**Episode 94 Isobel Williams**

[00:00:00] **Aven:** Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast

where the more we know

**Mark:** the more we want to find out

**Aven:** tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven

 **Mark:** and I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're going to be talking about a new translation of Catullus and the interview with the author, Isobel Williams.

**Mark:** Isabelle Williams lives in London. She was educated at Woking girls, Grammar School and Somerville college, Oxford. She blogs about drawing, and this includes drawing Japanese rope bondage, also called Shibari.

She has held solo exhibitions in London and Oslo, written articles for publications ranging from *The Amorist* to *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law*, and given talks about her work at conferences in the UK and abroad. She wrote and illustrated *The Supreme Court: A Guide for Bears* in 2017, in which the souvenir Teddy Bears on sale [00:01:00] in the UK Supreme court show you around their home.

**Aven:** Today, we're going to be talking to her about her newest publication, a translation of Catullus called *Catullus: Shibari Carmina*, which is a translation of a selection of Catullus' poems illustrated with line drawings from her time drawing rope bondage, Shibari, and with the translations heavily influenced by that domain.

It's available from Carcanet Press now. And I heartily recommend it as you will be able to tell very easily from our conversation in which I am rather overly enthusiastic. Before we start, one short content note. As is not surprising for discussion of Catullus and in particular, this translation of Catullus, there is some content I want to notify you of ahead of time. There will be discussion, though not explicit, of fetish and in particular of bondage, there's a brief mention of sexual violence and there is discussion of enslavement and the use of slavery as a [00:02:00] metaphor, both within the fetish community and within the poetry.

So with those notes, let us turn to the conversation with Isobel.

 So hi, Isobel! Thank you so much for joining us.

**Isobel:** Hello, thank you too!

**Mark:** Welcome! So I think we should start off with the question that we ask all our guests on the show about how there have been surprising connections between different aspects of your life and your interests and how they converged in perhaps a surprising way.

**Isobel:** Well, just to focus on the book because I'm not sure if I'm ready in COVID time, which has been extraordinarily static, to think back on wonderful external surprises without sort of bursting into tears. But the book under discussion, is not the first time I've made this sort of unholy sandwich between two different elements.

And I'm thinking about a book I illustrated and wrote in 2017, and it's called 'The Supreme [00:03:00] Court: A guide for bears'. It's about the UK Supreme Court. And it is exactly what it says, it's a guide for bears because the Supreme Court sells teddy bears when it's open, which it isn't at the moment. I mean, it's functioning, but it's not letting members of the public in.

And the teddy bears are a very popular item on sale downstairs. And as I carried on, I had a strange and bizarre hobby, which nobody prevented me from doing, partly because I got the Court's permission to do so, of sitting in the public seats and drawing whatever I saw and just blogging about it.

The bears look at you with the kind of cold, not unfriendly, but with a very sort of-- can I say judgmental?-- eye, maybe. And I began to look at the Court through their point of view, which is why this book happened. And as I say, the unholy sandwich did sort of make sense because I used the book to answer questions that I had been asked by all sorts of people, both in [00:04:00] the court and, you know, friends and acquaintances outside as to what happened there. And people would say, 'well, what sort of mood were the jury in today?' And the answer is 'there is no jury'. So those sorts of questions just developed into the book and a much bigger question I've been asking myself ever since I was at school is 'how on earth can I approach Catullus?', who is this desperately attractive, very appealing poet. But how can I, and how dare I try to not just approach, but translate him? And when I say 'translate', I'm going to use it as a sort of shorthand with two meanings. One is translate in a literal way. Not quite word for word, but close. But the other is translate or interpret, render in a free way.

In other words, writing versions. And having spent some, I'm embarrassed to say, decades trying to work out how this [00:05:00] could happen, I started through a hobby of mine to find a way. I found a key. And it's a key that works for me. And maybe it wouldn't work for other people. Are you aware of the series of children's books called 'That's Not My'?

**Aven:** Oh yes! 'That's not my pirate! His hat is too'-- or whatever. Yeah, we used to have a bunch of those for our kids.

**Isobel:** Yeah, exactly! And I kept thinking everyone who renders Catullus in some way seems to have their own very clear idea of who he is and what he's about. And I kept thinking of these 'That's Not My' books-- so 'that's not my Catullus, he's too acerbic, he's too nasty, he's too whatever'. And I found my Catullus in the fetish world, believe it or not, because I like to do life drawing when the world is open. That means I go to life class once a week and you draw a naked model. It's very [00:06:00] contemplative. It's all very internal, both when you're doing it-- and I have briefly a few years ago done a little bit of life modeling myself, and that is a hugely contemplative process as well. So you've got the room of silence, but you know, if you could hear all the thought going on, it would be quite extraordinary.

Anyway, people knew that I was up for a drawing challenge and someone I met at life class said, 'look, there's this club. They do Japanese rope bondage'. I said, 'what's that?' He said, 'Oh never mind, but they might let you draw there.' So I got in touch with them and I walked in from this sort of-- it looked rather unprepossessing, it's a converted old Victorian pub. I was approaching it in the evening in the dead of winter and it looked like a very forbidding promontory. There weren't quite vultures or crows circling overhead, but that was a sort of impression it gave. All blacked out, it obviously been condemned [00:07:00] about six months ago.

Anyway, I walked in with some trepidation and it was just like a very welcoming, warm, well lit, friendly club. I was treated like royalty. I was shown to a lovely seat. I had lots of space, a little table to put all my art gear on because, being a newbie, I had brought far too much stuff with me. And I keep saying the sort of atmosphere there was not dissimilar to what I have found in the Kensington Gardener's Club.

You know, you get friendliness, it's obviously a special interest. And sometimes people take that interest to extremes. But I thought, 'yeah, fine. Let's just get on with it'. And eventually people started tying each other up, but it's in a performance. So what I see is designed for other people to see, it's rehearsed, it's practiced and it's a bit like Olympic ice skating, where you get points for, you know, technical excellence.

There isn't actually [00:08:00] somebody sort of holding up cards saying 9.6 or something, but you get the feeling because obviously a large part of the audience-- and it's a small venue, it's a converted part just in the main saloon bar of the pub-- but a lot of the audience are also practitioners themselves and maybe some of them are going to perform in the same evening.

So all the really expert eyes are upon them. And luckily, they're all looking at what's happening on the tiny stage. No one was looking at me. I can just get on and draw whatever I want to draw. And I got my things to dip in ink and it can be-- do you know, I love drawing with bendy coffee stirrers you can get from coffee shops because they're nice and flexible.

They travel with you and you can use the broad bit or the thin side bit, and the first time I was there, someone was very kind. He sort of-- I was going to say 'showed me the ropes'-- I'm sorry, that's awful, I'm trying to avoid all that kind of stuff--

**Aven:** No, puns! All the puns!

**Isobel:** He even cut off from one of his lengths of bondage rope, he cut off [00:09:00] about seven or eight inches of rope for me draw with. And I've got old feathers and quill pens, and I've even-- this is a big secret-- I've even got pens, actual pens. Oh, bamboo pens as well, they're lovely, they're sort of sharpened sticks of bamboo. So I had all my gear and I could just sit there happily going 'sketch sketch sketch, draw draw draw'.

And to be honest, the first time you see something new, for me, you do the best drawings. And to be honest, I don't think-- that was about 10 years ago, I'm not sure I've ever topped that because I'm sitting there in a sense of absolute wonder. And there was one of the girls who was a very experienced bottom, bunny, model, that is the person who is tied. She teaches other bottoms, bunnies or models, and she was giving a little talk and she said, 'Now, you've got to think about your rigger'. And I thought 'what? What do you mean, is the rigor-- this is a rigorous pursuit? No, and I [00:10:00] thought, 'well, it's not that'. And I thought, 'rigor mortis?'. No, it's obviously not that.

And then I realized she was talking about your top or the dominant, or the person who ties you. He's called or she's called the rigger. So I thought, 'right, there's a new language here to absorb, something to learn'. So it was about language as well, right from the beginning. And it wasn't long before I began to feel that I could have seen maybe Catullus and his friends out of the corner of my eye, in that place. Not necessarily a whole fully fashioned Catullus, but aspects of the man.

