

Stephanie Burt on AFTER CALLIMACHUS: Poems for the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast

Marshall Poe

Welcome to the New Books Network.

Hello, everybody. This is Marshall Poe. I'm the editor of the New Books Network and this is an episode in the Princeton University Press Ideas Podcast series. And today, we're talking to Stephanie Burt about her book AFTER CALLIMACHUS. It's been published by Princeton University Press--I believe it came out in 2020--and I'm looking forward to the conversation.

Stephanie, welcome to the show.

Stephanie Burt

Happy to be here.

Marshall Poe

Good, could you begin the interview by telling us a little bit about yourself?

Stephanie Burt

About me? Okay. I'm from Washington DC. I've lived in Massachusetts and Connecticut and New York City, and England, and Minnesota. And I have some loyalty to Minnesota. I used to teach at Macalester College in St. Paul. And since 2007, I have been back in Massachusetts teaching at Harvard. Two cats; one dog; two kids. We live in Belmont. I wrote a book called *Belmont*. I write about poetry a lot and I think about the X-Men way too much and they'll probably come up later in this podcast.

Marshall Poe

Yes, one of my daughters is really into manga, so I think a lot about manga these days. So, my first question is: how did you become a poet and a translator of poetry?

Stephanie Burt

So, those are two questions. The first one: How does anyone become a poet? I mean, you know, practice? Realizing that you have nothing better to do with your time? Gentle encouragement? Or, at least, a lack of discouragement from peers and teachers when discouragement was perhaps just as easily warranted. The thing I like about making poetry as opposed to any other art form, is that at least when you're starting you can do it anywhere, 10 minutes at a time for free and the models, the kinds of work that you might want to imitate when you're trying to learn to write poetry, are out there in libraries or out there on the internet. If what you're doing is writing short poems, rather than trying to be, you know, the next Spencer or the next Virgil, you can read them for ten minutes at once and then go back to what you're doing. And you can combine trying to write poetry with other things. When I was a teen, I really very much enjoyed writing poetry, but doing something involving literature was definitely my third

choice for what I wanted to do with my occupation, with my career. My first choice was singer-songwriter and my second choice with molecular biologist, and then I got to college I learned that it's not really worth anyone's time to hear me sing and it's definitely not a good idea to have me anywhere near a lab.

So, I fortunately discovered that my literature professors thought this was a good thing for me to be doing with my time. I decided to focus on writing poetry and writing about poetry for a bit and that's where I am. And it turns out also that, right? Because poems, at least the poems that I like, are about things. Writing poems involves putting words together so that they sound memorable and moving and make you want to hear them or read them again. But, poems are also about things and they are a way of writing about things. It turns out I like writing about things and I have written poems and also what I hope is intelligible prose, not just about the things that poets conventionally write about, you know, erotic desire and fulfillment and loneliness and longing and parenthood and outrage and disappointment, and patience and cats, of course, and dogs, and we have dogs, so the next book is going to have a dog poem, which I never did, but also about the various things I'm a fan of: women's basketball, abstract painting, X-Men comics, other comics, the She-Ra television show, which I cannot praise enough.

Marshall Poe:

Wait, I'm writing this down.

Stephanie Burt

Yeah, and I have a kind of fan mentality I suppose and the last time someone wrote about my work at any length, I was accused of being I think a gushing fountain of praise. I've also been called a fangirl, which the person reviewing my work thought was an insult. They didn't say "fangirl" because the piece appeared a while ago, but if you switch out the correct gender terms, "fangirl," and that's not remotely an insult. I like to think that I provide the critical and conceptual tools to help people find new things and understand what they like and understand how people are different one from another, all of which are things that criticism exists to do.

But I like liking things, as one of my favorite podcasters has said, and I like connecting people to things that they might be changed by, might be transformed by, might get joy from. And sometimes they do that in the poems that I write and that brings me to translation, right? Let me know if I'm talking too fast, by the way. I think a lot, this partly has to do with the work of translation, about different ways of using English: different speeds, and inflections, and word hordes that different kinds of English use. And I'm aware that my kind of English sounds perhaps very American to people using other kinds of world English. And perhaps very East Coast and a bit rapid and bookish if you're used to other kinds of speech. So tell me if I need to slow down.

