on a writing tablet become lines on the flesh, even as new words for – and new uses of – the body emerge in the thwacks of assonantal play: 'torso… tor… tor… tor… Torquemada'. Catullus's deictic proclamation that 'This poem, charming man, I made for you' becomes, in Williams's penultimate stanza, a climactic instance of the juncture of shibari and poetry: as the poet makes a book of the beloved, so the rigger hoists his extravagantly, artfully bound bunny so that he might 'soar… over the edge'. Williams's image, suggestive of the poetic immortality that ancient poets so often promised, playfully and otherwise, perhaps flies even past its original.

In Williams's version of poem 50, the play of the two poets 'filled a void', which translates Catullus's *die… otiosi*, 'on a leisured day'. *Otium*, which can be translated as 'leisure' – or 'idleness', or 'repose', or 'peace', or even as 'freedom' – was most often negatively charged in classical Latin: *otium* was 'a void' that was to be avoided, to follow Williams's clever lead. The opposite of *otium* is *negotium*, which is not-*otium*, which is 'business' – or the normative undertakings of aristocratic Roman men. In poem 50, Catullus's 'leisured day' – or his 'day of freedom' – with Calvus is an emblem and inhabitation of poetic space itself, where the 'Master switch' is 'flipped', such that rigger and bunny, Torquemada and the torso he torques, are indistinguishable. *Otium* here conduces to a circulating, dynamic, generative reciprocity, of which the poem we read is product and evidence; and Williams's use of

shibari – and a mutuality of switches – as context again returns us to and opens up the senses of Catullus's poem. In the eruptive anxiety of the final stanza (which might be translated more literally as 'Don't be reckless, don't reject my prayers, lest Pay-back take hold of you; she is a harsh goddess; don't anger her'), the pall of *negotium* – of normative reciprocity, of business, of no-play, no-pleasure, no-poetry – falls over the scene, and all the bunnies drop from their rigs: should Calvus fail to accept Catullus's poem, should Calvus grow fearful of the freedoms promised, then all the usual instrumental reciprocities will reassert themselves – and riggers and bunnies return to being merely patrons and clients, bankers and debtors, the familiar sadists and masochists of the banalities of social practice.

Within his poetry-book, Catullus follows the poem to Calvus with a translation of Sappho's *phainetai moi* (Sappho 31, which begins, 'He seems to me equal to gods that man / whoever he is who opposite you / sits and listens close / to your sweet speaking …' – Anne Carson's translation). Williams offers two translations of Catullus's translation of Sappho; here's the raunchier one:

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
Making you laugh and my receptors go haywire
because one look at you Mistress and
I can't even form a polite request
For *semenawa*
My tongue dries cold blue tied to bamboo
Slung body hurts in tight jute knots
Rope burns and bare skin flinches from hot wax drips
Techno rattles my brain
Stinging eyes
Submit to the blindfold and and
Wanking, Orlando. It's unproductive.
Wanking makes you fretful and distracted.
Legendary kings and shiny cities,
Lost to wanking.

Williams's insolent and infantile (in a good way) opening doggerel (god/dog, oy!) captures Catullus's characteristic phallic aggression – though an aggression that is, I think, much more present elsewhere in his poetry. In Sappho, the 'he' who sits opposite the beloved is a cipher, reduced in the poem's second line to an indefinite pronoun – 'he… whoever'; a necessary point in the erotic triangle, but more a hypothesis than a person. In Catullus's version, 'that man' is twice invoked in the opening two lines (by the repeated definite pronoun *ille*), where he is not only equal to the gods (as in Sappho), but 'surpasses the gods' (*superare divos)*. Williams's version responds to Catullus's inflation of the 'he' into a he-man who is carnally present, in all his performative, self-regarding cis-ness. Once 'that man' is more substantial than an indefinite pronoun, he noses his way all the more – from version to version – into the poem, which then becomes more easily read as dramatizing the speaker's jealousy or erotic panic. That interpretative path makes Sappho's poem more legible within the familiar mechanics and by-ways of sexuality, though also less queer in its evocation of bodies and pleasures (the before and after – fingers crossed – of sexuality). In Sappho's poem, the fragmentation of the body provoked by the sight of the laughing beloved brings the

speaker near to death, but to a *morte* that is *petite* (Sappho's τεθνάκην ὀλίγω ᾽πιεύης is a perfect cognate for the 'little death') and through which the speaker then reconstitutes herself: 'I seem to me…' is the last complete line of the poem, standing in transformative contrast to the poem's opening 'He seems to me….' The subject declares herself as she remakes herself in an ever ongoing dialectic of disintegration and identity; and the 'he' is definitively punted from the poem (it is also only here, in the fourth stanza, that the speaker of Sappho's poem genders herself).