And of course, a big part of this whole thing is dominance and submission. And that runs right through Catullus' poetry because he is-- I mean, my thesis is that he's a dominant with the boys like Juventius , and he is a howling submissive with [00:11:00] Lesbia, his nemesis, the woman he cannot dominate.

In fact, he calls Lesbia sometimes in his poetry, he calls her 'domina' and that is a word that a slave would use for his master or mistress. And of course having said the word slave, another problem that is solved straight away, as well as the whole dominant/submissive thing-- actually, before I forget, the word in bondage is-- there's a wonderful bondage performer called Gorgone. And when I first met her she must've been, I don't know, 19. She was an incredibly together, already-there person. She was starting out as a brilliant bottom. She's now a brilliant top and a wonderful teacher, and she writes about bondage as well. She also writes lovely poetry and she wrote that being a top is about transformation and humility and being a bottom is about transformation and power. [00:12:00] That is actually where the power lies under the relationship. It flickers between the two, you have this constant sort of flickering between the two of dominance and submission. That helps an awful lot with Catullus.

But I was just going on to talk about the whole subject of slavery, which some people-- obviously some translators, depending on what century they've been writing in, have found difficult to handle. Now, there is a wonderful book of versions by a poet called James Methven and it's called Precious Asses. It's a collection of Catullus poetry. And I gather he's carrying on, he's still translating Catullus and I can't wait for the next lot to be published. But when he comes to 'slave' there's a poem where Catullus is telling his boyfriend, 'what do you see in this man? He's got no slaves, no cashbox, he's broke! So what James Methvin says-- I'm getting ahead of myself-- in his translation is 'he's got no chat or wherewithal'. [00:13:00] Now, I think that's a brilliant way around it. Because 'he's got no chat' means he can't sort of captivate you with his personality as he's talking. And I think that's a good way around it, but of course my way round it is because the whole master/slave bondage-dominant vocabulary is used in the world of Japanese rope bondage, I can use the word 'slave' if I want to-- I have a feeling in my book, I actually don't think I use the word 'slave', but when it comes to that same poem, 'what do you see in this man? He's got no slaves or cashbox.', I can say 'he's no Master' with a capital M, he hasn't got it in him to be your dominant. So the words I use are 'he is no Master' that problem just magically disappears. So that was where this extraordinary sandwich occurred and gave me, if you like, permission. I was allowed, I permitted myself to take this as a context for Catullus [00:14:00] and his whole circle, because there's an awful lot of ancient Rome in fetish, and there's a lot of fetish in ancient Rome. Therefore, I also had a lot of metaphor and simile, vocabulary and so on. So it worked for me, might not work for anybody else, it worked for me.

**Aven:** Okay, that's all fascinating. I want to pick up on a number of different threads. Let me start back at the beginning. So you said since school, you've been thinking about Catullus, so some very basic questions. And to some extent, this is probably a Canada/UK thing, but so you did Latin in school, let's start with that.

**Isobel:** Yes, that's right. So I started in what we call the second form in those days which is a bit historic. So that's, I think the age of 12 to 13, something like that.

**Aven:** Right. I imagine when you did Catullus in school, you did the poems that everybody does of Catullus in school, which are not the ones that Fordyce doesn't include in his translation, or that get translated into Italian in some of the older translations.

**Isobel:** Or just left in Latin, that's [00:15:00] fine. The sparrow poems basically, and I honestly can't remember exactly what we did then, but certainly it was all very clean.

**Aven:** Yeah. So you start-- cause I think people's encounters with Catullus, depending on how you first encountered them, have a lot to do with that question of 'Whose Catullus is it?' or 'Whose Catullus is yours?', and then also develop over time because I too started-- you know, I did Latin in high school, which is actually quite unusual here, but I did do some. And right at the end of it we did read some Catullus but again, the ones in the textbook, they were the cleanest and simplest of them.

And then I went off and did Catullus in university with a professor who got so red in the face if anything, even the slightest indelicate occurred that like, I remember he was so insistent on the sparrow being only a sparrow that he spent the entire class on that poem talking about which species of sparrow it was. And that was all he wanted to talk about. And I didn't at the time-- I didn't know there was another reading, so we all just sat there really kind of [00:16:00] confused about why he was so talking over all of us and just like, talking only about-- because we didn't even realize there was another conversation to be had about that.

**Isobel:** That's really funny because underneath it, he was actually desperate to tell you about it without the other interpretation, otherwise he would've gone on about it so long--

**Aven:** Clearly for him, it was nothing but a filthy poem, but he was so desperate. And then it took me a while before-- so we didn't read any of the dirty poems there either or some of the slightly dirty poems, but not the really foul ones.

And then I did read those more and I mean, I did Latin poetry in grad school, that was my thing. And Catullus is one of my poets, so I've of course read it all. And then I turn around and when I introduce Catullus to my students who are not taking Latin, but are just in there, you know, taking Roman Civilization in their first year or whatever. I introduce all the dirty poems to them. Like, most of my students don't know that Catullus writes non-dirty poems, frankly. I mean, not quite true, but-- because I [00:17:00] use him as a vector for introducing stuff about sexuality and stuff about invective and politics and political life and masculinity and all those things.

So the different visions of who Catullus-- and then there's other people who come to Catullus from other poets, who maybe know him best for 64, or who are interested in the religious aspects and only really know 63. So, the little epic and the poem about Attis and Cybele, which I do want to come back to.

So I think-- not only is he a very multiple poet who has lots of different characters within his own works, but also the way you come to him, because when you talk about him as witty and as engaging and appealing-- and he is-- but part of that is because very often we're first shown only his engaging and appealing poems. That's how we meet him. Right?

 And then we're on his side, and then we are introduced to the other poems and some of his other personalities. And then the question is like, whether that undoes your love for him or whether it strengthens it or how it works and how you come to know [00:18:00] the whole poet.

None of that was a question just, it was sparked by my thoughts from what you said, because-- okay, so. You'd done it in school, but you didn't go on to do Classics. Or did you?

**Isobel:** I went on to read English, but I'd so much enjoyed doing Latin poetry that I was able to do two special papers, once for first year exams and then once for finals, which were both in Latin poetry.

**Aven:** Right.

**Isobel:** So I did keep my hand in.

**Aven:** But so when you say you've been wrestling with thinking about Catullus for years, I'm just curious as to--

**Isobel:** --as a casual part of my general reading--

**Aven:** And the idea of translating as just a thought about it. Yeah.

**Isobel:** I'd always enjoyed translating, but I'd always thought I had been missing-- certainly looking at Catullus-- I thought I'd been missing certain elements. You don't have to relate directly to an artist, that would be impossible, [00:19:00] but you have to find your/my Catullus and I hadn't found my Catullus. Now, if you take the poet CH Sisson, he refers to Catullus as 'my friend across 20 centuries'. Now, I think that's a huge risk. I don't think Catullus would've liked me at all. I didn't come from the right sort of place. I didn't go to the right sort of school. You know, he was in with the absolute-- at least of ancient Rome and my family I'm sure, far too close to freedmen. You know, I'm sure if you look at it you'll find the equivalent of ex-slaves very, very recently in my family tree.

So I would have just watched him from the sidelines, which is what I was doing with the whole Japanese rope bondage experience, watching from the sidelines and drawing it. And someone said of me, 'she sits there like a little mouse and gets us'. So, how could I find Catullus as that little mouse?

**Aven:** Yeah. Yeah, I know. I think that because of-- sometimes the poems that people first introduced to and think about as their Catullus, that he's so easy to [00:20:00] identify with, if you pick and choose very carefully which poems you identify with. And I agree with the danger of that. And also the-- there's only a few people who could have the positionality now to imagine themselves as being friends with him. He would certainly be no friend of mine, nor would I want him as a friend. I adore his poetry, but...goodness, no.

**Isobel:** Well, he wouldn't want to be our friend, I think. Don't worry about that, but he is fascinating. Absolutely fascinating.

**Aven:** Yeah, I don't think there's anybody whose work I study from the ancient world who I imagine as a friend. And I do think that's an interesting-- I won't dwell on this, but I think it's an interesting part of the transformation of the field of Classics over time, from people who definitely thought of themselves as the peers, contemporaries, and friends across the millennia of the people they were studying, to those of us who come to this field now, who [00:21:00] know very well that we are not peers and would never be accepted as peers of those people and for whom that's not the impetus behind. That's a real transformation, actually, in scholarship, is from people who can imagine themselves at the dinner parties and enjoying it as opposed to those of us who imagine if we were at that dinner party, we would certainly not be the people enjoying ourselves.