So poems come from other poems, as well as from the life experience of the writer and some of the most fertile and delightful moments in the history of poetry and English have been the moments when poems were most likely to come from other poems and other languages.

Chaucer, who's not the first person to write verse in English, but who's the first person we think about all the time and read a lot of who wrote verse in English, unless you're kind of Old English, which is a different language, Chaucer is constantly reading French and Italian. He's reading Latin too, and he's taking poems in those languages and changing them and putting them into English. And he's not necessarily doing an accurate translation, but he's adapting. Poets of the 16th century: people like Wyatt and and Spencer are constantly doing this as well. They're

getting their ideas by turning cool stuff in other languages into English and that is still happening today. From poets like Brandon Som who has some very intricate translations, versions rather, of Chinese, a language he does not read fluently.

Translating poems and adapting, doing free translations or semi translations from other languages is one of the best ways to expand your own poetic style and to enrich the language that you're writing in and just to get new ideas. W.H. Auden, who I trust on most things and who was very, very down on many of the components of academic creative writing and of academic literary studies as he founded in America, was a very learned person who said that the only exercise that he recommended for would-be poets, the only things that poets really needed to do to get better at poetry composition was you need to find peers. You need to find other beginners or other sort of intermediate writers so that you can read each other's work and react as peers not as experts. And you need to be reading other languages and translating and whether or not it produces translations worth reading, it will certainly make you a better poet.

Now, Princeton University Press has decided to actually publish a book of very free translations that I put together that's the result of my engagement with this particular poet Callimachus and also of me off and on looking for work to translate and sometimes sending my translations and versions and adaptations out into the world, not just of Callimachus, but of a little bit of other Greek lyric and of other writers I admire in Spanish now and again. But, Callimachus is by far the largest of my engagements with translation/adaptation/imitation/working with poetic sources in another language. And I think this is where we switch tracks from me talking about me to me talking about that, right?

Marshall Poe

That's right. So, my next question is, why Callimachus? There are a lot of Greek poets to choose from. Why did you choose Callimachus' poems?

Stephanie Burt

Well, when you look at Greek poets, we have quite a lot of relatively short poems [that] have survived, there are fewer than you think, but Callimachus is absolutely the right poet for me for a number of reasons. I'll give you the capsule bio and then we'll lead into why he seems right for me. He's someone who may have spent his entire life in North Africa. He's from what today is Libya and he lives most or all of his adult life in Alexandria in Egypt, which is a port city. It's a cosmopolitan city; it's sort of the Paris of its time or maybe the Shanghai and it is in his lifetime starting to build what we now know as the Library of Alexandria, the repository of knowledge of the ancient world. Callimachus is around and he's writing at a time when there are already centuries of ancient Greek literature to draw on.

We call ancient Greek and Latin "the Classics." And of course, you know, Sappho didn't go around saying "I am part of the Classics," she just composed her poems and Aeschylus the playwright in classical Athens, didn't say, you know, "I am part of a revered tradition of myth and oral tradition," because those are people who are really at the dawn of the written literature. Hesiod is another example of this. Those are people who have a claim to be near the origin of Western Mediterranean, a particular kind of culture that we now call, maybe misleadingly, Western culture. It is also, of course, North African culture. Those are people, again, Sappho is a good example, or Pindar, those are people where when German Romantics go on about the origin of everything and the secret to all of modernity can be unlocked in the

