

### Catullus 16.14: Ring Composition with a Twist?

It is a commonplace of Catullan scholarship – and a matter of common sense – that the poet’s words in the first and last lines of poem 16, *pedicabo ego uos et irrumabo*, are not to be taken as a literal threat of anal and oral rape. Given that the poem itself enacts a pretty thorough humiliation of its targets, I wonder whether the last line (14) should repeat the first line not exactly, but rather with a change of tense. The perfects of the two verbs scan as well as the futures, and *pedicavi ego vos et irrumavi* would provide a very vivid climax (as it were<sup>1</sup>) to the poem: ‘I will humiliate you in a metaphorically sexual way . . . I have humiliated the two of you in a metaphorically sexual way (right here in this poem)’.<sup>2</sup> It would also make sense of the change in tense from *putastis* (3) to *putatis* (13): the latter would mean “do you still think I’m not a man?” Trappes-Lomax argues that we should follow Avantius in emending *putatis* in 13 to *putastis* as an “obvious improvement” in this “poem of ring composition”.<sup>3</sup> I suppose my suggestion would turn the ring composition into something we could call horseshoe composition or U-composition.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Be thankful I didn’t pun on the ‘ring’ in ‘ring composition’.

<sup>2</sup> For a close sociological equivalent to this sort of hypermasculine oneupperry, compare what more than one professional basketball player has said to a defeated opponent: “Tell me how my ass tastes!”

<sup>3</sup> John M. Trappes-Lomax, *Catullus: A Textual Reappraisal*, Swansea, 2007, *ad loc.*

<sup>4</sup> In the second-to-last production of *Henry V* at the Blackfriars Playhouse in Stanton, John Harrell delivered a text of the first Chorus that had been emended for accuracy: “or may we cram / Within this wooden U the very casques / That did affright the air at Agincourt?”