**Isobel:** I'll be serving the drinks and then I'd be executed for having spilled something on the floor. That's the way it would go, I'm afraid. Do you actually want to say anything about the hell of translation before we go on with Catullus-- because I don't know if you find that a sort of useful thing to think about, is actually rendering Latin into English.

For example, something that I often think about is the Latin translation of Alice in Wonderland and there's a bit from it to me which sort of shows up the whole problem in translation, where Alice says in a dreamy sort of way ,'do cats eat bats and sometimes [00:22:00] do bats eat cats?' And there's no way around this. This has to be rendered as 'feles ne vescuntur vespertilionibus et aliquando vespertiliones ne vescuntur felibus?' And that's it. The sound, you know, 'do bats eat cats'-- whatever you do. And you have another thing Catullus can do that we can't do is change his word order quite drastically.

**Aven:** Yes. Yes.

**Isobel:** Say, you have this line and pardon my quantities, I may be wrong here: 'difficiles longum subito deponere amorem'. ' It's hard, long suddenly, to dump love or love affair'. 'It's hard to abandon a love that runs a life' is my sort of version-y way, it's not quite literal. So-- 'difficiles longum subito depone--'

what's he talking about? '--amorem.' Oh, he's talking about love again. You know, we can't do [00:23:00] that. And those are two sort of major blocks, major obstacles, which is why I think the search for context is additionally important-- and just hopping back to CH Sisson, and I'm not sort of dissing him at all. It may be that he was happy that he found Catullus as a friend, maybe in the pub or somewhere else. And he thought, yeah, this is my good fellas, down the Dog and Duck having half a pint or something, you know.

**Mark:** I wanted to come back to the idea of translation and particularly translation that you mentioned in this kind of broader sense-- because you know, there's always an element of cultural translation because there's a whole context that goes with a poem in its original milieu, in its particular time period, in its particular region that has to be accounted for in some way to present it to a new audience.

And there are a number of different ways you can do it. The sort of scholarly approach is to throw a whole bunch of footnotes [00:24:00] explaining Roman culture and history or whatever.

**Aven:** Four textbooks you have to read before you're allowed to read the translation. Yeah.

**Mark:** Yeah. But you know, even translators in the Middle Ages, when they were dealing with the ancient world, had this problem and they're far less removed in time from that. But they had by then a different religion, very different social structures. And so very often medieval translations of ancient works are very medievalizing and there it's presented as a royal court sort of setting and the whole backdrop of courtly love and all these kinds of things.

And so what I find interesting about your approach is that you've drawn quite widely. I mean, the obvious main thing here is shibari. And I find that interesting because it's also something that probably the majority of your readership will not have already known about. But you're drawing on that as a way of [00:25:00] understanding what's really at stake in Catullus. Right? Rather than just sort of hammering on about the history of Rome or whatever, you found a kind of nice analog that brings out some of the key ideas in the poems. But you draw on a lot of other things too, like a couple of the poems you have one in hypertext, you draw on computer things. And there's another one that has a little pop-up message or whatever.

**Aven:** I liked that one--

**Mark:** So I'm curious about your thought process on that kind of thing.

**Isobel:** Well, the hypertext-- and that comes very near the beginning, doesn't it? So Poem #2, which is one of the two sparrow poems in which the sparrow-- let's call it a sparrow for now-- it's still alive. And Poem 2B is-- of course, one of these great problems in Catullus textual criticism, because Catullus only survives, as you know, through one corrupt manuscript that [00:26:00] was found roundabout the year 1300 and of course, Catullus died roundabout 54 BC. So there's a very long interval and the manuscript is certainly not in his hand.

And one problem is, how many poems did he actually write in this manuscript? Where does one begin? When does another one end? And is this 2B underneath the sparrow poem itself related to the sparrow poem or a fragment of something else? It's certainly not felt to be complete and because it's just this tiny fragment, I thought I would put it into hypertext just to show that it was almost something he was still working on in the back of his mind. So 'open paragraph- open square bracket- question mark- unrelated fragment- closed square bracket- end paragraph'-- you know, I won't read it all because it sounds quite painful. But it was a way of dealing with the fact that it was an incomplete fragment. Nobody knows what it's doing there. And at the very end he probably mentioned a golden apple in this [00:27:00] fragment, and I just turned it into a glinting quince because I read somewhere a theory that the golden apple of mythology might well have been a quince. And at that time that I wrote this, I did actually have a beautiful quince tree in the garden.

Sadly I don't have her anymore, but --so you know, things that are personal to me, there are autobiographical strains running through this and the pop-up was because Catullus is writing one of his extremely rude poems. This is #93, to Julius Caesar of all people. Now, Catullus has the confidence to be rude to Julius Caesar because he's a family friend. His dad entertained him at home in Verona. So my translation of the title is, 'And your mother' and the translation goes, 'I can't be arsed to please you, Caesar./ Your hide could be white or black for all I care'. And then-- maybe Catullus-- he sent it off, he's pressed send, and then he's had a sort of moment of whatever. You sense his anxiety because in fact what Caesar sees is a read receipt. [00:28:00] When Caesar gets this email, it says 'Microsoft Outlook: Gaius Valerius Catullus requested a read receipt to be sent when message 'And your mother' is read. Do you want to send a receipt?' And then, you know, you can tick the box saying, 'don't ask me about sending receipts again, yes/no?' And the no is highlighted. So that means Caesar is not going to be bothered to send a read receipt to this very rude message. Now there's too much going on there for me to expect most people actually to bother with. But it's just a nice, for me, a comment on the fact that Catullus is so insecure he would have sent a read receipt with this insult to Julius Caesar.

I could be wrong, but as I say, maybe not your Catullus, but that's my Catullus, that's it.

 **Aven:** No, I love it.

**Mark:** And it really is very much-- a large part of it anyways, is poetry for the eye because not only of course is it integrated with your illustrations, but a lot of the poems do use visual-- as you say, you wouldn't necessarily want to read out all those, but it works so well. And it's so [00:29:00] instantly recognizable on the page that you're able to very effortlessly convey some really interesting ideas just in terms of the way the poem appears on the page.

**Aven:** And to sort of pick up on that and some of the ways that you, when you're talking about translation and the joy of translating Latin into not only a different language, but a language that as you say, functions very differently so that we don't have that flexibility of word order, and we don't have that marking of case. Because the other thing you lose always-- not always, there are ways sometimes around it, but often lose with translation from any language. But I find it certainly when I translate Latin, is that you lose ambiguity, you know, intentional ambiguity, right? So often, is it-- the things you are made to pin down in class? Is that an instrumental ablative or is that an ablative of separation? Is that a possessive or a subjective or objective [00:30:00] genitive, what's going on here? And often the answer that the teacher doesn't want to hear, but that is the right answer is it isn't either, or it's both.

And you don't have to make that decision, especially in poetry. The poet is often intentionally leaving multiple grammatical ideas hanging until the end is resolved, like you were talking about in that one sentence, or in fact leaving them where there is no resolution. It could be ablative or it could be dative or whatever the cases are. And there are some places where you make that process clear. And of course you've taken extensive notes on what you wanted to talk about, I have not. So give me a moment while I--

**Isobel:** I'll tell you what, while you're looking actually-- I mean, I can talk about poem #56, where there is more ambiguity than any poet would have intended.

This is a really good example of the loss of meaning that's happened over the centuries. So what I've given in my interpretation of poem #56 is the three possible events [00:31:00] that Catullus could be describing. It could be a young boy with his girlfriend. It could be a young boy masturbating, or it could be Lesbia's brother Clodius masturbating. Anyway, one of these three options. Catullus then semi-rapes-- and you know, obviously this poem has been clouded in mystery, but I give you the three possible options that have so far been brought to light by centuries of Catullus textual criticism, which is a very dry and academic study, but it's crucially important is it's the coalface, is trying to work out what did Catullus actually write? And not in this version of the poem 101, which is the very famous one about Catullus' lament for his dead brother, the grave side.