Sappho needs no queering; she has always already gotten there first; she is the unwritten prolegomena to Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (though she has, of course, been straightened by generations of mostly male scholars and critics). In Williams's version of Catullus's Sappho, it is *semenawa* – the 'torturous rope' of shibari – that induces the speaker's conjoint breakdown and heightened consciousness of the body and its senses. The ropes and ties of rough sensual play effect what vision and desire alone induce in Sappho. Fair enough, especially for those of us without Sappho's exquisitely attuned continuum of sensorium and consciousness. But it is, for this reader, Williams's final stanza that recuperates the queerness of Catullus, if not of Sappho. That last stanza is Catullus's own addendum, corresponding to nothing in Sappho. And as in the preceding poem to Calvus, it is *otium* – its pleasures, its wastage, its 'wanking', in Williams's translation – that abruptly threatens: *otium* delights Catullus too much, it has destroyed kings and their empires; spend your life translating Sappho and you might bring all Rome down upon your head. The social super-ego erupts, as it can do (it is as if Catullus, for the first time in his life, has had a 'Roman' thought), but the exquisite preceding results of Catullus's *otium* might also call to question the busyness of kings (who are, after all, more likely to be brought down by their own imperial machinations of power; would that they would take a break). The queerness of Catullus's poem – his tribute to Sappho? – resides in its oppositional distance from the socially normative and dominant, even as it also implicates the body and its pleasures within that counter-position.

Williams's version of the final stanza also rather brilliantly replaces Catullus's self-invocation with an invocation of 'Orlando'. The Orlando of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, carving his love lyrics into the trees of the Forest of Arden, where he is tutored in love by the gender-deviant Rosalind-Ganymede? Or perhaps Virginia Woolf's Orlando, transgressing the norms of gender for some three hundred years, culminating in the 'wild goose' of the novel? Either candidate – or both – acknowledges and extends the lines of Sappho's ongoing queer reception – and the pleasures of *otium* and of wasted time – from Catullus to Shakespeare to Woolf to Williams's own volume.

'To deal with my responses I make them public / in a disciplined explosion' is Williams's translation of the last lines of Catullus 6, and that seems just right as a description of Catullus's poetic practice, especially in his shorter poems (the 'polymetrics', 1–60, and the elegies and epigrams, 69–116). Catullus's responses to the desire for a love that might elude all forms of calculation and to the subsequent desolation of that desire, as well as to the thrills and depravities of cosmopolitan Rome, to the pure venalities of Roman politics, to his own eroticism, to death and the fear of death, are combustible for their unashamed extravagance, for their deletion of any middle ground, for their rage, for their juvenile and just obscenity. It is a lacuna, if perhaps not a surprise, that Catullus goes unmentioned in Volumes 2 and 3 of Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, as his relation to self conforms neither to an ethic of self-mastery nor of care of the self, as articulated in Pliny or Seneca – the *rumores senum severiorum*.[3] Mastery is, rather, in the poems themselves, which are – for all their roiling emotion – immaculately controlled in their rhythms, in their sound-play, in their lexical

density, and in their learned allusions to Hellenistic and earlier poetry. The translations of Williams, in their extraordinary verbal and comic inventiveness, re-energize and make new many of Catullus's most familiar poems, as well as a few that hadn't much caught this reader's attention. The longer poems (61–68) situated in Roman ritual, in Hellenistic poetics, in mythography and in a daunting pile-up of epic allusion, remain resistant, I think, to translation, less fully revealed by Williams's comic gifts or by the context of shibari. But Isobel Williams has given us many terrific versions of a very great, very eruptive, very profane and very necessary poet.

1. Roz Kaveney, in the Afterword to her fine book of Catullus translations (*Catullus*, Sad Press, Bristol, 2018), writes that it was her work on Catullus and 'traditional verse forms' that marked her 'return to poetry after thirty-five years of silence' (p. 153).
2. Williams first published a translation of Catullus's shorter poems – nos. 1–60, the 'polymetrics' – in *Catullus: Shibari Carmina* (Carcanet, 2021).
3. This is an argument that is especially well advanced by P. A. Miller in 'Catullan Consciousness, the "Care of the Self", and the Force of the Negative in History', in *Rethinking Sexuality: Foucault and Classical Antiquity*, ed. D.H.J. Larmour, P.A. Miller and C. Platter, 171–203. Princeton, 1998.

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