brilliant primevalism of the earliest Greek texts. When those people talk about Classics, they're not talking about Callimachus. This is the opposite of that. Callimachus is an extremely sophisticated, worldly, late coming, non-mystical, sometimes down to earth or ironic, sometimes a little bit fussy, or I'm going to use the word "femme" here, detail-oriented, self-conscious writer who is writing in a time when the Classics are already Classics. One of his one-liners says in English, "I give you nothing that doesn't have a source. Everything that I tell you, I read about it somewhere, I can footnote it if you want." Callimachus is someone who's quite self-conscious about and who's okay with not being a primeval poetic source of prophetic chaos or instinct. And for someone like me, who is a trans girl, who's femme, who's detail-oriented, who's quite self-conscious? Who... I sometimes feel I don't really have instincts, I just have feelings and friends and things that I've learned. For someone who exists at an absolute remove from the primeval power of "you'll just know what to do when you get there." For someone who likes reading things in books, including comic books, and for someone who's quite social, who likes making connections to other people rather than simply reaching inside myself, Callimachus is an ideal collaborator. I feel that I have a lot in common with him, and of course he is a dude and gender and sex in the ancient world do not work the way that they work in my world in 2021, but it is quite easy, if that's what you're looking for, to find analogies for modern queer and trans identities, including mine, and for modern feminism, in Callimachus. Again, if that's what you're looking for. The poems in my book that are the most overtly feminist, that are the most overtly about, you know, "we need to fight patriarchy," are not necessarily and they're usually not the ones that are the most faithful to, the Greek originals. But those resources are available in his work and his relation to kinds of poems, not to sentiments expressed within the poems, but to what kinds of poems he chose to write are also very congenial to me. One of the other witticisms that he's often quoted out of context for is "mega biblion, mega kakon," which means "A big or great or large book is a big or great or large evil or bad thing or pain in the ass."

He was someone who had no ambition to compete with Homer; he was someone who would have thought that the Snyder cut was a ball of macho ridiculousness. He was someone who wrote narrative poems, and I translate some of his narrative work, but someone who did not at all want to compete with the greats of the past or the present in terms of scale or scope or strength. He was someone who wanted to be precise and beautiful and interesting and engaging and useful, and learned, and sometimes unpredictable. And he defended himself or articulated his poetics quite self-consciously in a couple of the poems that I translate that are sort of pushing back against people who said, "well, why don't you do something more bold and original and large scale?" And his answer was, "that's not me, and also stopping a macho jerk."

He had a proverbial rivalry with the poet Apollonius of Rhodes who was known for his epics. They probably didn't really hate each other, but they did represent rival concepts of what this art form in that day, that Hellenistic period, was supposed to be about. And again, I am absolutely on Callimachus' side right here.

Marshall Poe

You've reminded me a little bit of a fascination that my 11 year old daughter has with fan fiction, this is in manga universes, and she loves to read it. I don't think any of these people have, you know, they're not creating something exactly new.

Stephanie Burt

Neither did Virgil. This is honestly an entire other podcast. Do you read fan fiction yourself?

Marshall Poe

I don't, no.

Stephanie Burt

Okay, you may be missing out.

Marshall Poe

I'm sure. My eleven-year-old tells me every day how much I'm missing. And there're all these brilliant people out there writing brilliant fan fiction, which she finds online. It'll never be published except online. And she is fans of some of the people who write fan fiction.

Stephanie Burt

So am I. That speaks quite well to your relationship with your eleven-year-old.

Marshall Poe

[Laughing] She's always trying to get me to read this. Let me ask you a couple of questions about Callimachus.

Stephanie Burt

We can talk more about fan fiction if you want.

Marshall Poe

I think I would be out of my depth there, but I'm sure I could learn a lot.

Stephanie Burt

Okay. I will say another thing that Callimachus likes doing. Do you know what an Easter egg is? I hope it may be clear from my description already that Callimachus' poems are full of Easter eggs and the longer I'm in the poetry world, in the literature world, the more I dislike the kind of modernism that requires you to get all the references before you can have an aesthetic experience.

You know, I like *The Waste Land* but I don't want to write *The Waste Land*. I'm very tired of the kind of modernism that I associate with the later work of Ezra Pound or with certain slices of the modern post avant-garde, where you have to know all the references, you have to have read Agamben and you have to have read Gramsci, you have to have read Tasso and Ariosto or you won't get anything. I'm just not interested in that, but I love Easter eggs. I love the idea that if you happen to get this reference, the work becomes deeper and richer for you, but it's quite optional. There are quite a lot of references, Easter eggs, in my Callimachus book in homage to the Greek originals. Although surely there are some that refer to lost works that we, as moderns, will never get rather than referring to other works of the ancient Mediterranean world. I've got a whole bunch of Easter eggs that are either to modern literary culture, to poetic culture, or to various parts of the comic book and the comic book fan world.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I remember when I was in college and people would say, "that's a difficult text," and that just made me want to run away.

