HYLAS GOING TO THE WELL: PROP. I 20, 23-32

In this passage Propertius tells how Hercules' companion Hylas set out to seek a well and draw water. He was followed by the two sons of Boreas, who tried to snatch kisses from him. Hylas repulsed them, and they departed \(^1\). Then Propertius exclaims “ah woe! Hylas was going, was going to the Hamadryads”.

Now the emphasis given to the verb \textit{ibat} by the figure of \textit{gemma-}

\(^1\) It does not seem that Propertius intended to indicate that there was any real hostility between Hylas and his fellow-Argonauts, Zetes and Calais, although Apollonius of Rhodes (I 1298 ff.) and Apollodorus (III 15, 2) do tell us that Hercules later killed them, because they advised him to give up the search for Hylas.

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tio is odd, as it is surely the destination of Hylas, rather than the mere fact of his movement, that should disturb the narrator. It seems strange, too, that the journey of Hylas should evoke both the interjection a dolor and the solemn repetition of ibat in v. 32, when in fact Hylas has been on his way to the well since v. 24! The colon editors print after v. 31 tends, I think, to make v. 32 imply that Hylas began his journey afresh after Zetes and Calais had left him. But sectati (v. 25) indicates that the snatching of kisses took place as Hylas walked along with his urna in one hand and the ramus (v. 30) in the other, and as the winged sons of Boreas swooped down on him in turn (v. 27-8).

For these reasons I find the received text unsatisfactory. There is, however, much that is odd in the text of Propertius, and I am conscious that I may be following in the path of hyper-exact critics like Schrader in suggesting that future editors of Propertius should consider reading a dolor! ibat Hylas solus Hamadyyasis (32). This pentameter would cohere closely with the preceding hexameter: “his companions departed: ah woe! Hylas was going alone to the Hamadryads” (and thus had no one to rescue him when he was drawn into the well).

The simplest way to explain the process of corruption of solus to ibat is to suggest that a scribe, faced with the (h)amadyias hinc given at the end of the line in the archetype, felt that (h)amadyias must be a nominative, that it required a verb, and that hinc showed that a verb of motion was needed. Thereupon the insertion of a

2) Propertius is not particularly fond of geminatio (cf. Herzberg’s edition, Halis 1843-4, I, 109) but the repetition of ibat may be adequately defended by comparing the repetition of instat at Prop. II 30, 7.—The repetition sat mea sat magna (II 13, 25) occurs in a disputed passage, but D. R. S. Bailey, Properitana (Cambridge 1956), 89, adduces the parallel sat tibi sat magna (Silius VI 122) to which may be added sat prorsus sat erat decoris... sat laudis (Silius XIV 510) and repetitions of satis at Silius XIII 850 and Statius sil. III 5, 106.—It is the notion that is emphasized, not the form of the emphasis which causes the difficulty in the present passage. I may note that Professor O. Skutsch remarked to me in a letter “I have never been able to understand why ibat should have the pathetic emphasis”.

3) Horace’s ibimus, ibimus (carm. II 17, 10) does emphasize a resolution to set out, and is quite different.

4) This verb especially has the notion of accompanying or pursuing some person or thing that is itself in motion.

5) It is curious that Propertius never mentions the vessel that appears in the Greek poetical accounts (Apoll. Rhod. I 1207, 1234; Theocr. 13, 39 and 46; Valerius Flaccus tells the story quite differently (3, 545 ff.).

6) ire solus is found in Virgil (Aen. 11, 504), though with a slightly different nuance; cf. also incedo solus, Hor. sat. I 6, 112.