

QUID SI NON . . .—AN IDIOM OF CLASSICAL LATIN

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THERE ARE EIGHT PASSAGES in classical Latin literature introduced by *quid si non* . . . , and the primary purpose of this article is to collect them. This has not been done before. Considered individually the passages have caused doubt, difficulty, even deletion: but once assembled they illuminate each other and reveal an idiom in the sense of an expression “having a significance other than its grammatical or logical one.”¹ Not that it is altogether clear how one should understand the words non-idiomatically. There would seem two possibilities, either to pause after the *quid* (punctuating with a comma or a query) and translate in the form “What am I to say? Suppose *x* hadn’t been the case . . . ?,” or to make no such pause and translate “What would have happened if *x* hadn’t?” In modern editions some of the passages are normally printed the first way, some the second. But this can hardly be right. A set form of words is likely to have produced a set response. Moreover, even after picking and choosing in this manner one still fails to make satisfactory sense in six of the eight passages. What the context demands in these six cases (and readily admits of in the other two) is an assertion of positive fact conveyed with a tinge of exclamation or surprise, suggesting a translation like “It’s not as if *x* wasn’t the case!” or “And yet *x* really did happen!” Of course in this I am speaking of function and of how we may translate. Formally the Latin sentences remain questions—or rhetorical questions if the subdivision is valid²—exactly as an English letter to a bank manager beginning “Will you please transfer . . . ?” conveys a command and will in many languages be best translated as such, even though in English it remains formally a question.

The passages are: Quintus Catulus *fr.* 1 Morel; Livy 4.5.3; Propertius 1.9.15, 2.34.11; Vergil *Aeneid* 4.311; Ovid *Amores* 1.13.33; Petronius 42 (*bis*). In addition there are six passages in Ovid where *quid si* . . . , though not followed by *non*, appears to demand idiomatic interpretation of the same type. They are: *Heroides* 7.53; *Am.* 1.1.7, 3.6.89; *Ars* 3.197; *Tristia* 1.8.33, 2.497.

¹This is the definition of idiom in *OED* s.v. 3.

²Erasmus in *De recta pronuntiatione* (LB 1.963 D/E) proposed a special sign, an inverted comma, for when we express denial, doubt, or surprise under the guise of a question, and my exclamation mark should be understood as standing for this. The phrase “rhetorical question,” an unhappy one since its use is not confined to rhetoric, seems to be due to Reisig.

- 1 *Aufugit mi animus. credo, ut solet, ad Theotimum
devenit. sic est—perfugium illud habet.
quid si non interdixem ne illunc fugitivum
mitteret ad se intro, sed magis eiiceret!
ibimus quaesitum? verum ne ipsi teneamur
formido. quid ago? da, Venus, consilium.*

Quintus Catulus *ap.* Aulus Gellius 19.9
(Morel *fr.* 1)

My soul has escaped. I suppose it has gone, as usual, to Theotimus. Yes indeed it has. It always treats him as sanctuary. And yet I had expressly told him not to open his door to the runaway but to refuse admission! Shall we go in search? But I'm afraid we'll be caught as well. What do I do? Venus, please give me your advice.

Catulus's epigram is a loose translation of Callimachus:

Ἡμισὺ μὲν ψυχῆς ἔτι τὸ πνέον, ἡμισὺ δ' οὐκ οἶδ'
εἶτ' Ἔρος εἶτ' Ἀίδης ἥρπασε, πλὴν ἀφανές.
ἦ ῥά τιν' ἐς παίδων πάλιν ᾤχετο; καὶ μὲν ἀπείπον
πολλάκι "τὴν δρῆστιν μὴ ὑπέχεσθε νέοι". . .

Ep. 4 = *A.P.* 12.73

ὑπόδεχθε Bentley ὑποδέχεσθε Hecker νυ δέχεσθε Page

Even though Catulus has lost more of his soul than Callimachus and has a more precise idea where it is, the connection of thought is the same. *Quid si non* renders καὶ μὲν—"and yet" as Page suggests.³

Now Aulus Gellius, to whom we owe our knowledge of the epigram, quotes it as one of four with explicit approval for their command of idiom and lightness of touch—*nihil mundius, venustius, limatius, tersius*. Therefore *quid si non* . . . can hardly have struck him as clumsy. It is more likely, as we shall see, to have been a touch of true speech. Korsch's conjecture, recorded by Morel, *Quid? quasi non* . . . , is a symbol of the difficulty editors have felt. But it cannot be right. It is a sequence of words not found, unless my eyes have failed me, in any classical author for whom there is a concordance published.

- 2 . . . *tu statim consul sacramento iuniores adiges et in castra educes et minaberis plebi minaberis tribuno? quid si non quantum istae minae adversus plebis consensum valerent bis iam experti essetis!*

Livy 4.5.3

The tribune Canuleius has been arguing that plebeians should be given access to the consulship and the right to marry patricians. But, he says, if I as tribune propose such a law

³Denniston (*The Greek Particles*² [Oxford 1954] 390–391) stresses that καὶ μὲν is progressive, introducing a new point or amplifying an old one, rather than in itself adversative. His examples are of course from earlier authors but what he says suits the Callimachus passage perfectly.

you as consul will at once mobilise our young men, put them under military discipline, threaten the plebs, and threaten their tribune. And yet you have twice already discovered the futility of trying to intimidate the united plebs!