In the book that's under discussion, I take one version of the original [00:32:00] text, but 101 appeared in an earlier anthology in January this year. And I gave a slightly different fashion version because there are two possible options. It could be that Catullus goes to render these rituals of death, 'mortis', but one scholar thinks it's the rituals of love, 'amoris'. So in one poem I gave both of them as an option. And in this book here, I just give 'mortis', 'of death' as an option, because with all that vagueness, when we don't even have a hundred percent accurate texts and never will, that just opens up the possibilities to a translator even more. But yes, there is a thread of textual criticism running through this. And also if there's a line which is known to be missing, I might just say so. And in--certainly in poem #63, the Attis poem, I do. We do have little bits in brackets, in italics rather, indicating where the text is particularly corrupt and even there's a point where something might be missing or it might not be missing, not even that is clear.

**Aven:**  [00:33:00] Well, and I was thinking poems-- of some of the things, like 85, which is another very famous poem and what you've done there. I mean, it's a two line poem and it's one of your longer translations because you give-- a, what is it? One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight-- eight translations of the same two lines.

So this is-- for our listeners, this is the 'odi et amo' poem. ' I hate, and I love', a two line poem about his excruciating existence and one of the ways-- or so I guess it isn't eight,

**Isobel:** -- it's seven, the layout is a bit confusing.

**Aven:** Yeah, no, as I went to read that I went, 'no, of course those are the same one', but one of the first you do is the-- I mean, there's no such thing as a literal translation, but the most literal of literal translations or the translation that you would do if you were glossing, you know, essentially the gloss, right? Where you you give-- I don't know if you would like to read it. But again, it's one of these ones that's easier to see on the page than it is to read out loud--

[00:34:00] **Isobel:** Well, I'm happy to read this, but also before I start, what I've done is the first word is 'odi'. But when you're reading this word, the first bit you see is 'od--'.

So you think, 'yeah, there's the root for the word 'to hate'' and, 'Oh, it's the letter I' it's 'odi', so that means I hate, so that's why I begin 'hate I' as opposed to 'I hate'--

**Aven:** Yeah, it's the most literal glossing possible. Like, this is how your brain is figuring out the meaning. Yeah.

**Isobel:** Yeah. So the first, just the very first version I'll read is-- the close to literal one is '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' [00:35:00] Because we have different tenses from the Latin.

We can say 'I hate you' or 'I'm hating you'. And they can't. So that's another thing and it's agony, isn't it? Isn't it torture to listen to?

**Aven:** Yeah! So one of the things-- obviously my, well, maybe not obviously, but obviously-- but my Latin teaching heart was warmed by these and I'm sure Mark's too, in the sense that there is value in the process, not the end result, usually, but the process of doing that kind of extremely painful but careful understanding of the grammar and all of those things. And, you know, I'll do that in class all the time. I'll read it out in order and then sort of be like, 'and now to turn that into English, can you turn it into English', right? I mean, that's a part of the process.

**Mark:** I just think, since I'm such a grammar nerd, I actually find beauty in that version, seeing it on the [00:36:00] page.

**Aven:** I think perhaps my favorite part of it to me-- let's go even more nerdy-- is 'by what thing it do I'. I don't know what-- I love the grammaticalization of these things because, you know, 'quare id faciam'-- like, it means what it means and it's not that hard to translate at all. It's very much of Catullus, it is deceptively simple-- but I mean, 'quare' and like, the picking apart of what that conjunction or question in this case--

**Isobel:**  I'm so glad you say that. Because for years I did the, and I have got no excuse for this, but I fell into the lazy trap of thinking it was 'why'.

And of course it isn't 'why'. But you'll find, I think, that most translations say 'why', 'why do I do this?' Yeah. But of course it is literally 'qua-re'. You're quite right.

**Aven:**  And I mean, it is also 'why' you know, 'for what reason', 'by what manner', 'in what way', it's all of those things. And so the [00:37:00] thing you have to do as a translator is pick, and you have to pick something and you pick, depending on your choices, all those things you have to decide, you decide 'do I want it to run smoothly in the reader's brain, so that it sounds like the thing they expect it to be? Or do I want it to be rough so that they are caught up by it and wonder--' you know, all of those things are different and you've gone on to give different answers to those questions in your multiple other translations.

**Mark:** Well, it sort of forces the reader to engage with the text, you know.

**Aven:** Whether or not you know Latin--

**Mark:** --engage with it on all those different levels, because you have all these different approaches to how to express and each one expresses its own aspect of the poem.

**Aven:** And this is the only one, I think, that you give the Latin for, that you include the Latin of.

**Isobel:** Yes. And I think the whole thing really is to show that it's torturing me too. I'm finding this is completely impossible to translate.

**Aven:** Yes. And that's where I also wanted to come to, was that [00:38:00] like-- It's almost like a shape poem. That's not quite the right word, but like onomatopoeia or something. It's a thing that-- it's performative. It does what it is asking to do at the same time. Like, reading that translation ties you in the knots of trying to untie translation. I know I appreciated it greatly.

**Isobel:** It made me feel, it always makes me feel like-- I'm offering with different translations here of the same thing-- like you know, those sort of children's toys where the battery runs down, this little toy on wheels that maybe keeps hitting against the skirting board until eventually the mechanism runs down and it has to stop-- you know, I reached the end of the page. There's another bit where I show the working, if you like. In poem #34, the second verse of that. Because that's-- in my school, poem #34, I had to write it in a hurry at the very end because a page dropped out and I needed to replace [00:39:00] some things.

**Aven:** So I was going to ask you just before you finish explaining it-- that actually is really interesting because I have a note, one of my few notes I wrote down as I read through was 'inclusion of 34 surprised me, similarly 45, both often treated as very chaste poems', which is not to say that you can't have chaste poems in a book based around rope fetishes. Why can't you? Poem 34, again is-- for those who don't know, it is a hymn to Diana, it's a hymn sung by girls to Diana and it --on the face of it anyway-- it's usually treated by the scholarship as basically just like, playing with the hymn form. But there's nothing-- you can find some sort of double entendres if you really want to or whatever, but it's normally treated as just pretty much a pretty poem to Diana.

We could talk about other readings of it, but that is how it's normally treated. And so it was interesting to me that it was in this collection because you haven't translated-- we should say for people-- you haven't translated all the poems, you've chosen--what is it, 60?

**Isobel:** 60.

**Aven:** 60 of them, of the 116 poems. Well, they're actually 112--

**Isobel:** I think I have a little note somewhere in the book about what happened [00:40:00] about that. But just to say, I do include a number of chaste poems because once I found the context, then I know where we are, and obviously you don't have to drag it into every single one. I bring it in where it's appropriate. But where it's not-- I mean his whole life, his whole condition is one of the sort of bondage/dominance struggle, or you could interpret it that way. And I certainly do.

So I think the overall context is him. I think it works. Once you sort of pop it here, you can then sort of ignore the whole shibari rope bondage side of it whenever you need to. And as I say, that's another-- this is basically about learning Latin at my school. And this is the way you would answer or think of the first thoughts that go through your head in Verse 2, as you're looking at the exam paper. And I have those dreaded words, 'turn over' which were written, I think, on every exam paper I've ever sat at the end of the first verse.

**Aven:** Would you mind reading maybe the first couple of verses of this poem? Just so people know what we're--

**Isobel:** Yes. And it's-- the [00:41:00] original hymn was about boys and girls singing in praise of Diana. Well, in my school there were no boys. So all mention of boys has been completely cut out.

So:

'Blessed Diana's girls intact/ the pregnant one/ sacked school song sung lesson bells rung/ Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower/ Lewis and Short avoiding sport/ turnover/ Oh Latona's daughter/of greatest (masculine)/ great (feminine)/progeny of Jove/ whom mother/by the/pertaining to Delos/bore (gave birth to)/ olive tree/ To make you mistress of the peaks. The green retreats/ secret paths/ laughing streams/ You the virgin in the moonlight/ patroness of labor pains/ you the Empress of the crossways/ 'Moon Mask' your embroidered name-tape/ you [00:42:00] presiding over sick bay's/ blanketed heaps with menstrual cramps/ setting rhythms that will bring un-/ wasted eggs to harvest festival/ Holy by what name you choose/ hover as we seek to gloss/the gerund in the haunted hatband's/ Serviendo crescimus'

That's my school motto and it's all about my school uniform, everything-- I've been locked up by COVID too long. Just in the first verse, there was this 'Dian's bud o'er Cupid's flower'. That's a little quotation from Midsummer Night's Dream and little bits of the Midsummer Night's Dream kept on popping into this work. It's a very bondage-y sort of play. And if I'm feeling slightly at a loss for how to render something, I will, if I can, fall back on the Bible, the King James version or Shakespeare, it's just a little habit that I have. So that's why that's there.

