

‘Nevermore’: A Conjecture on Propertius 2.23.24

In Barber’s text and apparatus, elegy 2.23 ends with these lines (21-24)¹:

et quas Euphrates et quas mihi misit Orontes
me iuerint: nolim furta pudica tori.
libertas quoniam nulli iam restat amanti,
nullus liber erit, si quis amare uolet.

22 iuuerint *N* : capiant *cett.* 23-24 *damnant nonnulli* 24 Nullus *O* : stultus
Baehrens : mulus *Barber* : nullas *Pfister* : uiles *Birt* si quis liber erit, nullus
Foster

One correction to Barber’s apparatus is necessary: in 24, Baehrens conjectured not *stultus liber erit*, ‘a free man who loves is a fool’, but *stultus liberam erit si quis amare uolet*, ‘he who loves a free woman is a fool’². Although the word order is rather contorted, this better suits the preceding part of the elegy, which compares the danger and expense of upper-class adultery (3-12) with the cheapness and safety of common prostitutes (13-22). At the same time, a double corruption is that much less likely palaeographically: that *liberam* might lose its ending and assimilate to the preceding word is certainly plausible, but we would also have to assume that that word was separately corrupted from *stultus* to *nullus*.

In treating the problems of this couplet, different scholars have applied all of the tools of the critical art: interpretation, punctuation, transposition (of individual words or the entire couplet), emendation, and deletion (of 23-24 or just 24). Since all of these except the interpretations are listed in Smyth³, and none has won much acceptance from anyone except its author, I will mention only two here: Jacob’s repunctuation and Shackleton Bailey’s reinterpretation.

¹ E. A. Barber (ed.), *Sexti Properti Carmina* (Oxford 1960²). I am concerned here only with the textual crux in 24, and have nothing to add to previous discussions of *iuuerint* vs. *capiant* in 22 or the meaning (if any) of *furta pudica* in the same line. It is probable that 24.1-10 are a continuation of 2.23, and 2.24.11-16 may also be a misplaced portion of the same elegy, but this, too, is irrelevant to my argument.

² A. Baehrens (ed.), *Sex. Propertii Elegiarum Libri IV* (Leipzig 1880).

³ G. R. Smyth, *Thesaurus Criticus ad Sexti Propertii Textum* (Leiden 1970).

Jacob puts a colon at the end of line 22 and a full stop after 23. As he says⁴:

“Aliter, ac vulgo fit, tres ultimos versus distinxi, ne in protasi idem esset,
quod in apodosi: Quoniam nemo amans liber, nemo amans liber est.”

Unfortunately, this attempt to transplant the protasis (line 23) to the previous sentence produces a highly unnatural distribution of clauses. Elegiac meter will incline the open-minded reader to take any given couplet as a whole unless there is good reason to do otherwise. In this case, lines 21-22 require no continuation, while the word-repetitions within 23-24 (*libertas quoniam nulli iam restat amanti, / nullus liber erit, si quis amare uolet*) make it clear that they are either corrupt or a matched pair, or possibly (as I think) both. These facts tend to reinforce the unity of the couplet, and with it the usual punctuation, while still leaving us with an intolerable tautology. We will see that Jacob has been followed by Camps, among others, but I doubt that anyone who was not determined to find a way to evade the textual problem without altering the text would ever have thought to take 23 with 22 rather than 24.

Shackleton Bailey attempts to save the text of O through the distinction in Roman law between those who were *liberi*, free *de jure*, and those, such as runaway slaves, who were *in libertate*, free *de facto*⁵. The problem is that the sources for the distinction refer to *fugitiui* and others who are free *de facto* but not *de jure*, while Propertius' voluntary lover is free *de jure* but not *de facto*: the two are in a sense opposites rather than parallels⁶. It is easy enough to imagine a parallel that would be more parallel: no doubt a free Roman who had been captured by pirates might properly be described as *liber* though not *in libertate*⁷. But the fact that Shackleton Bailey can quote no such parallel

⁴ F. Iacob (ed.), *Sex. Aurelii Propertii Carmina* (Leipzig 1827), ad 3.17.22. (Jacob numbers the elegy 3.17 because he follows Lachmann in dividing Book II.)

⁵ D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana* (Cambridge 1956), 109.

⁶ Perhaps we should say that they are like parallel lines which point in opposite directions. Propertius certainly portrays himself as a metaphorical *fugitiuus* in 2.29, but only because he is there trying to escape from his love for Cynthia: cf. F. Cairns, *Propertius 2, 29a*, CQ 21 (1971), 455-60, and W. J. Slater, 'Pueri, turba minuta', BICS 21 (1974), 133-40. In 2.23 he is (metaphorically) not *fugitiuus* but *seruus uolens*, and so possibly *liber* but certainly not *in libertate*. If he had wished to contrast lover and *fugitiuus* as opposites in our poem, he would surely have given us something more wittily paradoxical, or at least more explicit.

⁷ "Those taken by pirates or robbers, or in civil war, remain free", although those captured in foreign war become slaves: W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery* (Cambridge 1908), 291-92.

makes it very unlikely that Propertius' readers would have taken our lines as he asks them (and us) to take them.