Madvig (*Emendationes Livianae* 110) pointed out that *quid si non* appears to give the wrong sense, and suggested either *quid? non . . . experti estis?* or reading *quasi* for *quid*. The latter, he thought, would be nearer the manuscripts but would require the change of *essetis* to *sitis*. Accordingly "locum pro dubio reliquit." Ogilvie on the other hand accepts *quid si non*, mentioning it as "an idiom which has been overlooked,"⁴ and interprets "Just think what it would be like if you had not learnt how ineffectual your threats against the *plebs* were!" But it is not clear why the patricians should think on these lines, or what Canuleius gains by asking them to. Nor can this solution be applied to the Catulus epigram. For what difference would it have made if Theotimus had not been warned? Obviously none.

3

*I, quaeso, et tristis istos compone libellos,
et cane quod quaevis nosse puella velit.
quid si non esset facilis tibi copia! nunc tu
insanus medio flumine quaeris aquam.*

Propertius 1.9.13-16

Ponticus has fallen in love at last, as Propertius always said he would. Epic poetry is no help now. When it comes to love Mimnermus is more effective than Homer.

Go and shut up those glum volumes of yours, and sing songs a girl can enjoy. It's not as if you weren't having success! You are mad to be thirsty in the middle of a river.

Shackleton Bailey's comment "It might be different if his love were unrequited and unhappy; he might then have some reason to fight against it. As matters stand he is simply quarrelling with his good luck . . ." is ingenious and may be exegetically correct. But in the context it is to make heavy weather of things. There is no need to raise the question of what might happen if it was a case of unrequited love, and Propertius does not raise it any more than we raise any question of identity when we exclaim "Why if it isn't John Brown?"

4

*Lynceu, tunc meam potuisti, perfide, curam
tangere? Nonne tuae tum cecidere manus?
quid si non constans illa et tam certa fuisset
posset et in tanto vivere flagitio!*

Propertius 2.34.9-12

12 *posset et F, posses et L P D V, posses N V² Vo*

⁴Ogilvie's remarks are based on Gordon Williams's discussion of Propertius 1.9.15 in *JRS* 47 (1957) 242 f., but he also refers to the Catulus epigram.

First the reading. From an original *posses* it would be hard to account for the unscannable *posses et* of an important number of manuscripts, but from F's *posset et* the path to the other readings is easy. Either *posses et* arose from a miscopying of *s* for *t* and was later "corrected" (as it visibly was in the Vatican manuscript) to the scannable *posses*; or the N-branch of the tradition omitted *et* by haplography and *posses* was a subsequent attempt to restore scansion. In this case the *non et ve* of N's line 10 may contain the displaced *et*. A further, but non-palaeographic, argument for F's reading is that it yields a sentence of exactly the same form as in our next example from Vergil.

With *posses*, which is what most editors print, sense of a kind can be made of the *quid si non . . .* on a non-idiomatic interpretation. Lynceus, it is supposed, has attempted Propertius' girl, but fortunately has failed in the attempt, and Propertius asks "What if she hadn't been constant and so firm? Would you be able to lead a life of such scandal?" But this sense is neither very sophisticated nor very appropriate. Lynceus might answer that he could perfectly well go on living in such a case and with pleasure too, fortified by the mythological precedents of successful seduction cited in the previous couplet, and quoting off his own bat the words of Terence's Micio (*Ad.* 102) *non est flagitium . . . adolescentem scortari*. There is also awkwardness in the abrupt change of subject from the girl back to Lynceus, to avoid which Heinsius conjectured *possesne . . .*. But the most serious objection is to the whole proposed scenario. Did Lynceus actually make an attempt on Propertius' mistress? There is no evidence that he did. In line 2 of the poem, *sic erepta mihi paene puella mea est*, we are told that Propertius nearly had his girl taken from him; in line 22 Propertius says that he forgives Lynceus because his words had been uttered under the influence of drink. Neither passage tells us of any action. Nor do these four lines. Questions introduced by *nonne* regularly expect an affirmative answer, and *nonne tuae tum cecidere manus?* suggests that Lynceus's hands failed him just as they failed other figures in Latin poetry in circumstances of strong emotion.⁵ The only alternative, if it could be paralleled, would be to suppose irony—his hands should have failed him but they didn't. But if Lynceus physically assaulted the girl it is not likely that she will have managed to fight him off or that if she did her successful resistance should be described in such a mild and abstract manner. *Constans et tam certa fuit* would seem a strange way to express a girl's refusal at the best of times, let alone in circumstances of violence.

But if we are to abandon this idea what are we to put in its place? We may start from the lines we have already touched on, *una tamen causa*

⁵See Vergil *Aen.* 6.33; Silius 2.140; Paul Petr. *De vita Martini* 408.

est cur crimina tanta remitto, / errabant multo quod tua verba mero (21–22). The offence now being forgiven by Propertius consisted of words—words uttered under the influence of drink. What were they and who were they addressed to? To the girl, to Propertius, or to both together? We can rule out the girl: for Propertius must have heard about them, and it would be absurd to imagine her confessing to him “Your friend Lynceus made me an immoral proposition, but he was hopelessly drunk at the time.” The words must have been spoken to Propertius or in his presence. What can they have been? Surely not a statement of the kind “I tried to have her but I failed.” This would be ludicrous, and furthermore it would imply an illogicality: why should Propertius forgive an offence because Lynceus was drunk when he reported it? In any case a boast would be more appropriate for a drunk man. But what boast? “She came to bed with me” is too strong: Propertius clearly does not think this happened. But there are lesser triumphs. Lynceus might have boasted “She looked at me” or “She smiled at me,” or he might simply have waxed enthusiastic about her charms. In any case the *tangere* and the *tum* of line 10 point to a specific occasion, perhaps a party where Lynceus might have touched her if his hands had not failed him.