**Aven:** So one of these verses then has the, like the masculine feminine, the doing it in radical order [00:43:00] again. And yeah, I mean, whether or not it makes sense to somebody who hasn't done Latin or Greek-- because if you study modern languages, you probably never do this bizarre habit that I think many of us have anyway, of this parsing as you go.

But for me, it is so familiar to me as a process of-- especially as a process of trying to explain to students what's going on in a sentence when they're slightly confused or whatever, just reading it out as if I'm reading every grammatical form and then going back and turning it into something comprehensible.

**Isobel:** If you haven't been doing that for years of your life, I'm hoping that some readers will just find it a mystery. Here is a mystery. And of course it's all about worship of the goddess. The girls and boys, when you let them in, singing a hymn to the goddess, and this is the mystery of religious worship--

**Aven:** -- it's the doing of things because that's how you do them. Not because you understand why. I think it's all fascinating. So one thing I want to mention, because you keep mentioning it and I think it's worth talking a little bit more about, is this [00:44:00] idea of bondage and dominance being central to Catullus' life and 100%, I'm on board with that. I mean, my view of Roman society in general, especially elite Roman male society in particular is that, that is essentially like, that's all they care-- not all they cared about, but a lot of what they're spending their time thinking about is about, you know, who's dominating whom under what circumstances and in which ways. I also really like it as a framing of his relationship with Lesbia whom you often call, I think, do you only call her Clodia?

**Isobel:** I call her Clodia sometimes, but mainly Mistress with a capital M because that would be in the fetish world what he would call her.

**Aven:** Yeah. And I find that the term, the name Lesbia is-- you know, it really needs a footnote because otherwise people think it means something that it doesn't mean. So I totally understand that. But because-- I'm assuming that shibari is --but correct me if I'm wrong, like, what I know of BDSM, which is also [00:45:00] not very much-- but in that the whole point about the person who is the bottom is that it is a voluntary submission. It is a submissive position, but it is a voluntary submission.

And I mean, I always, or for a very long time have felt very strongly that that's what's going on with Lesbia or Clodia as well, is that yes, he is dominated by her and she is cruel to him and he's submissive, but the circumstances of their life and the context of his life and their conditions and their statuses and everything else, make it a voluntary submission.

I mean, there is no-- when he calls her 'domina', he does so just like, as you say, you use that term Mistress, not because she has-- in a slave-owning society, to use a term that a slave would use when you are not the slave is a very particular choice because she does not actually have that control over him.

You know, whereas there was a person sitting in the room with him, probably at the same [00:46:00] time, over whom she does have that control, whose life literally sits in her hand. So he's functioning in a world where that control, that involuntary control and submission is a very real thing, but he is choosing a type-- I mean, choosing-- emotions, love, whatever, this isn't all it's choice. There's a choice there nonetheless, in some practical terms. And so I really liked that idea of that play when he presents-- because when he chooses to present himself in a poem, he's presenting himself. It's not just that he is submissive, but he's presenting himself that way, like a performance, like you're talking about. And therefore he has the power over her because he's the one putting her in the poem. So he gets to decide how to present her. He's the one controlling this performance.

**Isobel:** Yeah, exactly. Right. And also that there are further sort of two or three very strict rules which areobserved. Obviously it is, everything is consensual. Absolutely everything. And no means no. And you can't question that. It means no, that's it straight away, stop. [00:47:00] And everybody acknowledges those rules and is governed by them. And it's a much safer place to be than down the average pub on a Saturday night when people think they can approach you and they're sort of are no rules, really.

But you're exactly right. Catullus could have walked away at any time, but he embraced this, he chose it. And also don't forget, his art is based on conflict and that's where good art comes from. And maybe to be serving a Mistress who is volatile and for quite a lot of the time won't give you the time of day, or maybe can't give you the time of day because she's married or she's off with another lover or whatever it is. You're going to get good art out of that if you're a halfway good artist at all.

**Aven:** Yeah, the poetry of content is actually really hard to write. It's not that nobody's ever written it, but it's pretty hard--

**Isobel:** --but it's the happy ending of the novel. You know, the couple get married and 'oh right, the end'.

**Aven:**  Now the story's over.

**Isobel:** Because now they've come through their struggles and now they're [00:48:00] happy, so fine. Yeah. Great. No more book. No, you're, you're absolutely right. I agree totally.

**Aven:** Yeah. And so for that reason alone, I love it. And we're not going to talk a lot about the illustrations because of this very non-visual medium we're in, though obviously given that that's the genesis of the book, I will put links to your website on our show notes so people can go and look at some stuff. But I strongly encourage our readers of course, to pick up a copy themselves-- our listeners, in fact, that's who we have, not readers-- our listeners to pick up a copy so that you can see because the illustrations are beautiful and interesting and really do comment in really interesting ways on particular poems and their placement there. So it's hard to describe that. I don't know if you want to, but I want to say that because it's a hard thing to talk about when we can't show it.

**Isobel:** Well, each illustration does match the poem that it's with. It's always there for a reason because I was there. I was basically taking the energy off the performers. That's why I [00:49:00] love drawing something that's live, something, that's moving, something that's happening in front of me. I take their energy. And if there's a situation between, for example, two men practicing at a workshop where they're getting quite emotionally involved or a very strong man tying a weak woman-- or weak looking woman. I have to say it, these women, they have fantastic core strength.

**Aven:** I know, I look at some of these positions and I know that these ropes were not doing all that work. There is some real work going on there.

**Isobel:** --Or a woman tying a man where again, a lot of work has to go into that because for most women who tie, they're tying somebody heavier than they are, if it's a man. So a lot of ingenuity has to go into the sort of engineering side of how they do that. But yeah, I hope that the emotion that was happening at the time-- or even if it's just performed emotion, it's a mixture between performance and real emotion, I think-- but I hope I've been able to convey something of that from the scene that was happening in front of me and found a match for the poem that I've chosen to put it with.

 [00:50:00] I think all my bondage drawings more or less are on the blog, which I've been doing for about 10 years, which as I say, has just been very rudely interrupted by COVID. But yes, it's all on the web.

**Aven:** Yeah, so there'll be a link there for people to see that. So another point to get back to Midsummer's, your comments about Shakespeare and the Bible as sort of places to draw phrasing and things from. You have-- to talk about the stuff at the beginning and the end, you have at the end-- so at the beginning you have a really good little discussion of the timeline of Catullus that I am very likely to pull out and give to students in the future because actually, it hits on all the good points, not only of his timeline, but also of like, the things that are important about his life.

I mean, not that we know anything about his life, frankly, but the key elements that sort of contextualize the poems. I think you do a brilliant job in --what is it-- three pages of contextualizing his life.

**Isobel:** I'm really pleased you say that, because this is about the only thing that wasn't [00:51:00] present when I submitted the manuscript. I did sort of two and a half very grudging paragraphs about Catullus and the publisher said to me, 'please, would you put in a bit more information about Catullus?'

And I thought, 'Hmmm I don't want to'-- anyway I thought I better had, you know, because I've been told to. And when I'd done it, I thought, 'you know, he's absolutely right'. It's really quite helpful. So I'm glad you like it. And he will be even gladder that you like it. Thank you.

**Aven:** I do, because much as it, as Mark says, taking the academic approach of 'let's read a 40 page introduction before you're allowed to read the poems' is not a great way to make someone love poems. It's like the way I introduced poems that have jokes in them to my class with, 'well, as we all know, the best kind of joke is one that needs a 10 minute introduction and explanation, and then a 20 minute discussion afterwards so that you can find it funny. I mean, that's my favorite kind of joke. I'm sure it's your favorite kind of jokes, so let me explain all of what's behind this poem before we read it'-- you know, I [00:52:00] mean, that is always the danger. So no, I think you've done a really good job of laying out the things that matter in a way that doesn't delay getting to the poems more than we want it to.