It seems that we must resort to conjectural emendation after all. We have seen that those who emend the text generally attack the first word of the pentameter. I believe that emendation is indeed required and that *nullus* is the defective word, but that none of the suggestions so far made is correct. However, original thought is not really necessary in this case. Like Poe's purloined letter, the answer to the problem has been lying unnoticed, in plain sight, in an obvious place, for over a quarter of a century. In his edition of Book II, W. A. Camps prints Barber's text, with Jacob's punctuation, but in his commentary he glosses line 24 "a man who sets out to be a lover (or, lets himself fall in love) will *never* be a free man" (emphasis added)⁸. This is a good paraphrase of precisely what, I suggest, Propertius wrote:

libertas quoniam nulli iam restat amanti,
numquam liber erit, si quis amare uolet.

As emended⁹, the couplet provides a vivid epigrammatic statement of what we might call the theoretical basis of *seruitium amoris*. Elegiac love is unlike most forms of slavery in being to some extent voluntary¹⁰, but like other forms in being everlasting¹¹. The alteration also removes the tautology. What the emended line 24 adds to 23 is the element of time: the lover *has* lost his liberty (23) and so *will* never be free (24)¹². This contrast be-

⁸ W. A. Camps (ed.), *Propertius, Elegies Book II* (Cambridge 1967), *ad loc.*

⁹ In English, this construction would require a demonstrative in the apodosis, and the protasis would necessarily precede. This is sometimes the pattern in Propertius, for instance in 2.3.41-42: *si quis uult fama tabulas anteire uetustas, / hic dominam exemplo ponat in arte meam*. However, he more often omits the demonstrative, as in 3.23.21: *quas [tabellas] si quis mihi rettulerit, donabitur auro*. He also often puts the protasis after the apodosis, as in 2.14.20 (*sic hodie ueniet, si qua negauit heri!*) and 1.6.12 (*a pereat, si quis lentus amare potest!*). The first and last types are even juxtaposed in a single couplet, as in 2.4.17-18: *hostis si quis erit nobis, amet ille puellas: / gaudeat in puero, si quis amicus erit*. It is worth noting that the two halves of our pentameter could be reversed: it seems that chiasmus and avoidance of a trisyllabic pentameter ending are more important to Propertius than providing a construction that would be more readily intelligible — at least to English-speakers.

¹⁰ Not that that makes it any more admirable: as Seneca puts it (*E.M.* 47.17), *nulla seruitus turpior est quam uoluntaria*.

¹¹ Perhaps we should say rather that it appears voluntary to non-lovers, and that its end, if any, depends, as with other forms of slavery, upon the will or whim of the master — or mistress.

¹² It might be possible to take line 23 as referring to the increased restrictions on adultery in Augustus' moral legislation, which would fit particularly well after *nolim furta pudica tori* (22), if — a very big if

tween the times before and after his enslavement is already partly implied by *iam* and *re-stat* and the tense of *erit*. All paraphrases mislead, and Jacob's does so by making the tenses present¹³.

The corruption presumed is easy enough: *nullus* in 24 would have come from perseveration of *nulli* in 23, with the ending adjusted to agree with the word immediately following. Confusion of *nullus* and *numquam* would have been encouraged by the similarity in spelling — the crucial first two letters — and in meaning, with one generalizing negative substituted for another. The couplet may owe some of its wording to the final couplet of 1.10 (29-30)¹⁴:

is poterit felix una remanere puella,
qui *numquam* uacuo pectore *liber erit*. 30

Horace uses essentially the same words in his portrayal of avarice as slavery (*Ep.* 1.16.63-66), though his future tense means something quite different:

qui melior seruo, qui liberior sit auarus,
in triuiis fixum cum se demittit ob assem,
non uideo. nam qui cupiet, metuet quoque; porro 65
qui metuens uiuet, *liber mihi non erit umquam*.

— the text there is sound. However, I prefer to take *iam* as meaning ‘any longer’, referring to the period of time after the commencement of the individual lover’s *seruitium*.

¹³ I should perhaps add here that I have a bad habit of misremembering 2.23.24 as *numquam* (or *nullus*) *liber erit, si quis amare uelit*. A mixed condition would be quite appropriate in this context, if we think of elegiac love as having some resemblance to a lobster-pot, with the lover playing the part of the lobster: ‘if anyone should (hypothetically, because who would be so foolish?) be a willing lover, that man will (as night follows day) never be free’. Most likely, there is something wrong with my *Stilgefühl*, or I am unconsciously aiming at a rhyme of *erit* and *uelit*, but the idea seems worth mentioning. Another apparently inadvertent conjecture to add to the margin of one’s Smyth is found in a place where Propertians are not particularly likely to come across it. In *Poetic Craft in the Early Greek Elegists* (Chicago, 1985), 223, n. 23, A. W. H. Adkins misquotes the famous line 1.9.11 as *plus in amore uiget Mimnermi uersus Homero*. Although I do not think that this is particularly likely to be true, it is rather above the average of those listed in Smyth.

¹⁴ As Paolo Fedeli notes (*Sesto Propertio, Il Primo Libro delle Elegie* [Florence 1980], *ad loc.*), in these lines, “[s]i tratta di una nuova definizione del *seruitium amoris*: l’innamorato dovrà essere schiavo della sua donna e rivolgere sempre ad essa il suo pensiero”. We might say that elegy 1.10, particularly lines 21-30, in which Propertius gives Gallus advice on how to be a good love-slave, is a kind of mirror-image of 2.23. Besides being more distant verbally, the parallel in Cicero (*Parad.* 36, *an ille mihi liber cui mulier imperat?*) omits the element of time.