Stephanie Burt

Yeah, I mean, it's a difficult text. Some of my favorite poets are quite difficult but I don't want to make texts that are difficult in that way. What I want is texts that are difficult to get to the bottom of, right? You can read *Pride and Prejudice* once; it's not a difficult text to read once, at least you know, not for me, but it is quite difficult to feel that you've gotten to the bottom of it, to feel that you know all of what Jane Austen is trying to do. And I would actually argue that for Austen you never get there. And I'd love to have my work be difficult in that way. But I also want to be inviting.

Marshall Poe

Yeah I agree with you completely. I just read Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for the third time and trust me, I found new things in it. I really found new things.

Stephanie Burt

Yeah. That's a very good example.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. There's a lot going on there and the guy was kind of a genius and well anyway, I could go on and on about that but tell me this, what language did Callimachus write in?

Stephanie Burt

Oh, he wrote in Greek.

Marshall Poe

Okay, all right, well, let's go to the next question and that is: we've used this word translate very freely but that's not really accurate and you signal this in the book by something you called the imitators note that precedes the poems itself. What do you mean by the imitators note and what would you call these if they're not translations? They're kinda sorta translations, no?

Stephanie Burt

They're imitations and adaptations. Some of them are in fact translations. Some of them are an attempt to produce musically coherent and memorable and moving words, sets of words in English that are as close as I can get to what the Greek seems to be doing and those are translations, but most of them are not. Most of them deviate in word order, in sense, in example, in descriptive detail, and what I have left out is what I want you to envision. Most of them deviate in some way from the Greek originals and that is a literary tradition that is older than the English language. It is distinct from the tradition of trying to produce accurate, reliable translations, which I am not equipped to do by myself. I have enough Greek to do what I did but I couldn't have done that without consulting and working with Mark Payne from the University of Chicago, who is one of my favorite humans and who contributed an introduction that's really scholarly in a way that I can't be.

These are poems based on and responsive to and derived from what I see in the Greek originals. But most of them do not reflect line-by-line or sentence-by-sentence what Callimachus says, and there are a couple where I virtually reverse the meaning where the original is, for example, delightful and witty and well-constructed, but kind of sexist. There are a couple of love poems

that are about the joy of the catch and the chase and, you know, taking down your lover as if they were a rabbit and that's the opposite of how erotic relationships ought to work.

But even that poem, most of it does come in some way from what Callimachus wrote, but I did reverse it. A book that a lot of people I know dislike that I rather like is Robert Lowell's early 60s book IMITATIONS, in which he just zoomed through his favorite classical and Western European poets and produced versions that sounded like Robert Lowell and I wouldn't want to sound like Robert Lowell and I couldn't if I tried, I think. But his going to these poems he admired in order to make poems that worked in English has been something I admired.

One difference between what he's trying to do and what I was trying to do was that his poems sound like him and to the extent [that] they don't sound like him, they sound like the variety of poets he was taking on; he wasn't sort of trying to create a consistent persona throughout that book. His Rilke sounds like some sort of mash up of Lowell plus Rilke, and his Baudelaire actually sounds like Baudelaire sometimes and they have the same kind of self-hate. But, you know, his Sappho doesn't sound like Sappho.

The Callimachus that I'm trying to speak through, if it works, it is consistent throughout the book. And these poems sound like one another. And there's some version of me that's in there, but it's not exactly the same as the poems that I write that just say Stephanie Burt on them.

Marshall Poe

I want to digress for a second about translation. I've tried to do some of it myself from Russian and even Old Russian and English. And I have to say I failed utterly because all of my translations sounded like me.

Stephanie Burt

That's not necessarily a failure; that's just something other than an accurate translation. Are you translating verse or prose?

Marshall Poe

No, it was all prose, but it's just that I get to the point in the translation...sometimes I would translate scholarly articles for people and I would get to some point in the text and I would say "You know, I think they should have said this like that."

Stephanie Burt

Yeah, that's a problem in translation series. Actually, it sounds like you're translating people that aren't necessarily great prose stylists themselves.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I'm no great prose stylist. But I just get to the point that I say, "You know, I think there's a better way to put this, so I'm going to do that."

Stephanie Burt

And that's it, depending on what kind of translation you're trying to produce, that is either verboten or very much desirable.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, but this is kind of a process question. Well, it's a historical question. I'm a historian. I'm a medieval historian. One of the things that always fascinates me is how texts come down to us. Could you talk a little bit about how a Callimachus' poems made their way to us? What do we have? What don't we have? How do they survive?