We come now to the question of what made them fail him. It was not the girl’s physical strength. She is not presented as an Atalanta or Xanthippe, and in any case the words suggest some sort of compunction. What compunction, though? The thought of violating the girl’s virtue? Hardly. Chastity may possess “the noble grace to dash brute violence with sudden adoration and blank awe” as the Lady’s brother puts it in Milton’s *Comus*, but Propertius’ mistress was not chaste like this. No, the compunction must have arisen, as the vocative *perfidè* of the previous line indicates, from the abuse of trust involved. You do not steal your friend’s girl. And the exclamatory statement introduced by *quid si non . . .* in the next couplet adds the further and stronger point that it is particularly unforgivable to do so if she is not a casual pick-up or a bird of passage but a genuine partner in life.

For not the least advantage of looking at the passage in this way is that it allows a convincing explanation of *tam certa*. It is normally taken as synonymous with *fida*, tamely tautologous with *constans*. But from the usage of the Roman elegists⁶ as well as by etymology *certus* in amatory

⁶Roman elegy is primarily concerned with love-affairs, which it distinguishes from marriage on the one side and commercial transactions with a *meretrix* or *scortum* on the other. The affairs may be transient or lasting, the latter kind being generally regarded as the aim of the true lover. And the word which applies to them, in Propertius and Ovid, is *certus*. It may be used of the liaison (*certus amor*) or of the partners—e.g., Prop. 1.8.45, 1.13.6, 1.19.24, 2.24.36, 2.29.19, 3.8.19, 3.20.21; Ovid *Am.* 3.6.30, *A.A.* 2.248, 2.461 (*certa hostis*), 3.544, 3.575; *M.F.* 45 (*certus amor* to be achieved by personality not by

contexts seems to mean, not "faithful," but rather what lawyers call "appropriated." Put briefly and in the slang of a few years ago the girl was Propertius's "steady." Lynceus's offence was to have coveted her and perhaps to have boasted that she looked with favour on him. This offence has the three qualifications that the situation requires. It is heinous enough, at least in its potential consequences, to justify Propertius' alarm. It can be forgiven for having been committed under the influence of drink. And it is something Propertius can subsequently parade in triumph. For the lines (23 ff.) in which Propertius claims his philosophic friend as a fellow-victim of love, whether they belong to this poem or begin a new one, certainly refer to the same incident.

The second half of the rhetorical question, beginning *posset et . . .*, will, of course, according to the rule of our idiom serve the function of a negative statement. The hexameter asserts that she is Propertius's girl, the pentameter that she is not of a promiscuous character.

Lynceus, could you have abused our friendship? Could you have touched the girl I love? No wonder your hands failed you! It's not as if she hadn't been with me for a long time, hadn't so clearly belonged to me—or as if she were the sort of girl who could ever lead a double life.

5

*Quin etiam hiberno moliris sidere classem
et mediis properas aquilonibus ire per altum,
crudelis! Quid si non arva aliena domosque
ignotas peteres et Troia antiqua maneret!
Troia per undosum peteretur classibus aequor?
mene fugis?*

Vergil *Aeneid* 4.309–314

What is more you are cold-bloodedly launching your ships in the winter season and despite the storms cannot wait to set sail. Yet you intend to make for a foreign shore and a home you have never seen, and your ancient Troy does not exist any longer! Would you sail for Troy when there were high seas? No, it is me you are running from . . .

Against accepting 11.310–311 in a straight or non-idiomatic manner there is a grave difficulty which has never been spelled out.⁷ We must either

looks), *Ep. ex Pont.* 2.7.22 (by ironical metaphor of ill-fortune), *M.* 4.156 (Pyramus and Thisbe). *Fidus* and *fidelis*, though used freely of accomplices of various sorts, servants, blood-relations, and of those who have either married or promised to marry (e.g., *Tib.* 2.2.11; *Prop.* 3.12.6, 3.13.24; *Ovid Her.* 2.21, 5.99, *M.* 7.843, *F.* 2.815, *Ep. ex Pont.* 1.4.45) are never, or hardly ever, used of lovers. The words *certus* and *fidus* are therefore not interchangeable as would be suggested by *TLL*'s definition s.v. *certus* IV A.

⁷Most commentators remain silent. Austin offers a translation "Tell me, suppose it was for no foreign shore you were making now, suppose storied Troy still stood—would *Troy* be still your goal in a voyage on swollen seas?," but the second "still" seems to make the wrong sense. Arthur Palmer on *Her.* 7.53 tried to solve the passage by understanding a *si* before the second *Troia*. He also put forward a general explanation of *quid si* "It always puts a stronger case; shows the absurdity of a present course of action by pointing out that it would be impossible to act more foolishly under any circumstances."

run the *quid si* together or separate them. If we run them together we must imagine the thought in Dido's mind to be something like "What <would you be doing> if you weren't setting off into the unknown . . . ?" The question is not appropriate and few editors—Janell is the only one I have found—punctuate in this way. Nearly all follow Heyne's text in placing a query, or at least a comma after the *quid*, to make what seems a splendidly indignant speech: ". . . cold-blooded! What <am I to say>? If you weren't sailing into the unknown—if Troy were still standing—would you be setting out for Troy in this weather? No! It is me you are running from" But there are two obstacles, one metrical and one linguistic. It will take something of an *excursus* to explain them. Nevertheless the passage is an important one—*non legitur pars ulla magis de corpore toto*—and merits it.

