

**Jo Shapcott, interviewed by Fiona Cox (23/07/2012)**

**FC:** Did you have a classical education? Could you tell us about that?

**JS:** No. I never learnt Latin or Greek, but I was a pathological reader as a child and loved fairytales and myths, and I had an adapted version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – I can't remember which one – which I read from an early age.

**FC:** I love the image that you have in '1953' of being tucked up under your mother's arm like a book. It's really very Ovidian, that idea of your self being embodied by a book.

**JS:** Well, if you look at the Introductory poem of *Her Book* you'll see that it's an adaptation of the first poem of the *Tristia* where Ovid sends his book back to Rome in his stead. I wrote that, I think, especially for that anthology, so after all the other poems in it.

**FC:** Is there an adaptation or a translation which you favour in particular?

**JS:** No. I really just take the material rather than focussing on the language.

**FC:** Ovid is a constant in your work. Are there any other authors from antiquity with whom you engage particularly?

**JS:** No, not really. I'm not interested so much in the ancient world, as in myths and fairytales. And change. I'm very interested in change and transience, so Ovid was very appealing to me from that point of view.

**FC:** It's really interesting that you draw not only on the *Metamorphoses* but also on the *Tristia* which, until recently, have been much less well known. Can you talk about how you came to know them, especially as somebody who isn't a classicist?

**JS:** A friend suggested to me that I read them, and when I did I discovered how rich they are.

**FC:** What's remarkable at the moment is how many writers are turning to the exile poems – I'm thinking of Jane Alison's novel, *The Love Artist*, Josephine Balmer's volume *The Word for Sorrow* which melds her response to the First World War with her responses to the *Tristia* and in France the novelist Marie Darrieusecq recently translated the exile poetry. I wonder whether there's something in the *Zeitgeist* that is drawing people towards the exile poetry in particular?

**JS:** Well, I think the theme of exile is a very potent one, but it often has been. I don't know why we're turning especially to the *Tristia* now.

**FC:** During the Second World War there was an enormous turn to Virgil because he spoke of the pain of being a refugee, of the loss of your fatherland, but I'm not sure that there was an

especial revival of interest in the *Tristia* at that time. It may be that we are living at a time that connects to Ovid very strongly.

**JS:** Have you heard about the Titian project at the National Gallery?

**FC:** Oh yes – is it to celebrate the Olympics?

**JS:** Well, it doesn't celebrate the Olympics as such, but it's part of the Cultural Olympiad. It's also marking the fact that it's the first time that the three Titian paintings have been brought together and are being shown together for the first time since the eighteenth century.

**FC:** Well I'm just glad to hear that they're including some culture during the Olympics, given the amount that we're paying out on sport.

**JS:** Ah yes, but there are hidden costs there too. It's being funded by some Olympic money, but certainly some money was also taken from other Arts Council projects in order to pay for it. There are a variety of art forms inspired by the paintings – installation art, a volume of poetry and ballet. It's amazing to see the actual paintings in front of you. You can see where Titian painted with his hand, and dragged his fingers through the paint. Of course Titian was heavily influenced by Ovid, so his paintings are also part of the transmission that brings Ovid to our world. They've got the relevant extracts of the *Metamorphoses* up on the walls next to the paintings.

**FC:** In Latin or English?

**JS:** In English. I'm not sure whose translation they used. I'm really interested in the connections between different people responding to the same text, between artists and writers. For example *Of Mutability* was inspired as much by the work of the artist Helen Chadwick, who focuses a great deal on change.

**FC:** Was she influenced by Ovid, do you know?

**JS:** I don't know if there's a specifically Ovidian connection. Her works are extraordinarily beautiful, and born of corruption and decay. *Piss Flowers* are the casts she made of the shape of pee from a male and from a female, done in bronze, and they're really beautiful. I was absolutely bowled over by them.