Stephanie Burt

Absolutely. So Callimachus wrote several different kinds of poems. He wrote hymns, which are short narrative poems or short poems that contained a narrative praising Olympian Gods. He wrote what we call epigrams; they're all short and some of them are funny or witty or insulting and some of them are about love and sex and some of them are memorials or comments on the dead and on other topics, but they're all quite short. He wrote lyric poems that are also short but that had song-like qualities. He wrote what we call Epyllions, shortish epics that have unified subjects or framing subjects in which various stories get told. Ovid's *Metamorphoses* is an example...but he wrote poems that look like Ovid's *Metamorphoses* and that you get a framed tale and then other tales inside it but that are shorter. He wrote a very celebrated long poem called the *Aetia*, which is several books worth of what we in the comic book world call origin stories. How did this come to be? And *Aetia* is also to some extent a travel book. He takes various legends and factoids and things you would see if you visited parts of the ancient Mediterranean and answers questions like "Why is that there?" There's a city where you're not allowed to say the name of the city. Why is that? Why is the temple on this island in this bizarre shape with an idol that you'd never see elsewhere in the ancient Mediterranean? Why is that? Why? Why, why, how did these things come to be? And the *Aetia* is a collection of works in verse that are linked together that tells stories about why why why in the ancient world. And there are a couple other categories of works that he produced.

Now, they've survived in different ways. The hymns and the epigram survive complete. You know, entirely scribally transmitted books of these things have come complete all the way down into the late medieval world and the early Renaissance world, where they could be put into print. And we have them; we have them all. All of the other works, *The Aetia* and the rest of it, they all survived only in fragments, sometimes because they're quoted in other works, sometimes because somebody found a piece of paper somewhere. A number of them have turned up, if I'm not mistaken in [unclear], if I'm not pronouncing it wrong. They've turned up in modern days in discoveries in archaeological digs where somebody finds a piece of papyrus and it turns out that the words on it are continuous with words in another fragment that we already know is Callimachus and so we get more of that poem or a longer poem. There are quite a lot of these fragments because Callimachus was a very popular, a very well-known writer in the ancient world.

And if you're a modern poetry fan, honestly, Auden is probably the best analogy. Nobody thought of Auden as the great prophet and source of everything. Nobody has formed a cult around Auden and Auden certainly didn't want that. But everybody thinks he's super smart and most everyone I respect about poetry thinks that there's some of Auden that you can admire. And in some sense, it all sounds like Auden, but there are a lot of different kinds of works. And Auden was very conscious of changing what kinds of works that he wrote in. So, if you imagine that two of Auden's books, let's say *The Sea* and *The Mirror* and the one book that has *Musée des Beaux-arts* in it, survived complete and everything else just turns up when people copied into their journals or quoted on Tumblr or...it's something like that.

And, you never know when somebody's going to dig up a little bit more, but there are a lot of fragments and I treat the fragments because a lot of the work before and after Callimachus is fragments, my goal is to produce poems that feel like entire poems in English and sometimes I translate one fragment as if it were a poem and sometimes I paste several of them together. And some of them, as, with the story of [unclear] early on, some of them are fragments where we know that they belong together and some of them I just got up my glue pot and put together fragments that seemed to work to make a short poem. This is more like a paste out and Callimachus is someone who was very conscious of quoting and sort of wanted to be quoted and quotable. He's a poet who you can do this to.

Marshall Poe

Now I know Callimachus wrote things other than poetry because I read the Wikipedia page. What other interests did he have?

Stephanie Burt

His prose works, I believe, do not survive, but we do know that there are some. There's a tradition that he was a librarian at the Library of Alexandria—he was there when it was starting. And so he's involved in the collection and making available of knowledge from throughout the ancient world. There's also a tradition that he was what we now call a high school teacher which is a very low prestige job in antiquity, but he has a couple of poems about the labors of teaching and why that wasn't fun for him--poking fun at people he knows who had to undertake that job after he had grown out of it, but he was primarily known and extensively known as a poet.

Marshall Poe

Okay, this is also a process question and it relates to a personal experience. So, in some of these translations I was doing, I had other translations at my knee. I found this very irritating.