The metrical objection is that punctuating after the *quid* creates a line of unique rhythm. Vergilian hexameters where the second foot is spondaic and ends with a diaeresis fall into a strictly limited number of types. There is always a caesura in the foot, and the next word is always one of the following:

a a trochee, forming a weak caesura in the third foot (over 200 instances).⁸ Except for two or three times in the *Eclogues* (1.70; 4.34; and perhaps one should include 5.15), this is followed by an iambic word for a strong fourth-foot caesura. Example: *Libertas quae sera tamen respexit inertem* (*E.* 1.27);

b a molossus or choriamb, creating a strong fourth-foot caesura (32 instances, none in the *Eclogues* or first *Georgic*). Example: *Praesertim si tempestas a vertice silvis* (*G.* 2.310);

c another monosyllable, to create a strong third-foot caesura (162 instances). The sequence of two monosyllables thus created is generally assumed to form a single metrical unit, and this seems correct. There are no occasions where a sense pause between them is necessary. (One should no more punctuate after *nos* in *A.* 10.89 than after *dolus* in *A.* 2.390 or after *Tros* in *A.* 10.108.) Example: *Depono: tu dic, mecum quo pignore certes* (*E.* 3.31);

d an elided monosyllable, creating a line as in *b* (10 instances). Example: *Tum, credo, cum me arbustum videre Miconis* (*E.* 3.10);

e an elided dissyllable, creating a line as in *c* (13 instances). Example: *Aspice nos—hoc tantum—et si pietate meremur* (*A.* 2.690).

Our line obviously does not belong to types *a*, *d*, or *e*. Nor does it belong to *b*. For the instances of type *b* are all either single words or single metrical units (e.g., *ante alios*), and the lines all have a firm fourth-foot caesura unclouded by elision. This leaves only *c*, which is itself ruled

⁸This count and the following ones have been taken from my own reading of Vergil, not a computer's, and I do not vouch for the precise accuracy of the arithmetic.

out if we punctuate after *quid*. It follows that unless we are prepared to create a unique line we must not punctuate after *quid*.

I now pass to the linguistic objection. The question at issue is a delicate one and relates to the expectation of a Roman reader with no written marks of punctuation to guide him when confronted with the words *quid si*. Would he naturally take them together, separate them, or would he have to wait till he had read the rest of the sentence before coming to a decision?

The problem is too extensive to be fully discussed in an article to which it is only marginally relevant. Nevertheless we can arrive at some provisional conclusions from Vergil's own usage and from that of the authors closest to him. The passages in Vergil, Horace, Livy, and Propertius with what makers of concordances call adverbial *quid* may be divided into four groups:⁹

- a* where the *quid* is followed by a conditional clause
- b* where the *quid* is followed by a temporal clause
- c* where the *quid* is followed by a relative clause
- d* where the *quid* is followed by a direct question, often introduced by a postponed interrogative particle.

In *a* and *b* the clauses are both adverbial and the accident that in English we can say "What if . . . ?" but not "What when . . . ?" should not affect how we punctuate the Latin. The identity of form will be clear if we think of an equally identical form in English for the two cases, such as "What about the possibility that . . . ?" and "What about the time(s) when . . . ?" *c* is similar, even though the clause is substantival rather than adverbial; and the sense is always equivalent to the English "What about the fact that . . . ?" or "What about the person(s) who . . . ?" *d* is somewhat different, grammatically considered, in that direct questions are not subordinate clauses, but it is semantically similar. The sense can always be rendered in English by the same form of expression "What about the question whether . . . ?" or "What about *x*—will he . . . ?"

In short there seems little effective difference between these four groups and little reason why a Roman reader should have distinguished between them. And if he did not distinguish between them when reading we should not distinguish between them when writing. Either we should always put a point of pause or interrogation after the *quid* or never. Sense and rhythm both strongly favour the never. This is already the general practice of most editors for groups *a* and *b*. But if it is correct

⁹I exclude instances where the *quid* seems wrongly classified as "adverbial," for example Horace *S.* 2.6.55 where I would punctuate: *quid militibus? promissa Triquetra/praedia? Caesar an est Itala tellure daturus?*

for these groups it should also be correct for groups *c* and *d* where English speakers may experience moments of difficulty. The best way to convince the dubious will be by an example. Let them consider the string of *quid*'s in *Georgics* 3.258–265. Most editors punctuate after the third *quid* but not after the first two. The discrimination is illogical and misleading. All three serve the same function and should receive the same treatment. But punctuating after all of them would give an intolerably jerky and unstructured sequence of utterances. The only acceptable solution is to leave them all equally without punctuation (as Mynors does) and to assume that the Roman reader would have taken them all equally in his stride; “What about Leander . . . did he not try to swim the Hellespont in an impossible storm? . . . What about leopards, wolves, and dogs? . . . What about the tremendous battles fought by timorous deer?”

It is, of course, true that Vergil was a poet of genius who could, and did, write unique lines for special effects. But here a punctuation after *quid* will produce two uniquenesses, not just one, and the effect of the resulting conditional clause will be more banal, not more special, than the effect of an idiomatic *Quid si non* Ovid at least seems to have assumed so, for his near-repetition of the phrase in *Heroides* 7.53 (discussed below) would otherwise be a pointless coincidence. Finally the contextual function is exactly the same as that of the similarly structured previous example from Propertius—the presentation of a further and stronger point. It is unnatural to set sail in winter; it is doubly unnatural to do so when you have no home to set sail for.