But you also in the end have a section of --what's the term you use for them, after the very brief notes-- the strands, yes. And they're quotations from other works, passages from other works often that have to do with bondage, metaphorical or actual. And throughout the poems, you have sometimes actual quotations or you have references to Housman or other poets.

So I see it as-- and I'd be interested in you talking about how and why you're using those-- Catullus, of course, was a very intertextual poet, like all of his coterie and followers, and yet that's one of the other imponderable or impossibilities of translation. How do you convey [00:53:00] to an audience that doesn't know its Homer and Apollonius inside and out in both Greek and in the Latin translations that, you know, a particular phrase has that reference in the Latin without a footnote?

And it seems to me that what you've done is convey the intertextuality of Catullus -- you've translated it to a new kind of intertextuality. Was that an intention? Is that something you were consciously thinking about?

**Isobel:** Obviously with Catullus, you've got echoes of other poets, echoes of Greek. And I am not one of the translators who's set out to give you a heavy nudge in the ribs if there's a Greek word by using, I don't know, maybe a French word or something. I'm not one of those who matches it word for word in that way. But I think I just am happy with the canon generally, the flow of the canon. You know, it's like a river [00:54:00] and you can dip a little teaspoon into the river and you get a tiny bit of river water, but if you analyze it, there are millions of little organisms in it, and I think that language and the way we speak and what we read and what we say to each other has now absorbed so much of the past.

It is this continuing river, which makes me very happy to use, just dip into that richness. And as I said earlier, I tend to stick to things like the Bible and Shakespeare when they have a resonance. And I don't actually-- I've mentioned Housman by name. I've only quoted him in the notes, but I mentioned him by name, which is a little bit of a cheat in a way, because if someone has read Housman then suddenly whack, they're going to get a little flood of associations, even if they can't remember a single line all the way through, there'll be sort of pictures and ideas. And I thought at the time, maybe it's a little bit naughty to mention Housman because-- though there's a poet called, an Irish poet, Bernard O'Donoghue, who said once he was a bit nervous about mentioning Schubert in a poem because [00:55:00] suddenly it's too much, you start hearing Schubert or thinking about music of that era and suddenly there's a whole seam of richness.

And is it too rich? A little like too much egg in the pudding or something. But I will just allow if something pops up into my head and quite by chance, little bits of A Midsummer Night's Dream would pop up into my head, it's normally trying to help me solve a problem, so I will let it in.

And I think to pay tribute to the context that Catullus is working in, I'm going to show the context that I now in my century am working in and the things that have been implanted in me. And I don't think I overdo it. Little tiny touches now and then.

**Aven:** Oh, I like it very much because I think-- Catullus has, except in Poem 64, has a fairly light hand with his allusions, even though he has them everywhere. And he has a ton of intertexts and you can spend lifetimes finding them, but he's less obvious about that than some poets are-- as I say, except for 64, but you don't translate 64, [00:56:00] which was, I think a good choice on your part.

Because it's very long and it would have unbalanced the book quite a lot, I think.

**Isobel:** It's different. It needs a different kind of treatment.

**Aven:** Yeah.

**Isobel:** I haven't quite arrived at a satisfactory treatment for the whole, but I love the ending, the very bitter, the sort of catastrophic end. Oh God, everything is so awful because I think we're sort of living through it without wishing to be too miserablist. We're kind of heading for it now.

**Aven:** Yes. We're in the fallen world that he describes so clearly. Yeah.

**Isobel:** I fear we are. So it's there, it's just something to tackle with sort of ropes and crampons or whatever, but I'm not quite ready for the whole thing. I only just did Attis, really. I hadn't been intending--

**Aven:** I'm wanting to ask you about Attis because--- okay, so. For my listeners, because I know there's a particular couple of my listeners that will care very much about this news. You have translated Poem 63 and you have translated Poems 68, A and B. I say that because I have an [00:57:00] ongoing discussion with a couple of friends on Classics Twitter about whether Catullus 64 or 68 is the greatest poem ever written, maybe tongue in cheek, but we have our particular preferences and someday in my fantasy life, I would like to teach an entire graduate course only on Poem 64.

Whereas they were like, 'okay, and I'll teach the companion class that is only Poem 68'. And I was like, 'okay, you do that one, I'll just do 64, we'll be good!

**Isobel:**  Who is going to teach-- cause some people would say it's #63--

**Aven:** --but 63 is beyond me--- literally, when I turned the page and saw that you were doing 63, I wrote a exclamation down on my notes because I was so impressed that you would tackle it because I think 63 is brilliant.

So it's a poem about Attis, who's this-- well, it's very complicated, but a youth-- maybe from Rome, maybe from Greece, who follows the goddess Cybele to Asia Minor, and the poem opens with him castrating himself, and then proceeds from there. And it's written in this weird meter, that [00:58:00] replicates a hymnic meter, a particular that are for the songs to Cybele.

And it's a very complicated poem and it's very good and interesting, but it's beyond me. It's more than I can quite handle. Like, even teaching it this year just in English, it was really interesting, but it was-- I find it hard to kind of grapple with. And I think your translation is brilliant. But yes. Talk to me about 63.

**Isobel:** Well, I think we've lost so much in terms of feeling, how we feel about the gods. And Catullus is on a sort of urbane edge where he could sort of talk about piety still in a normal kind of way, even though he wasn't a believer necessarily, but I think he's looking back to a much more primitive time.

And to me, this is like a broken vase, where we in our century have swept up the bits and we've stuck it together beautifully, but it's never going to make the same sound as the vase that Catullus heard [00:59:00] when he finished his poem and sort of pinged it, it would've made a lovely sort of resonant sound.

We have lost so much. I say there's a sort of stream of autobiography running through this. Everything is autobiographical. Drawing, particularly is autobiographical. I was here. I saw it this way. Let me show you. So there's a massive amount of intervention going on. But here in 63, I am a hugely selfish intervener. Part of it is about tinnitus because I was beginning to worry a little bit about very, very low level tinnitus, which I have. So the first line contains the word 'otorhinolaryngeal' a) because it pertains to study of the inner ear, and also because 'otorhinolaryngeal' falls out in the way that the end of this terrible meter, the galliambic meter falls out.

Now, some poets have very bravely done the whole thing, translated the whole thing in galliambics and I applaud them. And I think the star of this is Boadicea by [01:00:00] Tennyson. If you read that, I mean, what a champion, he's done it. I wasn't going to do that. So you'll get little references to tinnitus throughout, because there's a lot of bashing of cymbals going on in this.

And you have to understand that there can't be drug-taking when you're doing shibari, when you're doing Japanese rope bondage, because you could kill someone, you know, nobody's off their faces. That's why I like it so much. But here I think Attis was a little bit off his face, perhaps, if he's castrating himself with a stone.

So I'm suggesting, you know, I say it's 'ketamised to Anatolia'. But also I've got little hints now and then of a Catullus textual criticism class, which ran once a week over two terms in my former university. And to my great surprise, I think to even their greater surprise, they realized that they couldn't-- well, they could stop me, but I asked, 'do you mind if I come to this course as a much older person now'.

And they said, 'okay, you can come and sit in on the class'. And what was great about the class is that not everybody was being examined on it. So there [01:01:00] wasn't any stress or tension from my being there. But I do mention-- yes, 'Travesty-Attis', he's speaking to his followers and then he stops, 'Travesty-Attis reached a lacuna'.

He came to a gap in the text, in other words. 'The choir of transcribers/ growled and trilled,/ the tympanum buzzed'-- now tympanum, you can think of the timpani, the kettle drums in the orchestra, or you can think of the tympanum in your inner ear, which is giving you hell-- 'tinnitus whistled/ annotators/ made for the groves'.

So are they making for the groves of academe? So it's perhaps a little bit heavy handed there. I don't know,--- but this is my little strand, as well as a strand of tinnitus. It's a strand of textual criticism. You've got these scholars running after Attis, crashing through the grove, the woods, trying to get to the refuge of the goddess, the knowledge of what this text, this very corrupted texts of Catullus, actually might say.

