MISCELLANEA

‘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 iuuerint: nolim furt a pudica tori.
libertas quoniam nulli iam restat amanti,
nullus liber erit, si quis amare uolet.

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

One correction to Barber’s apparatus is necessary: in 24, Baehrns conjectured not stultus liber erit, ‘a free man who loves is a fool’, but stultus liber 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 re-interpretation.

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 distinxii, ne in protasis idem esset, quod in apodosis: 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

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(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_. The problem is that the sources for the distinction refer to _fugitii_ 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 parallels. 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_. But the fact that Shackleton Bailey can quote no such parallel 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). This is a good paraphrase of precisely what, I suggest, Propertius wrote:

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

As emended, 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 voluntary, but like other forms in being everlasting. 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). This contrast between the times before and after his enslavement is already partly implied by _iam_ and _restat_ and the tense of _erit_. All paraphrases mislead, and Jacob’s does so by making the tenses present.

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