6

*Invida, quo properas? quod erat tibi filius ater,
materni fuerat pectoris ille color?
quid si non Cephali quondam flagrasset amore!
an putat ignotam nequitiam esse suam?
Tithono vellem de te narrare liceret:
femina non caelo turpior ulla foret.*

Ovid *Amores* 1.13.31–36

33. *quid si non . . . suam omittunt P S (sicut et vv. 11–14 et Am. 2.2.18–27): habent ceteri. Restituit P³ (qui tamen cephalio nunquam flagraret scripsit), ut et alios locos supra commemoratos.*

Sourpuss, why the hurry? Or is that the reason you had a black son—because your mother's heart was black with spite? Yet that same heart once burned with love for Cephalus! But perhaps it imagines that no-one has heard of its lapse? I wish it were possible to tell Tithonus about you. There would be no more disgraced wife in heaven.¹⁰

¹⁰Or, if Goold's defense of *fabula* (*HSCP* 69 [1965] 28) is right, “no worse scandal in heaven.” In the previous line Tithonus is usually taken as the subject of *narrare*. But if he knows the truth what qualm stops him telling it? On the other hand if he doesn't, and if Ovid could only tell him, then being exceptionally talkative he could be relied on to give it exceptional publicity.

Most editors reject verses 33–34 because of their omission by the first hand of P, but print the other verses where the same thing has happened. This is inconsistent since the couplet has the same authority as they do: it should be explained, not swept out of sight.¹¹

The lines (like others in the *Amores*) cap Propertius, no doubt in a friendly spirit—*iure sodalicii*. Propertius had argued (2.18.7–18) that grey hairs cannot matter because Aurora still loves Tithonus. Nonsense, says Ovid. Aurora is plainly bored with the old man or she wouldn't rise so early day after day waking everybody up especially lovers. It must be spite, although she once had a lover herself, Cephalus. The connection of thought is made by the colour, and is misunderstood by those who, like Barsby, interpret the blackness of Aurora's heart as "implying evil and in this context adulterous." Black, for Ovid and for the Romans in general, was not the colour of evil but of mourning, of ill-omen, and above all (as here) of envy.¹² Ovid is accusing Aurora of a dog-in-the-manger attitude, which, he adds, is quite unnecessary anyway since she once had a lover herself. The thought of this leads naturally to Tithonus: what a pity he doesn't know, for if only he did his notorious loquacity would soon spread the story

With the couplet preserved the ideas flow in a lively and sequential manner. Without it there is discontinuity. The inference about Aurora's heart's being black with envy leads nowhere. Tithonus is introduced from nowhere. And what will the *de te narrare* be about? Without the mention of Cephalus here the only faults left to Aurora are her jealousy and her early rising, neither of which is enough to make her *turpissima femina caelo*.

There is thus no reason to suspect the couplet from the point of view of the context. Indeed the reverse. But there remain three difficulties of internal detail: the meaning of *quid si non*, the subject of *flagrasset* and *putat*, the elision of the last syllable of *nequitiam*.

The first of these, the *quid si non*, of course ceases to be a stumbling-block as soon as we understand its idiomatic use, and becomes a reason for accepting the couplet as genuine.

The second, too, will on investigation turn out to confirm its claim. For though *pectora* never think or act in Vergil, Tibullus, or Propertius, they do in Ovid. They rejoice (*A.A.* 1.361), have diverse characters (*A.A.* 1.759), dwell on problems (*E.P.* 1.8.53), and remember (*E.P.* 2.10.52). It is therefore just as natural for a *pectus* to be the subject of *putat* as it is for a *mens* to be so in *A.A.* 3.720. Nor is there any difficulty

¹¹Kenney in his O.C.T. apparatus at *Amores* 2.2.31 shows reason for believing the omitted lines genuine, though he still approves the omission of our couplet.

¹²For black as the colour of envy see Ovid *Met.* 2.760, 790, 832; Statius *Silvae* 4.8.16; Silius Italicus 8.291 and Ruperti's note.

in *pectus*'s being the subject of *flagrasset*. *Pectora* are the subject of *flagrant* in *Tristia* 4.9.7, whereas people are never found in this role in the amatory poems of Ovid. Admittedly they are in his later work, but only Phaethon, who blazes with desire for the Sun's chariot, *cupidine currus*, in *Met.* 2.104, and Tereus, a Thracian and therefore presumably a red-head, in *Met.* 6.460. The cases are clearly exceptional and underline rather than contradict Ovid's normal reluctance to describe his characters as on fire. But he is perfectly happy for their breasts to be.

The third stumbling-block is the elision in *nequitiam*. It is the only instance of an elided final *-m* in this part of an Ovidian pentameter, according to Platnauer, *Latin Elegiac Verse* (89). This is undoubtedly an argument to be set in the scales against the authenticity of the couplet, but it is not a heavy one statistically considered. Platnauer's analysis is very minute. He distinguishes 67 types of elision, and 22 of them occur only once in Ovid. *Nequitiam* here will therefore only make a 23rd example, all the less unlikely in that $\frac{2}{3}$ of the 22 instances occur in the amatory poems and the amatory poems form only $\frac{1}{3}$ of Ovid's total corpus. The exceptional elision (which is only exceptional for Ovid—cf. Propertius 3.7.12) cannot weigh seriously against the combined aptness of the argument and the idiom in which it is expressed, to say nothing of the difficulty of accounting for the couplet on any other hypothesis than that of its being genuine.

7, 8 *Homo bellus, tam bonus Chrysanthus animam ebulliit. Modo, modo, me appellavit. Videor mihi cum illo loqui. Heu, heu! . . . nos non pluris sumus quam bullae. Et quid si non abstinax fuisset! Quinque dies aquam in os suum non coniecit, non micum panis. Tamen abiit ad plures . . . Planctus est optime—manu misit aliquot—etiam si maligne illum ploravit uxor. Quid si non illam optime accepisset! Sed mulier quae mulier miluinum genus. Neminem nihil boni facere oportet . . .*

Petronius *Sat.* 42

A fine man, a good man, Chrysanthus. But he has breathed his last. The other day it was, only the other day, when he spoke to me. I can still hear him talking. Oh, ooh! . . . We are bubbles, that's all. And yet he had dieted all right! For five days not a drop of water, not a crumb of bread passed his lips. But he has joined the majority . . . It was an admirable funeral—he had ordered a lot of manumissions—even if his wife didn't mourn much. And yet he had treated her admirably. But women are all the same. Sharks! One must never be generous . . .