Stephanie Burt

Yeah, it depends on how good you are with your source language and what you're trying to do. It is one experience--and I have done it--to translate or adapt or imitate work into English where the poem you're working with already has a number of well-known translations. There's a Cesar Vallejo poem that everybody and their cousin translates that I've adapted into English. It's a weird sad poem that I just love to death but with Callimachus there are, as far as I know, three translations of all the poems or most of the poems into English. The body of translation that has been most helpful to me and that I did consult is the ever helpful Loeb Classical Library which is just a whole bunch of very helpful, not beautiful prose translations by classical scholars, some of whom did this work 80 years ago and some of whom did this work more recently. But at this point, the Loeb Classical Library provides for Callimachus as for all the major poets of the ancient world of the Western Mediterranean, just blocks of prose that either tell you more or less what the Greek is saying or give you one version of what the Greek is saying that is at least reliable, or almost does that, but leaves out the sexy bits. When you work with older Loeb Classical Library, sometimes you get either deliberate sort of euphemisms or suddenly the English turns into Latin where it's instructions on how to have really fun sex.

So, you don't want to do that without reading Greek at all. And you don't want to do that without an awareness that often the translators are making choices and other choices are possible but those are extremely useful. And one of the things that I loved about working with

Callimachus is that there aren't tons and tons of existing beautiful English translations. There are others. Someone named Frank Nisetich did a version of a lot of Callimachus I think less than 20 years ago, early 2000s, I think. And those are attempts to be more or less accurate. He doesn't, you know, introduce jet planes and Tumblr. It's also someone--and they're very good for what they are--it's someone whose sense of how verse should sound in translation was much closer to Pound's than to Auden's and so, his ear is not my ear at all. So these other translations do exist. I think there's one more from the late 20th century but there aren't a lot. The one that I really loved using was the Loeb Classical Library, which is not trying to create poems in English. And I did find myself deliberately not consulting the other verse versions until I had at least drafts of what I was doing.

Marshall Poe

I have a question. It's about register and, you know, when I would translate stuff from 18th century Russian, let's say I didn't really understand what register they were writing in and by register I mean a kind of highbrow/lowbrow/with a lot of slang/without a lot of slang, because I just didn't know the language well enough. How do you deal with the question of register in translating poems that are as old as these?

Stephanie Burt

So that is three questions. One is, how do you notice register as a matter of word choice in the source language; how do you know when a particular word suggests mega politeness or is very colloquial and familiar or has a regional or otherwise specialized implication? And the answer to that is, I don't know because I'm not actually a classical scholar. My Greek is not awesome. It's good enough to do this, so they tell me. They see me and people seem to like it. Classical scholars tell me that I'm not embarrassing myself. My Greek is good enough but is not good enough to make fine distinctions of register, even where they are possible, which, with ancient Greek, it sometimes is. You can say, because we know where else these words occur, right? Like nobody has conversational ancient Greek, but we can say this word occurs, only in Dorian text, this is a Homeric word, right? This is a word that never occurs in Athenian text. This is a word that when it occurs in plays is only spoken by characters of low social status. We can sort of cross check and make guesses about words, but those are guesses.

The second question is about tone in the original.

When does the content or the syntax or the framing of what's being said suggest familiarity or formality or would appeal to someone of higher social station or insult. And in English, at least American English, we have a lot of words, but we don't have highly defined registers of formality the way a language like Japanese does. We don't have, at least within North America and US and Canada English, Standard English, we don't have a language that works like Arabic where there are different ways of communicating that have entirely different regional, national, and social class implications, right? There's nothing like classical Arabic in English. There's not even really anything like modern standard Arabic which sounds very different from what you hear on the street in Iraq.

So in English we are used to having a lot of words. We are used to not necessarily knowing the level of formality or the register from the words. And we are used to looking at many, many cues at once to try to figure out tone and that I can do. But the fun thing about this

project is that if I guess wrong and I get Callimachus' tone and register wrong, and I'm happy and you're happy with the poem that I've produced in English, that's fine.

The goal is poems that are self-consistent and moving and thoughtful and fun and maybe you learn something in English that is based on what Callimachus is doing. And I do not pretend to get everything right in the source text. The goal is to have the target language produce works of art that are unpretentious and fun and maybe have some wisdom in them.

