TOWARDS AN INTERPRETATION OF PROPERTIUS 2.22(b).44*

'aut si es dura, nega: sin es non dura, venito! quid iuvat heu' nullo ponere verba loco?'

Prop. 2.22(b).43-44

H.E. Butler offers a nebulous translation of the pentameter (line 44) in the 1967 Loeb, substituting ‘at’ for other conjectures: ‘But why take delight in waste of random words?’ J.P. McCulloch gives an even freer translation of line 44: ‘But why waste words?’ Musker on the other hand interprets ‘nullo ponere verba loco’ as ‘using just empty words.’ Shackleton Bailey is right in maintaining that ‘nullo loco’ can scarcely mean ‘at random’.

Unfortunately he regards Lachmann’s interpretation ‘cur nihili (“as of no account”) facis verba, id est, promissa tua’ as the correct one. In spite of Camps’ observation that it was actually the unknown mistress’ ‘ambiguous answer’ that gave rise to the lover’s reproach, he too nevertheless joins the ranks of those favouring the interpretation: ‘to treat your words (i.e. your promises) as of no account.’

From the above translations three interpretations (with the exception of (i) not radically different from one another) emerge: (i) a waste of random words; a waste of words, (ii) empty, meaningless words, and (iii) words of no account. In the light of the two opposite poles ‘nega’ and ‘venito’ in line 44, and considering the lover’s desperate and futile search for hope and assurance, which glimmers through in the rest of the poem, none of the foregoing translations seems to me to give a perfectly satisfactory interpretation of line 44.

No man likes to hear the word ‘no’, because he does not always know why the woman says no. The word ‘no’ is always shocking, sometimes shattering; it hurts his male ego and, when no explanation is forthcoming, he is prone to think and expect the worst. Because of the consuming uncertainty, sorrow, disappointment and jealousy in his heart, the lover, insisting on a straight answer, yet desperately hoping for a ‘yes’, addresses his mistress rebukingly: ‘Say “no!” or say “yes!”.’ From the past participle ‘audita’ (line 49) it is quite evident that she did not at all fail to reply.

Instead of a metrically unsuitable opposite of ‘negare’, e.g. [‘at’ or] ‘āaas’, the poet makes use of ‘venito’ to mean ‘yes’ in line 43. In 2.14.20 ‘veniet’ (like ‘venito’ above) also forms the positive alternative for ‘negavit’ (cf. ‘nega’ above). The fact that the expression ‘nullo loco ponere’ is found nowhere else in Propertius or in any of the other well-known Roman poets impedes interpretation. However, in the light of the negative and positive poles in line 43, and the clearly perceptible uncertainty and frustration in which the lover finds himself, I would suggest the following interpretation: ‘Oh (Ah), why do you take delight in putting (your) words (i.e. your answer) in no place?’ i.e. not in the ‘right’ place, an answer consequently lying between ‘no!’ and ‘yes!’, an undecided, ambiguous and doubtful answer. The translations of Helm and Shepherd move in the direction I propose. The Oxford text’s ‘haec’ can be regarded as a
feasible and logically possible reading in the pentameter but, given the emotional
tenor of these few lines, I provisionally accept the much more forceful
emendations 'heu' (Rothstein, Giardina and Fedeli) or 'en' (Heinsius, followed
by Hanslik and Helm). Although 'en' offers a meaning of wide scope, since it can
be used not only in the sense of exciting Cynthia's attention, but also of
manifesting Propertius's impatience, indignation, anger (see 1.18.4), excitement
and remonstrance, nevertheless 'dolor . . . acer' (v.45) and 'suspiria' (v.47),
words with an emotional connotation, in this context put up a very strong case for
the interjection 'heu' as suggesting our poet's grief, regret and disappointment,
i.e. his emotional insecurity.1