Friedländer suggests that the repeated *quid si non*'s are intended to characterise the style of the speaker, Seleucus. But it is not clear how. Are we to think of social class, regional dialect, archaism? Or of something more personal, ἡθικώτερόν τι? I suspect the latter. Theophrastus helps illustrate the personalities of his characters by telling us their tricks of speech, and in Petronius the repeated *ad summam*'s of 38–39 suggest the character of a bore. Seleucus' general style strikes one as histrionic, and

if the *quid si non*'s are a part of it they will mark an exclamatory or dramatic delivery. But whatever the nuance the sense is plain. Chrysanthus had starved himself on doctor's orders—*ἀστυρία* was the standard cure for fevers and much else till it was upstaged by bleeding in the 1st or 2nd century A.D.¹³—and had nevertheless died. He had treated his wife generously but she had nevertheless grudged him her tears.

I now pass to the instances in Ovid where *quid si* seems to demand the same type of idiomatic interpretation even though it is not followed by *non*.

9

*Quid si nescires insana quid aequora possint!
expertae toties tam male credis aquae?*

Ovid *Heroides* 7.53–54

Yet you know what wild seas can be like! How can you trust the water when you have had so many bad experiences of it?

Taken straight the words make poor sense. Dido is writing to Aeneas on the eve of his departure. "What (would you do) if you didn't know about storms?" is an uncalled-for question and suggests the inappropriate answer "Exactly what I am doing now—set sail for Italy." Diggle (*C.Q.* n.s. 17 [1967] 138) was right to feel unease, but his proposal of *quasi* for *si* will not do on two counts. *Quid quasi* is never found in this way in Ovid,¹⁴ and by taking *tam male* with *credis* he reduces *expertae toties* to the level of a tautology. Dido's point is that Aeneas's experiences of the sea were not only numerous but unhappy. The fact that *tam male* qualifies the preceding participle is proved by *Amores* 1.6.70 *temporis absumpti tam male testis eris*—"you (*viz.* the wreath abandoned outside my mistress's door when seen by her tomorrow morning) will testify to my wasted time."

Since Ovid follows in Vergil's footsteps throughout the epistle it cannot be coincidence that his Dido writes *quid si nescires* exactly where Vergil's had said *quid si non*, and if it is not coincidence it is proof that the words formed part of a recognised idiom. But what was there about it which attracted Ovid's attention? Did it stand out as something above or below the expected level of epic language? As something precious or as something lively and colloquial? Surely, with Dido in the full spate of her fury, the latter—which accords well both with Gellius' description of Catulus' style and with Seleucus' character in Petronius.

¹³See Celsus 2.10.1 sqq. Also Galen's treatises against the Erasistrateans on the subject of venesection (Kuhn 11.147–186, 187–249).

¹⁴In fact I have found only three passages in classical literature where *quid* is followed by *quasi*, and none can be cited in support of the alteration. For the *quasi* does not qualify the verb or the sentence but simply the following word (*natali* in Ovid *A.A.* 1.429; *magnum* in Persius 5.66; *paelicibus* in Martial 12.96.3).

10

*Quid si praeripiat flavae Venus arma Minervae,
ventilet accensas flava Minerva faces!*

Ovid *Amores* 1.1.7–8

But Venus doesn't take up Minerva's arms, nor does Minerva wave lighted wedding-torches!

Ovid is remonstrating with Cupid for interfering in his poetic life: gods, he says, should stick to their own departments. A straight interpretation of the passage makes good sense (Question: what would happen if Venus did Minerva's job and Minerva Juno's? Answer: unacceptable confusion); but good sense is also made by an idiomatic interpretation. We are as it were in a kissing-gate between two fields and the alignment of the gate is all that decides which one we are in. Slightly in favour of the idiomatic interpretation is that it adds a touch of surprise to Ovid's complaint.

11

*Quid si legitimum flueres, si nobile flumen,
si tibi per terras maxima fama foret!
nomen habes nullum, rivis collecte caducis,
nec tibi sunt fontes nec tibi certa domus.*

Ovid *Amores* 3.6.89–92

But you aren't even a real river, or a river with a pedigree, or a river with a reputation in the world! You are just a flooded ditch, without a name, without a spring of origin, without a fixed abode.

The stream that separates Ovid from his love is in unexpected spate. Ovid has tried the soft approach, reminding it that rivers in mythology have fallen in love or helped lovers, but instead of quietening down the stream goes on rising, and Ovid becomes angry with it.

Now in this example, unlike the previous one, a straight question will not give the required sense. There is no point in asking "What if you were a legitimate, respectably-born, or famous river?" and no appropriateness in the subsequent answer "You have no name." It is worse still if we put a query after the *quid*. "What? If you were famous you have no name" is plain nonsense. The Budé translation tries to save the the day by understanding a wish. Ovid wishes it were a famous river and then he wouldn't mind being held up by it. There is some attractiveness in this. But it is unnecessarily complicated. The wish would have to be an ironic one. And it is not a solution we can apply to the other examples. For example in *Amores* 1.1.7 Ovid does not wish, even in irony, for Venus to steal Minerva's arms.