So there's not really an impact to guessing the tone and getting it wrong, but I do have to guess. You do have to make a guess.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I think I spent too much time with philologists, who, they really go to town on this stuff.

Stephanie Burt

Oh, I'm a big fan of philology.

Marshall Poe

I am too, I just can't do the work.

Stephanie Burt

Yeah, well, there's a very good book, actually. I don't think it's a Princeton book. It might even be called PHILOLOGY, published about two years ago, about the history of the thing we call philology and what it has contributed to the way that we read now.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, which is a lot.

Stephanie Burt

It's a ton! And if you're of my generation you were told that the most important thing in the history of literary criticism was debates among theoretical models of literature in general, which is wrong. It's massively, massively wrong.

Marshall Poe

And what's right?

Stephanie Burt

Well, a lot of people are right at once and nobody has the whole truth.

But, there is a complex history of vernacular practice which interacts with and has never completely been subsumed by general theoretical models of how we read and indeed the general theoretical models of how we read, when they change, often change because they have new infusions of people going from practice.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, vernacular practice. I really like that expression. I think that's what my eleven-year-old daughter is partaking in when she reads fan fiction.

Stephanie Burt

Oh, one hundred percent and they theorize themselves. There's an academic discipline called "fan studies," and my friends do it. And I do a little bit of it. And when it's done well, I mean, half the people who are involved in academic fan studies are writing fan fiction themselves. They don't necessarily want you to connect their fan fiction to their academic writing. There's a long tradition of this, right? There are the great English professors who wrote mysteries under pseudonyms.

But if you're doing academic fan studies as well, you are looking at the way that fans are creating and circulating models for why they do what they do and how we process it and its distance from institutional power is part of its appeal.

Marshall Poe

It's liberating; it's very liberating for the people who do it. They don't have to worry about all these things...

Stephanie Burt

...or they don't have to worry about... some of them worry about these things differently.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. Yes that's much better put.

Stephanie Burt

If you'd like, I can recommend some works that are very safe for work, don't worry, fanfic in which characters from the Marvel Comics universe are worried about institutional power dynamics and sources of authority. That is one of the eternal topics of fiction and poetry. But, if you are a fan fiction writer, you don't have to worry about these things in the same way that you do if you're an academic. I should add that I think you were sort of moving in this direction anyway. I would not describe my Callimachus book as fanfic because the term fanfiction carries with it an implication of distance from commercial publishing, and of course I'm very grateful to Princeton University Press for commercially publishing my work and making some of it available for free because it's published in online magazines. But, if you want the whole thing, I do recommend that you send \$24.95 to Princeton University Press. So it is not fanfiction, but it resembles fanfiction in that it is my homage to characters and works that I admire, and that I depend on and that part of my brain wants to inhabit, that sort of live rent-free in my brain, and that it is me telling stories with and making works of art with intellectual property that I very clearly do not control.

Marshall Poe

I'm really glad you mentioned this because I hadn't made the connection between commercial publishing or the lack of connection between commercial publishing and fan fiction. Because these things that my daughter has shown me, these people have no desire to be paid anything for anything they do. They just want readers; there are a lot of them.

Stephanie Burt

Well, I mean, how many poets are actually paid a lot, right?

We have a lot of readers. Some of these people are also extremely successful commercially

published novelists, although some of them are probably 11. It's not that they don't want to be paid anything for anything. It's that they are working in a particular art form where it's illegal to pay you because the intellectual property is not under their control and they want readers.

But, yeah, of course it's an art form and it is related to what I'm doing with Callimachus, although it is not the same thing.

Marshall Poe

Well, it's been wonderful to talk to you. Let me ask our traditional final question on the New Books Network and that is, what are you working on now, other than chasing kids around?

Stephanie Burt

I thought you were going to ask me to read a few poems. Do you want me to do that or is that for a different moment?

Marshall Poe

You can still definitely read a poem if you'd like to.

Stephanie Burt

Why don't I answer your "what am I working on now, beside chasing kids around question" and then if you want we can go out with a couple of poems so that people who want to read poems on a page but prefer their podcasts to be conversations can skip the poems and make a beeline for the book? If they don't see it in between poems, thank you so much for this conversation! It is an honor to be part of it and I really enjoy this kind of interview.

