

David Parlett

SELECTIONS FROM THE

*CARMINA BURANA*

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A VERSE TRANSLATION

Penguin Books

## CB17 Fickle Fortune

*O Fortuna velut luna  
statu variabilis . . .*

O how Fortune,  
inopportune,  
apes the moon's inconstancy:  
waxing, waning,  
losing, gaining . . .  
Life treats us detestably:  
first oppressing,  
then caressing,  
shifts us like pawns in her play:  
destitution,  
restitution,  
mixes and melts them away.

Fate — as vicious  
as capricious —  
whirling your merry-go-round:  
evil doings,  
worthless wooings  
crumble away to the ground:  
darkly stealing,  
unrevealing,  
working against me you go:  
for your measure  
of foul pleasure  
I bare my back to your blow.

Noble actions,  
fair transactions,  
no longer fall to my lot:  
powers to make me  
and then break me

all play their part in your plot:  
now seize your time —  
waste no more time,  
pluck these poor strings, then let go:  
since the strongest  
fall the longest  
let the world share in my woe!

## CB19 A Begging Song

*Fas et nefas ambulans  
pene passu pari . . .*

Good and Evil, going round  
arm-in-arm, advise us:  
show how scattergoods compound  
the misdeeds of misers:  
show how virtue is defined  
by its moderation —  
knife-edged in between  
rival sins, requires a keen  
eye's discrimination.

Do you recall having read  
Cato's wise researches —  
titled *Ethics* — where he said:  
'Cultivate the virtuous?'  
This means: having set your heart  
on the joy of giving,  
give, first, careful thought  
as to which men are the sort  
worthiest of receiving.

In days gone by we were required  
to stick with study: none retired,  
or wished himself to be released,  
till ninety years of age at least.

Now lads of barely a decade  
can graduate — get themselves made  
professors too! And who's to mind  
how blind the blind who lead the blind?

So fledgelings soar upon the wings,  
so donkeys play the lute and sing:  
bulls dance about at court like sprites  
and ploughboys sally forth as knights.

Down at the inn, Pope Gregory  
is brawling ignominiously:  
Jerome, austere saint on earth,  
goes haggling for a ha'pence-worth.

Augustine of his harvestings,  
St Benedict of vinous things,  
converse collusively — discreet  
as a couple of fishwives in the street.

Reclining idly, Mary bores,  
while Martha moans about her chores:  
no movement stirs the womb of Leah,  
and Rachel's flashing eyes look bleak.

Stern Carot's tasteful rectitude  
displays a new-found taste for food:  
Lucretia's chaste virginity  
is up for sale — or offered free.

Idea's our parents used to shun  
shine in the eyes of everyone:  
what's moist is now called dry, and what  
once passed for cold now counts as hot.

Virtue's translated into vice,  
hard work's considered not quite nice;  
phenomena forget their place,  
things fall apart, they leave no trace.

Now let the prudent man take care  
to bring his soul to good repair —  
lest at the last, when Death arraign,  
he cry 'Lord, Lord!', and cry in vain —

For once that Judge has sentenced, He'll  
convene no court of last appeal.

### CB 10 A Voice in the Wilderness

*Ecce sonat in aperto*  
*vox clamantis in deserto . . .*

Hark! The voice of one comes crying  
from the wilderness outlying: —

We deserting, we deserted  
hear our just deserts asserted:  
life is nobody's ambition:  
none but live in death's condition:  
every one a sinner, traitor  
to the plans of our creator:  
none will bear his cross nor heed a  
call to follow Christ as leader.

Who is good? Who trust-inspiring?  
 Who complies with God's requiring?  
 In a word, in brief opinion:  
 Death extends his dark dominion –  
 stalking those in priestly raiment  
 who extort unpriestly payment –  
 who, enrobed at ordination,  
 offer vows of dedication  
 which from well-lined benefices  
 they forswear as artifices:  
 in God's house their vice reposes –  
 stinking weeds instead of roses.  
 Holy they are not, but wholly  
 crooks who grind God's law down slowly,  
 Simon's one of that tradition,  
 seeking people of position:  
 Simon favours all who favour  
 Simon, be they ill of savour:  
 Simon, down at Rome invested,  
 leaves no cloister unmoleted.  
 Keep a coin back, Simon's hateful –  
 grease his palm and Simon's grateful:  
 Simon stealing, Simon loaning –  
 here promoting, there dethroning –  
 leads this man to fear and falter,  
 that one to the wedding altar:  
 men once excommunicated  
 find themselves blessed and elated.  
 Simon makes no bones about it –  
 he'll confound law soon as flour it.  
 May that Simon be confounded  
 in whom so much power is grounded! –  
 May St Peter, losing patience,  
 cast him down to Hell's foundations.  
 He who spends his life high-flying  
 fits himself for Hell on dying.

Who would share this same addiction  
 let him share the same affliction –  
 sepulchred infernally  
 expiate eternally!

### CB16 Hard Luck

*Fortune plango vulnera  
 stillantibus ocellis . . .*

I cry the cruel cuts of Fate  
 with eyes worn red from weeping,  
 whose fickle favours travel straight  
 back into her keeping:  
 as ye read, so shall ye find –  
 luck comes curly-headed  
 from the front, but round behind  
 not a hair is threaded!

Dame Fortune once invited me  
 to enjoy her blessing:  
 to riches' throne exalted me  
 caring and caressing:  
 but from maximum renown,  
 garlanded and fêted,  
 Fate stepped up and threw me down –  
 glory dissipated!

Fortune's wheel goes round and round,  
 down go all my talents:  
 others rising from the ground  
 fly too high to balance:  
 so beware Fate's old routine,  
 kings and lords and ladies –  
 for beneath her throne lies Queen  
 Hecuba in Hades.