12

*Quid si praecipiam ne fuscet inertia dentes,
oraque suscepta mane laventur aqua!*

Ovid *A.A.* 3.197–198

But really I am not here to teach you to keep your teeth bright or to wash your face in the morning!

Ovid has just stated that he is not running a course in personal hygiene, nor are the ladies in his audience from beyond the bounds of civilisation. To attempt to understand this couplet in anything like the way proposed by Arthur Palmer for other cases (see note 4) "I wonder what even more absurd result would follow if I were to teach you to clean your teeth" or by the Budé for 11 "What? If only I could teach you to clean your teeth!" would be grotesque. Sense demands simply the plain assertion "I'm not going to teach you this." The element of slight surprise that we have come to associate with the idiom is present because of the preceding line 193 *quam paene admonui ne trux caper iret in alas* "I almost cautioned you against letting your arm-pits smell," and is directed by Ovid against himself for forgetting where he is and who he is talking to.

- 13 *At fecere alii (viz. "vale" dixerunt) nullo mihi foedere iuncti,
et lacrimas animi signa dedere sui.
quid nisi convictu causisque valentibus essem
temporis et longi iunctus amore tibi!
quid nisi tot lusus et tot mea seria nosses,
tot nossem lusus seriaque ipse tua!
quid si dumtaxat Romae mihi cognitus esses,
adscitus toties in genus omne loci!*

Ovid *Tristia* 1.8.27–34¹⁵

Others, with no obligations to me, did so (that is, said goodbye) and proved their feelings with their tears. And yet I had been bound to you by our having lived together, by strong common ties, and by long mutual affection! We had known each other well both at work and at play! Nor was it only at Rome that we met—you had been with me in all sorts of places!

It is a melancholy fact of life that some people you have always looked on as friends will vanish as soon as they think being seen with you may be dangerous. Ovid is writing to such a one, who never even came to say goodbye to him, though many others, including comparative strangers, did. The meaning demanded by the context is quite clear—positive assertions for the sentences introduced by *quid nisi* (as if it had been *quid si non*) and a statement of denial for the sentence introduced by *quid si*. This, together with the element of surprise, in this case surprised dismay, is exactly what the idiom would lead one to expect. But to extract the same sense by non-idiomatic interpretation requires a variety of special pleadings. The difficulty with the last couplet is particularly great, and it may have been despair of understanding it that led one group of manuscripts to omit it altogether.

- 14 *Quid si scripsissem mimos obscena iocantes,
qui semper vetiti crimen amoris habent!*

Ovid *Tristia* 2.497–498

¹⁵The last couplet is omitted by four mss (including M), and Luck omits it from his text.

At first sight this seems another kissing-gate situation. Is the effect a wish—"If only I had written mimes!" (for then I would have been hung for a sheep instead of a lamb, or alternatively, for then I might have got away with it since the best society goes to watch them)—a question—"What if I had written mimes?" (answer: an even remoter place of exile)—or a statement—"I never wrote mimes"? All are arguable, though a wish seems the least likely. A question is what it is normally taken as, and this would fit well enough if Ovid were talking about the severity of his sentence. But he is not. His complaint is the uniqueness of the verdict: he is the only specimen of a leisure-poet who has been ruined. There could have been no difference in this respect if he had written mimes. So what we must have—and of course I am speaking of the function, not the form—is an exclamatory statement. I don't know anyone else, says Ovid, who was destroyed by his own Muse. I am the only one

And yet I never wrote mimes with their obscene jokes and their constant theme of forbidden love!

The second rule of philosophy in Newton's *Principia Mathematica* runs "Effectuum naturalium eiusdem generis eadem assignandae sunt causae, quatenus fieri potest. Uti respirationis in homine et in bestia; descensus lapidum in Europa et in America; lucis in igne culinari et in Sole; reflexionis lucis in terra et in planetis." If we apply the rule to linguistic phenomena and to our problem of *quid si non* we shall note that it is certainly possible to "assign the same cause." The explanation that the words serve to introduce a positive assertion tinged with an element of surprise satisfies the context in every case. In two cases differing explanations are possible. The Propertian passage *quid si non esset facilis tibi copia?* will make sense on a non-idiomatic rendering provided that the *quid si* are taken together. And the passage in Vergil *quid si non arva aliena . . . ?* will make sense on a non-idiomatic rendering provided that the *quid* and the *si* are separated (and provided we ignore the strong arguments from linguistic and metrical usage against separating them). Since these are the traditional renderings there is unquestionably a temptation to "play safe," to accept them, and to confine the idiomatic (and therefore more sophisticated) interpretation to the contexts where it is unavoidable. But this would be against both common sense and scientific method. If the same explanation fits the same phenomenon whenever it occurs it is better to accept it, not to look for three different ones.

But granted the singleness of the idiom we may still ask how a contemporary Roman would have perceived it. He could not have called it a rhetorical question since that is a modern phrase, but would he have

thought of it as a question at all? The alternatives will be clearer if we look for a moment at some modern English sentences. Consider

- (i) Why don't you like Tolstoy?
- (ii) Why don't we dance?
- (iii) Why don't you shut up?
- (iv) Why if it isn't my old dog Argus!