So what am I working on now? I am looking right now at the whiteboard that I keep in my home office, my closet-like home office, which I really love and feel lucky to have. Because after a year of working from home, my working memory capacity is really just nothing. So, I have a whiteboard and I depend on it.

I am working on a couple of academic articles. One is about 60s poetry and urban renewal. I'm collaborating with a graduate student. One is about the poetics of shipping containers with particular reference to the modern poetry of New Zealand. There's some Yeat's scholarship; there is an essay and there are going to be a couple essays in a collaborative book about how to read X-Men Comics, which will be published by Columbia University Press in a couple of years. And I'm very lucky in terms of who I'm working with there. [Unclear] Thomas, who is a scholar of Black Theology and Ramzi Fawaz, was who was a cultural studies person at the University of Wisconsin and the novelist Rachel Gould.

It looks like I'm going to be co-writing an online comic, which I think I'm not quite allowed to announce yet. But if you're listening to this podcast in the fall, or the Autumn of 2021, or if you're listening to this podcast in the Spring of 2021 and you're in the southern hemisphere and you Google my name and online comics, you may see what I'm working on. I'm very, very excited about that.

There is going to be an anthology also from Columbia [University Press] of poems from before the 1920s, about queer erotics and proto-queer identities, because my friend Drew Daniel at Johns Hopkins and I discovered that if you're teaching an Introduction to Queer Lit class and you want a book of queer poems from before the 20th century, none exists. There are doorstop,

anthologies of lesbian literature and of gay male literature that are, you know, 20% poetry and there are five million anthologies of queer poetry from the last hundred years, which of course have had permissions fees and who knows what. But despite the fact that it would be free to the press that chose to do this and had no permissions fees because these are all public domain works. There is nothing that is the poems you'd want to give to queer lit students and lovers of queer lit from the beginning of English and translation into English up until the 1920s, so Drew and I and [unclear] from Penn are doing that.

Oh, and there's going to be two books of poems by me. One is a mini book, a chapbook that Rain Taxi Editions is doing this summer that is poems related. These are fandom poems; they're poems about superheroes; they're poems about cartoons. They are poems that have sources and non-realist, modern stories. And then there's going to be a full-length book of poems by me from Graywolf Press, who have been amazing to work with, that will probably come out towards the end of 2022.

Marshall Poe

Yeah. A Shout Out to Graywolf Press. We do a lot of their books.

Stephanie Burt

Cool. Who's the last Graywolf writer you interviewed?

Marshall Poe

I don't remember. I mean we publish so many interviews with so many authors that I couldn't come up with something.

Stephanie Burt

Yeah I know. I can't say how lucky I am to have Graywolf on my side.

Marshall Poe

So, do you want to take us out with a poem?

Stephanie Burt

Okay. Okay.

How about one of the poems in homage to the goddess Hera? Which is also a poem about being grateful to have publishers, honestly, and interviewers. And, you know, people who assist and bring this work out into the world and it is also really a poem about parenting and, you know, I'm very lucky that my kids are old enough that they're not going to, eat glass while I do this interview. One is in school and the other is walking the dog and hanging out. I'm lucky to have other adults in my life who are there for them.

So this is a version of Fragment 100 from Book 4 of the Aeita.

Everybody wants to be the talent. Nobody wants to be the one to manage the place and implement compromises needed for everyone else to continue to function. That's true around here and also on Mount Olympus. Consider this wooden plank, whose knots resemble eyes. It shakes tan hair and eyelashes. Tradition at Samos says, before expert carvers existed, this board was regarded as a true and holy image of Hera set in an altar and worshipped along with the

rest much like the crude or primitivist Athena at Lindos. Why? The queen of Olympus, the wife of Zeus, is also the gods' organizer, their schedule maker, quartermaster and carer. The other God's perfect themselves. They choose their fearsome or awesome self-presentation in detail, whether beautiful or sublime, violet-litted or plated or shining hair loose when they face a congregation. She can't, or won't. She doesn't have the time.

Thank you!

Marshall Poe

Wonderful, thank you very much. Let me just conclude by saying, Stephanie, it's been just terrific to talk to you!

Stephanie Burt

This has been fun. I think I gotta write more books so that we do this again.

Marshall Poe

Yeah, I think so too. Alright, thanks very much. Goodbye.