

Guzzling Poison and Draining the Sea: Propertius 2.24b.27

The poet proposes trials for a rival lover (2.24b.23-29):¹

*contendat mecum ingenio, contendat et arte,
in primis una discat amare domo:
si libitum tibi erit, Lernaean pugnet ad hydras* 25
*et tibi ab Hesperio mala dracone ferat,
taetra uenena libens et naufragus ebibat undas,
et numquam pro te deneget esse miser:
(quos utinam in nobis, uita, experiare labores!)*

27 *terra* F₁LP : *trita* Heinsius : *atra* Baehrens
bibens LP *inbibat* Lachmann

Although the manuscript variants are impossible and the conjectures at best unattractive and unnecessary, there are still three small problems with the text of line 27:

1. It may be doubted whether *ebibat* can be taken equally well with its two objects. Scholars have mostly worried about the second one, finding *ebibere* an inappropriate verb to govern *undas*. For instance, Lachmann (1816: 186-87) emends to *inbibat*, on the grounds that Propertius professes willingness to emulate his rival, and so must not ask him to take on too large a task.² Rothstein (1920) argues that *ebibat* should be taken literally with *uenena*, but implies the simple verb *bibat* with *undas*.³ Shackleton Bailey (1956: 113) suggests that *ebibat* can be taken with *undas* in the sense “drink his fill of”. This seems a little weak: a thirsty man may ‘drink his fill’ of fresh water, but a drowning man surely gets much more than his fill of sea-water. Perhaps we should say then that *ebibere* with *uenena* means “drain, drink all of,” and with *undas* “drink large quantities

¹ My text and apparatus are taken from Barber 1960, with pertinent additions to the latter from Smyth 1970. Except as specified, all references are *ad loc*.

² “Nimium profecto hoc est, quod rivalem maris undas ebibere vult. Cavere eum oportebat sibi, qui his subjecturus erat: *Quos utinam in nobis, vita, experiare labores!*” If he is suggesting that draining the sea or attempting to do so would be foolish, the objection is misguided: so would drinking poison or battling multiple hydras. Lachmann’s own *inbibat* has the look of a patch: the Ovidian parallels he quotes (*Am.* 2.10.34 and *Her.* 7.62) use the simple verb *bibere*, and the only purpose of *in-* seems to be to save the meter. Doubts about *ebibat* go back a long way: Passerat (1608) uses the monstrous form “hyperbolicῶς” to describe it, apparently in relation to *undas* rather than *uenena*, though that is not entirely clear.

of, drink to the point of choking.” This is defensible as a sort of zeugma or syllepsis, and would probably do, were it not for the other problems in the line.⁴ However, despite the general assumption that *undas* is the problem, it seems to me that *ebibat* is in fact less appropriate with *uenena* than with *undas*, since poison, unlike sea-water, need not be guzzled or drained to the dregs to be harmful.

2. The second problem to consider is the unbalanced distribution of the adjectives in the line: “willingly guzzling poison” versus “shipwrecked, gulping down the waves.” Unintentional shipwreck is no more a proof of love than the inadvertent drinking of poison. If either is voluntary, both are, and *libens* must surely be taken with with *undas* as well as *uenena*. On the other hand, only the second action requires (or admits) *naufragus*. There is no difficulty in taking *libens* with both objects, or in taking *naufragus* only with *undas*, but the combination of the two in one line seems inept. Of the two adjectives, *naufragus* is essential, while *libens* seems expendable. It hardly needs saying that drinking poison is only a proof of love if one knows or at least suspects that the drink is poisoned, and the same goes, *mutatis mutandis*, for shipwreck. In addition, *taetra* suggests that this poison looks and tastes like what it is, and so is unlikely to invite inadvertent guzzling.

3. Although commentators do not notice any problem, *libens* seems particularly awkward just two lines after *si libitum tibi erit*. Strictly speaking, there is no redundancy, since the words refer to different wills, but we might expect that a contrasted pairing of Cynthia’s imperious whim with the poet’s willing and eager submission to it would have been more pointedly expressed. Once again, misgivings center on *libens*.

Although each of these problems is quite small, the combination of the three is suspicious in itself, and the fact that all three can be removed by a single change is another indication that the difficulties I see in the line are not imaginary. One way (perhaps not

³ “*Ebibat* paßt nur zu *taetra uenena*, zu *undas* muß daraus das einfache *bibat* ergänzt werden; vgl. Ov. am. II 10, 33 *quaerat auarus opes et quae lassarit arando aequora periuro naufragus ore bibat* her. 7, 62 *neu bibat aequoreas naufragus hostis aquas*.”

⁴ This is essentially the same as Enk’s explanation (1962): “*ebibere* adhibetur de potionibus (medicamentis, venenis), cf. Celsus V. 27. 4 *acetum quod forte secum habebat, ebibit*, Apul. Metam. X. 5 *fratri suo paratam mortem* (i.e. venenum) *ebibit*, et de liquoribus usitatum modum excedentibus, cf. Phaedr. I. 20. 5 (canes fluvii) *aquam coepere ebibere*. Hoc loco Propertii verbum *ebibendi* ad utrumque obiectum aptum est.”

the only way) to dispose of the repetitious and superfluous *libens*, while providing a suitable contrast of verbs, would be to emend to *libet taetra uenena et naufragus ebibat undas*, “let him sip foul poisons and, shipwrecked, gulp down the waves.”⁵ A scribe who mistook *libet* for *libet* — a particularly easy mistake with *libitum* just two lines before — would have been dangerously tempted to rearrange the word-order and adjust the inflection so as to produce good meter and tolerable sense.

It must be admitted that my solution, while removing some problems, also introduces one or two. The first is that the contrast of *libet* and *ebibat* might be thought a bit precious and artificial. The second is that the meter is very unusual. Propertius only elides at the main caesura seven times in four books, and he puts a spondaic verb in the first foot only six times in all the 681 hexameters of Book II. The combination of two such rare features in one line is not impossible, but it is unparalleled, and that is suspicious in itself, particularly when both of the metrical peculiarities have been introduced by emendation. So perhaps the solution to the problems of Propertius 2.24b.27 is still to be found.⁶

⁵ Parallels will be found in *OLD* s.v. *libo*² § 3, “To consume a little of, sip, nibble (food or drink)” and *TLL* 7.2.1340.28-73 “de cibo uel potu sumendo (fere parcius . . .).” Propertius’ only other use of this particular sense of *libare* (in a nibbling metaphor) comes in Suringar’s certain emendation of 3.21.28: *libaboque [librorumque O] tuos, docte [culte Heinsius] Menandre, sales*. Tacitus contrasts *libare* with *haurire* in a literary metaphor (*D.* 31.7, *qui quasdam artes haurire, omnes libare debet*), Ambrose with *ebibere* (*Noe* 29.111, *neque iustus uinum ebibit, sed de uino, hoc est de eius portione libauit*, a passage I only know from *TLL* 7.2.1340.70-71).

⁶ Platnauer (1951: 84 n. 2) lists six instances of elision at the caesura, to which 2.17.11 should be added. In Book II, spondaic verbs in the first foot of the hexameter are found only in 11.1, 15.29, 22.13, 26.1, 30.7, and 31.1. I owe the metrical argument, and all of the specific examples, to S. J. Heyworth, *per litteras*. I am grateful to him, and to the *Phoenix* referees, for all of their suggestions and objections, which have been carefully considered even when they were not followed.

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