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 were¹) 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)’². 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”.³ I suppose my suggestion would turn the ring composition into something we could call horseshoe composition or U-composition.⁴

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¹ Be thankful I didn’t pun on the ‘ring’ in ‘ring composition’.
² For a close sociological equivalent to this sort of hypermasculine oneuppery, compare what more than one professional basketball player has said to a defeated opponent: “Tell me how my ass tastes!”
⁴ 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?”