**FC:** It sounds quite Baudelairean – creating flowers out of decay.

**JS:** Yes, absolutely.

One of the contemporary artists doing a modern version of Actaeon has set up a bath, and you have to peep through a hole to see the live model lying there. And all of the models he uses are called Diana in real life, which is really quirky.

**FC:** That's brilliant, because it catches that sense of shame and embarrassment that you feel if you do actually walk in on someone in the bathroom by mistake.

**JS:** I chose to write about the Callisto painting, which is fascinating because it's an image of real feminine power and vulnerability at the same time. Callisto is lying on the rock, obviously pregnant and with her navel bared, and there's that strong gesture of Diana pointing at her. There are so many diagonals in the picture. And I'm really interested in the question of direction in poetry, how a poem looks on the page. We tend always to approach poetry horizontally, line by line, but its verticals are important as well. When I was writing the poem I tracked the direction of each character's gaze with a ruler, and the one gazing out at the reader is the dog.

**FC:** That's lovely – that the spectator should be invited into the narrative through the dog's gaze.

**JS:** Yes – I'd originally thought of writing the poem from the dog's perspective, but then decided to write it from the point of view of Callisto, after she had become a constellation, which presented its own problems. What kind of voice does a constellation have? What I did was to insert an asterisk after each word in the poem, so as to show the stars.

**FC:** I listened to the interview that you and George Szirtes did, and loved your observation that in your poem Callisto is looking back to this moment from the future, from the constellation that she becomes, because of course that's exactly the opposite direction of Ovid, who closes the *Metamorphoses* by looking into a future where he will exist among the stars.

**JS:** Oh yes – I hadn't consciously realised that when I was writing it.

**FC:** The sky and stars and space underpin all your books – you seem to have a vision of them which owes a lot to the ancient world.

**JS:** In what way – how did the ancients view the stars?

**FC:** Well, I'm thinking really of Ovid, and how our sense of wonder at the stars is the element that makes us human, rather than sharing the viewpoint of animals. There's a passage at the beginning of the *Metamorphoses* where he talks about humans standing up and raising their vision to the world, so that in fact the *Metamorphoses* is a poem that's framed by stars.

**JS:** Well, I'm also interested in science and looking at stars from a scientific point of view. I have a lot of curiosity. I discovered when writing the Callisto poem that Juno had ordained that Callisto's constellation should not dip down into the sea, which in antiquity it didn't, but now it does, because the axes of the heavens have shifted in the meantime.

**FC:** That's fascinating – that's one of those moments when science actually sharpens our sense of wonder at the poetry.

**FC:** What's very interesting in *Of Mutability* is how dangerous and fragile the world appears to be. In 'Era' the metamorphoses, the weird and wonderful creatures, appear to happen as a result of the invisible toxins with which we're saturating the world. It really is Ovid addressing contemporary concerns, and of course behind the whole volume stands the war in Iraq, I think? In 'A Letter to Dennis' you write of the need to 'find a use for fury'

**JS:** Yes, yes, absolutely, that's right. We don't have a figure like Dennis Potter anymore, who was so angry and involved, and who used his work so powerfully. Of course I'm writing about the world we live in, and I'm interested in the way in which Ovid helps us to think about the world around us, and about such matters as where do our selves, our bodies end and the rest of the world begin? How do we understand the difference between the molecules that make up our bodies and the rest of the world. It's science again.

**FC:** There seems to be a continuum from the 'Mad Cow' sequence from your earlier works, and your depiction of illness in *Of Mutability*? In both works the metamorphoses of the body are engendered by something that we've done as humans. We've poisoned our world.

**JS:** Well the Mad Cow poems were written before we'd made a direct connection between Mad Cow disease and its manifestation in humans. It was suspected at the time that I was writing, but it hadn't been proven. And in many ways the Mad Cow is a heroic figure – a kind of holy fool – exuberant and creative. The holes in her brain let in a host of different stories. I'm especially fond of a poem called 'Deft', where she's a very strong, creative figure. So I'm not sure that there is a continuum between those poems and the illness in *Of Mutability*.