A native English speaker will immediately understand (i) as a genuine question, (ii) as more of a request than a question though by a process analogous to overriding an automatic drive on a motor-car it could be given a surprise answer (e.g., "Because the speeches are about to begin"), (iii) as a command, though somebody who was insolent enough could exploit the form of words to give a provocative answer (e.g., "Because I'm not a concertina"), and (iv) as an exclamation with no possible answer at all. Into which of these categories would an ancient Roman have placed *quid si non* . . . ? Most probably into the last of them, that of an irreversible or indissoluble idiom. This is not just because there are no contrary examples—eight instances are too few to make this a safe argument—but rather because there appears to be a restriction on the use of the word-sequence. It is found only in the comparatively brief period of time between Catulus and Petronius, and only before a past tense of the subjunctive. These limits suggest a recognised idiom. If we look beyond them, as it were over the wall, at other instances of *quid si* followed by a negative we find that the lie of the land is different. When Seneca in *De Ben.* 3.22.2 puts the question *quid si nollet?* it is open open to us to answer it. Indeed our assessment of whether an action is altruistic or not depends on the answer. And when Seneca discusses the man who fights with his conscience and wins, saying "*Non potui aliter. quid si nollem? necesse erat.*" (*Ep.* 22.4) it is possible to imagine an answer, though obviously the answer will be as abstract as the question. In Brutus' letter to Cicero (*Ep. ad Brut.* 1.16.1)¹⁶ the context is very different, not abstract at all but all too real. Nevertheless the question posed by *quid si nolit?* (sc. *Octavius nos salvos videre*) is one that Brutus evidently considered answerable since he proceeds to answer it—*non erimus* (sc. *salvi*). So too in the Verrines (*Verr.* 5.21.54) Cicero answers the question he poses, albeit with another (*Quid si hoc verbo non esses usus "libenter?" nos videlicet invitum te quaestum facere putaremus?* "What if you hadn't added 'gladly'? Would we have thought that you were sorry to be making a profit?"). These are the only other instances of *quid si* followed by a negative and subjunctive that I have found in classical

¹⁶It does not affect the argument whether the letter was really written by Brutus or is a first-century forgery.

Latin,¹⁷ and they are decisively different from our eight examples in that they all put questions to which an intelligent answer is theoretically possible. The sentences introduced by *quid si non* lack this possibility. Thus it seems likely that when a Roman heard the word-sequence *quid si non* his mind was disposed to accept a positive statement in much the same way as ours is when we hear the word-sequence "Why if it isn't ...?"

Next, what of the Ovidian usage of *quid si* and *quid nisi* followed by the subjunctive? Do they belong to the same category of an inevitable and indissoluble idiom? The passages I have cited are to the best of my knowledge exhaustive,¹⁸ and they are all compatible with an idiomatic interpretation. However the phenomenon seems unique to Ovid. Other writers use *quid si* freely enough,¹⁹ but always where an answer is theoretically possible (e.g., Propertius 2.9.29 *Quid si longinquos retinerer miles ad Indos?* Answer: "You would be even more unfaithful"). There is therefore a problem. Contemporaries could hardly use the same words so differently if they belonged to a bound phrase, but only if they came from the same indeterminate area as our English example (ii) above, "Why don't we dance?" or "Why don't you sit down?" Such a remark is open to two interpretations in contemporary English, but one is slightly more colloquial than the other. If this were the case with *quid si* followed by a subjunctive it would account for Ovid's avoiding the locution, as he does, in his two serious works, the *Metamorphoses* and the *Fasti*. *Quid si non* may have become generally acceptable on the written page because of Catulus' epigram (or because there was no ambiguity involved), whereas Ovid alone had the courage to exploit the idiomatic use of *quid si* and *quid nisi*, and that only in his lighter works.

One final speculation. In function the sentences we have been discussing operate as exclamatory statements, but in form they remain hypothetical questions. We may therefore ask ourselves what logical bridge, if any, connects these two aspects. It is true of course that all

¹⁷Except for Cicero *ad Q. fr.* 3.7 (9).7, where reading and sense are alike uncertain.

¹⁸In *quid si referam?* (*Met.* 9.328) the tense is future indicative, as is shown by *Met.* 9.150-151.

¹⁹But the usage of Roman comedy is worthy of remark. Nowhere in either Plautus or Terence as far as I can find does any character say anything like "What if she hadn't died?" or "What if the ship hadn't come in?" using *quid si* followed by a negative. This is astonishing, but it may be connected with the fact that all the thirty or so instances of *quid si* in Plautus are not only positive but also refer to the future. Their sense fluctuates between a question "What would happen if ...?" and a straight proposal for action "Why don't I ...?" or "Why don't you ...?" with the latter predominating and the locution being used like its modern equivalent as a form of command. This might be enough to account for its not being negated. One does not normally write sentences like "Why don't you not go?"

unreal conditions imply their opposites. "If Alexander hadn't died young" implies that he did. But this by itself does not explain the usage. Nor, as we have seen, does the assumption of an ellipse. In any case solving problems of language by looking for what is not said is generally speaking a procedure disfavoured by linguists. New locutions arise by analogy more readily than by omission. We ought therefore to look for analogous uses of *quid* that we can understand. For instance there is no difficulty about *quid mirum*? It means "no wonder!," and *quid* in verbless utterances like this is often used to state a negative. Indeed in one of the poems we have already discussed Ovid addresses the river "*quid mecum furiose tibi?*" (*Am.* 3.6.87), and the implication is that the river and Ovid have never had anything to do with one another. On this analogy the *quid* in our passages will deny or dismiss the possibility expressed in the *si* clause. In the first passage we will have "the possibility of my not having forbidden Theotimus to entertain my soul doesn't exist," and so on down to the last "there is no possibility of his not having treated her excellently." This may sound clumsy, but it is not as far from colloquial language as it looks. A modern Seleucus could express the same meaning in almost exactly this form, "there's no way he didn't do it all for her!"

The suggestion is tentative. But it seems to offer an explanation of the idiom that simultaneously covers its form, its function, and its exclamatory nuance.

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