

VERGIL, HOSIDIUS GETA, AND *QUID SI NON*

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IN AN EARLIER ARTICLE in this journal¹ I argued that the word-sequence *quid si non* . . . formed a hitherto unrecognised idiom of classical Latin whose function was not to introduce a question "What? If . . . not . . ." or "What if [he had] not . . . ?" but to assert a positive fact in a tone of exclamation or surprise: "And yet [he did] . . . !" At the time I was aware of only eight occurrences, but Dr Holford-Strevens has now most kindly pointed out to me a ninth. It is not an independent example but an echo of *Aeneid* 4.311, where Dido, making her final plea to Aeneas, exclaims *quid si non arva aliena domosque / ignotas peteres et Troia antiqua maneret!*: "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!"

The new passage is in Hosidius Geta, the author of a Vergilian cento in dramatic form on the subject of Medea. He re-employs the line in the prologue, spoken by Medea herself:

*nusquam tuta fides! vana spe lusit amantem
crudelis. quid si non arva aliena domosque
ignotas peterem!² haec pro virginitate reponit.
heu pietas, heu prisca fides! [et haec] captiva videbo
reginam thalamo cunctantem ostroque superbo?
haut impune quidem si quid mea carmina possunt.* (19–24)

Composing centos was a kind of game in which the new quilt had to be made from patches of not less than half a line and not more than a line and a half of the original in such a way that the words in their new context gave a sense that was simultaneously new and coherent.³ It is not the highest form

¹Maurice Pope, "Quid si non . . . —An Idiom of Classical Latin," *Phoenix* 36 (1982) 53–70.

²The sole manuscript of Hosidius has *peteret*, which makes it impossible not only to scan the line but also to make sense of it. Jason would have to be the subject, but Jason is neither travelling nor about to travel to a strange land. *peterem* is R. Lamacchia's emendation ("Tecnica centonaria e critica del testo," *RAL* 13 [1958] 258–280, at 267) and seems as certain as such things can be. It simultaneously restores the hexameter and allows sense to be made of it. But the actual translation Lamacchia proposed ("che sarebbe di me, se non andassi alla ricerca di terre straniere e dimore sconosciute?") cannot be right. If the reference is to the future, the Latin verb would have to be *petam*, if to the present the answer that imposes itself, "I would be still in Colchis," is inappropriate.

³Ausonius in the prefatory letter to his *Cento nuptialis* likens the composition of centos to the

of literature, and Hosidius (who is mentioned by Tertullian and must therefore have lived before A.D. 200) does not handle it with as much wit as Ausonius and Valeria Proba were later to do. Nevertheless he is moderately workmanlike. We may assume that all his re-arrangements yielded a meaning, even if that meaning is usually pedestrian and sometimes slightly forced.

Now it is obvious that Hosidius' lines 20–21 must be taken idiomatically as a statement. Medea is speaking in indignation, and she could only ask "What if I were not accompanying Jason back to the foreign land of Greece?" if the consequence would then have been even worse. But it would not have been worse. Quite the opposite. Nor would there be any point in her next remark "This is how he rewards my lost virginity." On the other hand taking the words as an exclamation produces a satisfactory sequence of thought: "He has cruelly tricked me. It is not as though I have not come with him to these foreign shores—and this is the way he rewards me."

Obviously we cannot transfer this conclusion automatically to the *Aeneid*. The rules of cento composition allowed changes of nuance, and it is in theory conceivable that Vergil wrote the sentence as a straightforward question and that Hosidius then cleverly exploited it idiomatically as an assertion. Nobody who reads Hosidius all through will willingly credit that he could ever have been so creatively reconstructive. But since the possibility exists, however remote it may be, Hosidius cannot be used to guarantee the truth of the idiom in Vergil. What he can do is make it easier to accept. This is a more humble function but it is still a useful one. Our conservative instincts caution us against the re-interpretation of well-known passages: when something has been in the spotlight for a long time we are tempted to suppose that everything about it must have been already seen and that anything new must be an illusion. But this fear can now be allayed. There is nothing new about taking *Aeneid* 4.311 as an assertion of fact. Hosidius could take it as one, and Hosidius lived very close to Vergil's own time.⁴

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game of ostomachia in which one made up realistic pictures from abstract geometric shapes cut out in bone. He sets the limit of length as one and a half consecutive lines. To transfer longer passages, he says, would be to ruin the point (*nam duos iunctim locare ineptum est et tres una serie merae nugae*).

⁴Ovid, who was even closer to Vergil in time, seems to have taken it so too, and in my article I cited *Heroides* 7.53 where he gives his Dido a closely similar expression at the same point in the argument: *quid si nescires insana quid aequora possint!* This only make sense as an exclamatory statement: "Yet you know what wild seas can be like!" The *confirmatio* offered by Hosidius is of the same kind as this, but it is stronger in that the form of words is exactly the same and the reference to the passage beyond any shadow of doubt.