But also of course I do mention slaves-- I mention fugitive [01:02:00] slaves, 'I'm as wretched as fugitive slaves'. And so we can think, 'yeah, this is actually current, he's living in the land of slave ownership'. And just at the very end-- spoiler alert, I suppose-- Attis goes back into the woods. He's chased into the woods by what is a lion in the original, and I make the lion a dragon because I have tiny, tiny little touches of Japan just here and there. Honestly, blink and you miss them. But it's a tribute really, to where the whole shibari world comes from. And then I add a few words at the end, which show you it's actually just been talking to his 'domina' as usual, and he's begging her for a favor at the end and talking about his mother. I throw in a bit of cheap psychoanalysis with this book as well, just to make it complete. I mean, what do I know? I never met him, you know, 2000 years ago, crikey.

**Aven:** Well no, I love it. Cause the reason I was surprised was because of the complexity and difficulty of 63, not because it [01:03:00] doesn't make sense in this context because absolutely. I mean, the whole poem is about domination and submission and voluntary submission that you then apparently regret, but then apparently don't depending on what stage of Attis'-- and then yes, the textual lacunas around, for instance, the gender, which you don't play a great deal with, but there's so much debate about what the gender stuff is going on in that poem, whether the-- cause there's different readings. Yeah.

**Isobel:** I don't play too much with the gender here or at all, in fact. And I think one way, because it is such a hugely complex poem, because sometimes you think not all the sort of bits of the broken pot have been stuck together again in the right order, necessarily. What I do here and also with #68, another of the longer poems is 'if in doubt, get on with it'.

**Aven:** Yeah.

**Isobel:** Really fast.

**Aven:** No, and 68, again, is textually corrupt-- I mean, we keep saying this, but the longer poems have their particular problems. 68, it's the question of whether it's one poem or two poems, is the big question of the [01:04:00] scholarship on that poem. And then if they're two poems, how they're related.

And so you deal with that as well. I mean, I like the meta textual stuff you have in general. The fact that you're not afraid to point out that there are parts where we don't know what the text is, or these are parts where there's a division and we don't know if there's a division, and the way you've integrated that into the poems themselves, rather than-- I mean, you have one page of notes at the end, but that's not really what you use them for. You know, rather than footnotes, rather than the kind of scholarly apparatus, instead it's actually in the poem and it's with transitions of voices and different-- like an internal commentator essentially, sometimes.

**Isobel:** Thanks. And for example, #68B, I've just got one line in italics, 'something missing/ go on'. And I do.

**Aven:** --oh, and sorry, because I was just flipping through, can I just say this-- there's no question attached to this, that I love your, as it were, title of 58, 'Glue. Bit'.

**Isobel:** Ah, yes.

**Aven:** Just, that made me laugh out loud. [01:05:00]

**Isobel:** Well, in fact, the person setting the poem, I hadn't made it quite clear that yeah--

'Glue. Bit.' Is the title and this is a poem of absolute despair. 'Oh Caelius--' and Caelius may have been another lover of Lesbia. 'Oh, Caelius--/Mistress, Herself, her Worship, our own Lady of the/Labia, the one the poet loved/More than himself and all the rest--/Now downloadable dogging in urban areas/And choking on locally elected members'-- and the word 'glubit' is-- and there's been a lot of comment about what this verb is. Does it mean removing a husk or something like that? But you can imagine the action that's going with it, whether it's manual or whether it's oral. But there's an element of glue. There's an element of bit and then glue, full stop, bit, full-stop-- it kind of works. And I suppose readers will be divided into those who know the word in the original and those who don't. But I think there's something in there for those who don't as well. [01:06:00] That's been my intention.

**Aven:** Yeah, no, I agree. I just, because I do and 'glubit' is-- it's not quite a hapax legomena, I think there's one other place that's used, but it's an agricultural text where it means stripping the bark off a tree. So there's much discussion about what this word exactly means in this very clearly dirty context. Yeah. Anyway, I just happened to see it and I think, I mean-- I don't know, Mark, you don't know Catullus as well, and I know that you-- so for me, I absolutely am reading it as a translation of Catullus. I think it's maybe a different experience to read it more as just a work of poetry. But the images and things like that, go a long way to making the emotional part of it more comprehensible, even if you aren't going to get the specific references to the Latin text or something like that.

**Isobel:** Yeah. I hope it's clear. I've gone for clarity all the way through. My own view is that you don't need to [01:07:00] be familiar with the Latin text or even need to go and look it up if you don't want to. That's my hope.

**Aven:**  So my one last question, just back on which poems is-- you know, you chose a selection, is there any specific criterion by which you were choosing which poems to translate? Was it simply which ones you felt able to, which ones you liked? Was there any particular thought process behind what poems you did and didn't translate?

**Isobel:** I think it's just I have more of an instant emotional connection with some of them than with others. When I started to do this, I did 17 poems and I thought, 'Ooh, I've done it! Hooray, finished!' But then they started to sort of creep into my brain a bit more. I think some of them just sort of begged to be let in. And I ended up with 60 cause I thought that was a nice sort of round number. And it's interesting that you should ask this because I'm-- I've started having a look at some more and starting to go into them a bit more [01:08:00] deeply.

And I'm looking at the end where some of the most vituperative, vicious ones are, the ones most sort of redolent of 'Good heavens, this man needs instant psychoanalysis now, he needs therapy' because looking at them all in a cluster you think, 'gosh'-- again, it's a bit like #64, these need special, different treatment, different state of mind. Don't quite know how to make this look appealing without chucking a bucket of paint stripper over it, which is not going to help anyone. So I think where I felt I had something to say, something to add, that I felt most comfortable with, but I'm afraid as I put aside my first collection of 17 poems, I thought, 'Oh, that's great'-- it's actually all of them, you know, it is actually one work. And of course, what we have is one incomplete work from that corrupted manuscript that was discovered in, you know, 1300 or so. But I think the ones that have come down to us through this enormous stroke of [01:09:00] luck really are one work and just to have taken 60 poems from it, I have created some difficulties in the order of the poems not coming in the order intended because some are missing.

Now I say the order intended, as you know, that's a hugely controversial thing to say--

**Aven:** Shall I refer our listeners to the 5-12 entire monographs on the question of the order of Catullus' poetry?

**Isobel:** But I have one practical piece of experience to add to this, because when I started doing this and trying to add the drawing and so on, I thought, 'Do you know what? I'm going to do girl drawings and boy drawings.'

So in other words, when he's with the boy I'm going to put all those poems together. And then when he's with Lesbia or other women, I'm going to put all those poems together. And when I changed the order, something terrible happened. It was like one of these old saggy mattresses. You know, you lie on it and everything goes 'boiiiiing' and your body just sort of curves and you feel--your back goes, you feel absolutely terrible. And when I put them back in the right order, the tension [01:10:00] returned, that's all I can say. Now, if you put me under deep analysis, is that because it's what I'm used to seeing? And I would say, well, no, because I'm not used to reading the whole thing through, in one go.

I'm not that close to knowing what the order is instinctively and the order is not something I've studied in the manner of these academics you've just mentioned, who are ready to sort of punch my teeth out. You know, as I've just said that I think the order should stand, but I really do think the order we've inherited has some resonance has some meaning and should not be messed around with.

**Aven:** That's really interesting because I mean-- I hesitate to make any kind of pronouncement on this question either, because it's not what I have spent my life studying either. But you know, that is my general feeling at the very least for 1-60 at the order and probably for the short epigrams as well.

And like, I also think a very strong argument can be made for the entire thing as having real-- not a narrative order because [01:11:00] obviously narratively it's entirely out of order-- but a musical order or something where, as you say, the tension is raised and lowered and there's all the different ways that you think back on other poems and stuff.

I think it works the way it is now. Again, maybe it's just because that's what we have, but it's interesting to hear that that rearranging them made it not work as well.

**Isobel:** As far as I'm concerned, something happened. And of course, a lot of secluded dons in tweed jackets over the centuries-- a sort of 19th century don alone in the Bodleian Library or something, would say 'how can he write about dumping her before he's writing this absolutely loving adoring poem or yet another lovelorn'-- well, have an affair! You know, you can--

**Aven:** -- well and also what a boring story it is if it's A-Z through B, C, D, E, F. I mean, there's a reading that reading the first poem in the relationship is an awful lot more [01:12:00] piquant if you've already read the dumping poem. There's an absolutely different reaction to reading that, reading poem 51 if you've read poem 11, if we're to think of those as the dumping and the pickup poems-- which is another question. So yeah, no I'm with you. I don't think tension is built by putting the blocks in order.