**FC:** Well I'm thinking that in both there's that sense of being on the outside, and of struggling through a world that's out of kilter. The Mad Cow lurches and stumbles, and in *Of Mutability* you describe very vividly a sense of dizziness, and of suddenly feeling unsafe. It's that sense of being in a world that's lost its bearings, I suppose. And that Ovidian sense that being unable to stand upright makes us a little less human.

I was wondering how important your gender is to you when writing poetry, how aware you are of writing as a woman?

**JS:** Well it's both incredibly important and not important at all, in the sense that being a woman underpins my whole outlook on everything, but at the same time I'm responding to everything around me simply as myself.

**FC:** Yes – I was wondering, though, whether you think that women are more drawn to certain themes, certain mythological figures? To borrow another of your lines do we 'remember the same past differently?'

**JS:** Well, when I was commissioned to write a poem for *After Ovid* I plumped for the figure of Thetis.

**FC:** Oh, is that the Thetis Creatrix poem?

**JS:** No – what happened was that I wrote the Thetis version for *After Ovid* and then in the days before a reading of it I began to get cold feet, because I didn't think it was very good and I was nervous of reading it out in front of poets like Ted Hughes. So just before the reading I wrote another poem called 'Thetis' which I think is much better, and which begins 'No man can frighten me'.

**FC:** It ends with another very contemporary image, doesn't it? When she talks of being raped, and bleeding from her eyes and being beaten, it's impossible not to think of the horror stories that were coming out of Bosnia at around the same time about the ways in which women were being abused?

**JS:** Yes, yes, that's right. It is coloured by events that were happening in Bosnia. I don't know generally whether women go for certain myths that men don't go for. It would be interesting to look at the Titian project and to see if the women went for Callisto and the men for Actaeon. [It transpires that only 3 of twelve writers chose the Callisto painting, all of them women – Shapcott, Carol Ann Duffy and Lavinia Greenlaw].

**FC:** There are myths such as that of Medusa which women return to again and again, and I'm not sure that you'd find a man responding in the same way. This is partly because of Cixous' essay *Le Rire de la Méduse*, and your own poem 'Watching Medusa' appears to share that same sense of power that's been won.

I'm very interested in the connections that you establish between your own work and that of others which, I think, is indicated most vividly in your title 'Shapcott's Variation on Schoenberg's Orchestration of Bach's Prelude and Fugue in Eb major, 'St Anne'.

**JS:** Yes, that's right. One of the differences between writing and music is that in music it's much easier to indicate through titles that you're creating a variation on somebody else's work.

**FC:** And the fugal motif indicates that the work keeps on being perpetuated. It's very interesting that you're able to establish connections with music and painting, as well as with other writers. It all seems part of this 'passion for layers' you write about, so that Ovid comes not just through Titian, but also Pushkin as you show in the title 'The Gypsies' Tales of Ovid – (after Pushkin)'.

**JS:** Yes, that's right, but there are other influences as well that I haven't mentioned explicitly. I wasn't aware of it at the time, but I think there's an awful lot of Emily Dickinson, whom I love, in *Of Mutability*. I have a poem 'The Deaths' where I write: 'I thought I knew

my death/ so when, after a bee buzz/ of an afternoon' which must look back to her line 'I heard a fly buzz – when I died', even though I didn't realize this when I was writing.

**FC:** Could you say more about where your voice begins and the other voices end? It's a little like what you were saying about the boundaries of where our selves end and the world begins. When does a poem stop being somebody else and become Shapcott? I'm thinking of your versions of Rilke, and the fact that you close the volume with that citation from Borges 'I do not know which of us has written this page.'

**JS:** Well of course, in translation studies there are a great many people looking at the difference between a translation and a variation and where one begins and another ends. My own versions of Rilke couldn't be recognised as straightforward translations – in fact sometimes I say the complete opposite. If you put the poems side by side it would look more like an argument than a translation. In fact when it comes to his 'Roses' sequence I write back as the figure of Rose and answer him in that way.