NOTES

* I wish to thank Prof. W.J. Henderson of the Rand Afrikaans University for some useful
suggestions.
1. See Propertius, Elegiarum Libri IV, ed. P. Fedeli, Teubner Stuttgart 1984, 100; R. Helm,
Liebeslegion, Zürich/Stuttgart 1964, 111.
4. The insertion ('as of no account') is my own; Shackleton Bailey (above, n.1) 108–109: "locro" =
"in the right place" is as legitimate as "tempore" = "at the right time", but there is no evidence for
"nullo loco", "nullo tempore" = "nullo loco", "non tempore". No references are given as to
pages or specific editions (1816 or 1829) consulted.
6. L. Richardson jr., Propertius Elegies I–IV, University of Oklahoma 1977, 276; L. Havet, Notes
7. Cf. Prop. 3.21; also 2.22.11: but in the latter poem we find sheer bravado: Propertius is feigning
his indifference.
8. Camps, op. cit., 157; Prop. 2.14.20: 'sic hodie veniet, si qua negavit heri.'
9. Camps, op. cit., 157; I could not find evidence of this idiom in any of the following poets:
Lucretius, Catullus, Virgil, Juvenal, Tibullus, Ovid, Martial or Persius; cf. P.J. Enk,
10. Cf. Prop. 3.21; also 2.22.11: but in the latter poem we find sheer bravado: Propertius is feigning
his indifference.
10. The parallels in Cic. Fin. 2.90 and Leg. 2.12 in which the verbs 'numerare' and 'habere' (not
'ponere') respectively are used, together with 'nullo loco', are, however, not conclusive proof that
'ponere', which, when used with the preposition 'in' and the ablative case, normally means
'reckon' or 'regard', has the latter meaning also without the preposition 'in'; cf. Cic. Top. 18.71:
'in laude ponendum est' = 'it must be regarded as praiseworthy'; Nep. Epam. 1.2: 'in vitius poni'
= 'to be regarded as a fault.' Cic. Fin. 3.8.29: 'qui mortem in malis ponit' = 'one who counts death
as an evil.'
11. Lewis and Short, s.v. 'loco' 1075: 'at the right place'; 'suitably'; cf. Cic. Fam. 9.16.4: 'posuisti loco
versus Accianos'; in this regard cf. R.Y. Tyrrell, Cicero in his Letters, London 1956, 264 n.4:
"Loco" is their proper place'; cf. Oxford Latin Dictionary 1040, s.v. 'locus' 18: 'position assigned
to a person or thing in treatment or estimation, status, footing or sim. ("haec nullo ponere verba

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loco’); cf. Hor. Epist. 2.2.113: ‘... verba movere loco, ...’ = ‘to remove words from their place,’; if words can be removed from their place, then, surely, they can also be put in their place or a certain place!; cf. Ov. Fast. 1.326.

12. R. Helm, Properz, Gedichte, Berlin 1983, 106–107: ‘Was für ein eitler Spass, redest du so ohne Sinn!’: my underlining; W.G. Shepherd, Propertius: The Poems, Penguin Harmondsworth 1985, 83: ‘If you’re harsh, say no: and if you’re not, then come! What pleasure to take your words as meaning neither?’; my underlining. Shepherd’s translation was only available after I had already decided on an interpretation.

13. In a few doubtful passages in Plautus it is used as an exclamation of admiration or surprise: Plaut. Poen. 5.2.147; 3.2.6.

14. Cf. in this connection Prop. 2.17.1: ‘promissis ducere amantem’ = ‘to beguile a lover with promises’ (Loeb translation); ‘ducere’ does occur frequently meaning ‘cheat’ or ‘deceive’ (Plaut. Mostell. 3.2.26; Ter. An. 4.1.20, id. Phorm. 3.2.15; Ov. Her. 19.13, id. Met. 3.87), but there is conclusive proof in Propertius (1.16.17–24; 2.4.1–4; 2.23.17, 19 and 20; 3.14.26 and 4.5.33) that a mistress keeps her lover on a string, therefore the verb could possibly also have the meaning of ‘keeping someone waiting’ (‘aliquem ducere’ = ‘laten wachten’, J.W. Fuchs, Kramer’s Woordenboek Latijn, Den Haag 1971(4) s.v.5, 191): in this sense it is mostly used poetically; cf. Caes. B Gall. 1.16.5: ‘ubi se diutius duxit intellexit’ = ‘he perceived that he was being put off too long’. The expression ‘promissis ducere’ occurs only once in Propertius.

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Acta Classica is published annually by the Classical Association of South Africa. The journal has been in production since 1958. It is listed on both the ISI and the SAPSE list of approved publications.

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