**Isobel:** I just mentioned 51, just very briefly. Somebody said that I shouldn't have put a string of obscenities into poem #51. I actually translate it twice, so you can choose. One has the obscenities and one does not. Because I don't think the obscenities are actually obscene myself, but you know, it's a question of judgment. But you can choose.

**Aven:** Oh yeah. That's-- the word is 'wanking', for those listening, is not particularly obscene, I think, in most-- put it this way: there's a lot more obscene things going on in Catullus that can be translated that way. Though I did love the inclusion of 'and maidens call it Love-In-Idleness' in the 'otium'--

**Isobel:** --again, well, that's Midsummer Night's Dream elbowing its way in again, [01:13:00] because idling and idleness-- I mean, idleness is a fairly common, fairly popular way of translating 'otium'. 'Otium', it's one of these killer words we don't have. And it can have overtones even if something-- not having to fight a war at the time. And is that a good thing or a bad thing? If you're trying to build---

**Aven:**  If you're a Roman--

**Isobel:** --all those things we just don't have. So 'idling' and also refer to the car engine idling, you know, going too far. But no, it's one of those things that people who know the Latin are sort of watching with narrowed eyes when they get to that bit in 51, to see how you're going to do it.

**Aven:** Oh yeah, no, it's good. One of the many reasons I love Catullus is for the way you can return to poems and where you can read them on one surface and enjoy them, and then you can pull them apart and re-put them back together and enjoy them in a different way. And then you can come back to them after you've done that and read them back on the surface level again, how you can keep revisiting and re-enjoying the [01:14:00] poems. And I think not only have you produced poems-- to my mind-- that have that same quality of being enjoyable, but you can also come back to them and think more about them, which I think is wonderful.

But also, you have definitely added to the number of translations which make revisiting the originals a more exciting prospect. And I thank you for that, because I think that's the the wonderful thing about multiple translations is they improve the original.

**Isobel:** Thank you. Oh, that's great. Thanks. Yeah, I mean, the thing is you can mess around, you can do whatever you like with Catullus, really, because he is such a great artist. He is strong enough to withstand it. It's like Shakespeare, you know, you can maybe go to an absolutely terrible production one night and think, 'Oh God, no. What a terrible evening in the theater', but Shakespeare himself will spring back and survive any amount of duff treatment. And Catullus is the same because he's one of these artists who thrives on conflict, thrives on ambiguity and beauty. And of course, [01:15:00] he's passionately in love with poetry as well as Lesbia. And that's why-- getting back to the order-- okay, you get Lesbia poems and then you get poetry poems interwoven. Good poets, bad poets, he has just as much emotion for them as he does for Lesbia.

**Aven:** Oh, for sure. Or more, possibly. And again, I think that the connection with the-- you know, he's a poet in love with form and technique. As much as the emotion is there, but the form and the technique are a passion as well.

And I think that's an analog from what I gather too.

**Isobel:** Yes, very much so.

**Aven:** So, is there anything that we haven't touched on that you'd particularly want to bring up?

**Isobel:** Let me just have a look. I think we've talked about how it made Catullus more familiar to me, this whole sort of setting, but there was something written by a poet called John Clegg, which of course holds the equal and opposite view and he expressed it much more articulately than I can.

And he says 'what makes Catullus [01:16:00] appealing to translators is paradoxically what makes him impossible to translate'-- I'm going to paraphrase this a bit-- 'we identify with him far more than any other Roman poet, but this identification is dependent on glossing over the differences between Roman sexual mores and our own when those mores are unfamiliar, unappealing, and in places unreconstructable'.

I think we can only say thank goodness, actually. And he says that I've found a unique way around the problems. He says 'shibari, Japanese rope bondage is unfamiliar enough, at least to me, to serve as a permanent reminder that the sexual practice and politics of Catullus' world are not my own.'-- This is John Clegg talking-- 'with the poems rendered into those terms, it feels as if a major blockage has been lifted. We can see more of the poet because we see honestly the parts of him that we're out of sympathy with, we're less inclined to make him 'Tinder generation' by proxy'. I think that's a lovely phrase. And He goes on to talk about a poem, #7, where I actually lapse into Japanese at one stage.

This is [01:17:00] Catullus being very passive and he's talking about being kissed by Lesbia, which is what his male friends so disapprove of, they think he's a bit sissy, but he wants to count the number of times he is kissed by his girlfriend and he says to her, 'Ply me hemp silk jute and tie me/Ichinawa, takate kote/Futomono, hishi karada,/Tasuki, kannuki,/ Hashira, daruma shibari./All of it. Semenawa for the burn.' So he's asking-- this is what he wants from her. You don't have to understand it. And one critic has said, 'Oh, poor Isabelle', you know, I've just gotten lost in the string of Japanese terms for bondage.

And this guy, John Clegg, he says it's the best translation of this poem he's ever seen by a mile. So you can take your choice. And both of them are right. You know, that's the joy of criticism. Both of them are right. So-- but I like that idea that making Catullus alien or emphasizing just how alien --and quite horrible actually-- ancient Rome could be [01:18:00] helps you see the poetry clearly, and there's been an awful lot of fuss and gloss over the centuries and sentimentalization of the poet. And I'm trying to strip off, I think, some of the varnish that might've started adhering from certain attitudes. For example, one poem where he's being terribly rude about somebody who doesn't speak Received Pronunciation, as we call it-- which of course, I do-- #84 and I put at the top of this poem, I'm quoting the Oxford Anthology of Roman Literature in which somebody has said, 'this is a pleasantly trivial anecdote ridiculing the pretensions of an upstart'. Well, it's actually Catullus being very nasty about somebody who doesn't talk proper. So it's not pleasantly trivial. And who is this guy writing in the Oxford Anthology of Roman Literature to describe Arrius as an upstart?

**Aven:** Yeah, it's just like I was saying at the beginning about how scholars have so often assumed that [01:19:00] they would be the one Catullus would approve of, and they're taking his side and taking his view and saying, 'Oh, of course it's an upstart unlike us, you and I Catullus, right?' They want to be-- Catullus is making the in-group and the out-group and scholars have wanted to be on the in-group for too long and thought that they would be. And so they take him at his word and you're right. It's a terrible-- I mean, it's a very good poem, but it's a terrible poem from any kind of human perspective. And to treat it as if it's putting someone who deserves to be put in his place in his place is very telling of the scholar, I think.

**Isobel:** I mean, I gathered that this guy was indeed regarded as a bit of an arriviste in Rome, which is very sort of snobby--

**Aven:** By Catullus and his friends at least.

**Isobel:** But I think more generally, as I say, it's a very stratum-ridden society. As I said, it's part of the varnish that I'm trying to sort of scrub away a little bit. But you know, I'm just one of many. And in 1991 Guy Lee wrote in the [01:20:00] introduction to his translation 'surely there isn't a need for yet another personal emotional translation of Catullus'.

And that was 1991. And he's just howling in the desert, you know, because there's been this-- he's standing buried under this flood of personal free translations. So I haven't found the exact quote, but, you know-- and I don't blame him either, enough is enough, but I had to add to it because Catullus is just irresistible.

**Aven:** Yep. Absolutely.

**Isobel:**  Compelling, yeah.

**Aven:** Absolutely. Well, this has been absolutely fascinating. I will put a link to your website, as I said, in the show notes. Are there other places that people can --you have your blog for people to come and see your drawings, should they be allowed to resume in the future?

**Isobel:** Oh, one day, one day. Yes, I've got a blog about drawing bondage in particular, I've got a straight blog about drawing generally. I have a website which is a sort of overarching thing, and I'll give you all the [01:21:00] links to that and make it really clear what's where.

**Aven:** Right. And what is your Twitter handle?

**Isobel:** Well, believe it or not, you can probably guess. It is @otium\_Catulle.

**Aven:** That's right. So 'Idleness-Catullus'. So yes, please. Feel free to check all of those things out. And the book is from-- is it Carcanet Press?

**Isobel:** Carcanet Press, that's right. I'm on Instagram too. I'll send you the link to that as well. Yep.

**Aven:** Perfect. Well, thank you so much for this conversation. It's been absolutely fascinating.

**Mark:** Yeah, this has been wonderful.

**Isobel:** Well, thank you very much for very much enlivening my lockdown over here. I've really enjoyed it. Thank you. Thank you.

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**Mark:** Bye.